



Effects of an emotional intelligence intervention on aggression and empathy among adolescents



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Aggression
Empathy
Emotional intelligence
Social and emotional learning
Adolescence
Gender

The aim of this study was to explore the effects of a two-year intervention grounded in the ability model of emotional intelligence (EI) on aggression and empathy among adolescents. Eight Spanish public schools volunteered to participate in the research. A total of 590 adolescents (46% boys) were randomly assigned to either the EI training group or control group conditions. Students in the EI training group reported lower levels of physical/verbal aggression, anger, hostility, personal distress and fantasy compared to students in the control group. Additionally, the EI program was particularly effective for males' empathic abilities. These findings confirm the effectiveness of social and emotional learning interventions in Spanish academic contexts and extend the literature of gender-related differences during adolescence. Study limitations and future research directions are also considered.

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Introduction

Aggressive behavior and interpersonal conflicts among children and youth continue to be common problems in educational systems across the globe (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). Aggression is widely defined as “a response that delivers noxious stimuli to another organism” (Buss, 1961). Manifestations of aggression are linked to several aspects of psychosocial maladjustment or mental disorders and are negatively associated with prosocial behavior and adaptive social functioning, especially during adolescence (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000; Loeber & Hay, 1997). As a result, aggressive behavior in high school settings leads to a significant decline in school climate and, consequently, reduces the quality of teaching and learning therein (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997).

During adolescence, one factor that buffers against aggression is empathy, defined as both the cognitive and affective substrates of “sharing” others' negative experiences (Davis, 1983). Associations between aggression and empathy are well documented, especially among the young population (Escrivá, García, & Navarro, 2002; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Mehrabian, 1997; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Richardson, Hammock, Smith, & Gardner, 1994; Sanmartín, Carbonell, & Baños, 2011). In addition, adolescents' empathic abilities have been negatively associated with relational peer victimization, social problems, and internalizing disorders, such as depression (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Ickes, 2009). Therefore, empathy plays an important role in the promotion of psychological and social adjustment in youth.

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Emotional intelligence

Adolescents who frequently engage in different forms of aggressive behavior may lack the ability to identify and regulate the negative emotions that are often central to aggression (Peled & Moretti, 2007). These abilities fall under the umbrella of emotional intelligence (EI). EI, as defined by Mayer and Salovey (1997), is composed of the following four component abilities: a) the ability to perceive, appreciate and express emotions accurately; b) the ability to access and/or generate feelings that facilitate thought; c) the ability to understand emotions and emotion-related knowledge; d) the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. EI influences the development of socially competent behaviors (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). EI is negatively associated with aggressive and disruptive behaviors in youth (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Davis & Humphrey, 2012; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012; Lomas, Stough, Hansen, & Downey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2008; Moriarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001) and positively related to empathy, the establishment of personal relationships and satisfaction with one's social network (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). Hence, students who are better able to perceive, understand and manage their emotions are less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors and show more emotional awareness, which may elicit a better understanding of self and others' emotions and consequences of their behaviors.

Bearing these findings in mind, EI may play an important role in the reduction of aggression and the promotion of empathic abilities. Indeed, the abilities to recognize, understand and regulate one's own and others' emotions enhance the development of conflict resolution skills and are related to more positive and healthy social relationships (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011).

Benefits of emotional intelligence interventions

There is a growing literature supporting the effectiveness of programs that promote emotion-related abilities among youth (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, for a recent meta-analysis). These initiatives are commonly called Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions and appear to offer promising benefits, including the reduction of aggressive behaviors and the fostering of socio-emotional skills and mental health. Regarding initiatives grounded in the ability model of EI (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), previous work has reported that students who received EI instruction had a more positive classroom climate (Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012) and fewer clinical symptoms, including anxiety, social stress, and depression, than students in the control group (Ruiz-Aranda, Castillo, Salguero, Cabello, Fernández-Berrocal, & Balluerka, 2012; Ruiz-Aranda, Salguero, Cabello, Palomera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2012).

The role of gender

Given the documented influence of gender on social, cognitive, and emotional development, gender differences on aggressive behaviors and empathy should be considered (Baxendale, Cross, & Johnston, 2012). Past research suggests that boys tend to express more anger and display more direct aggressive behaviors (e.g., physical fighting), whereas females tend to demonstrate aggression in indirect ways, such as social rejection (Card et al., 2008). With regard to empathy, adolescent girls appear to possess more of the cognitive and emotional components of empathy than boys (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Davis, 1983; Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991; Escrivá, Navarro, & García, 2004; Pérez-Albéniz, de Paúl, Etxeberria, Montes, & Torres, 2003). In addition, recent evidence has shown that adolescent males engage in more bullying behaviors because they are less empathic than females (Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2012). Based on documented gender differences, it is expected that the benefits of SEL interventions vary depending on students' individual characteristics (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor, Liang, Tracy, Williams, & Seigle, 2002). Thus, the benefits that these interventions confer on students may depend on gender vulnerability to certain outcomes.

The present study

According to the literature, SEL interventions have a positive influence on several indicators and predictors of social functioning. However, the most recent meta-analysis on SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011) raises several questions in the literature. First, there is a lack of results for the adolescent population; only 13% of studies examined the effectiveness among secondary students with interventions implemented in high school settings. Second, there is a lack of SEL evidence outside of the US; most SEL evidence is based on American studies (83% of the existing literature), which makes it difficult to test their generality worldwide. To fill these important gaps in SEL initiatives, we aimed to test the effectiveness of a two-year EI training in Spanish settings with the INTEMO program on adolescents' outcomes and examine the degree to which the intervention's effectiveness differed by gender. We hypothesized the following: (1) the INTEMO program would contribute to the reduction of various indicators of aggression, including instrumental and emotional components of aggression, enhance the empathic abilities positively related to social competence (empathic concern and perspective taking), and reduce the abilities negatively associated with such competence (fantasy and personal distress); (2) given the documented differences favoring socio-emotional development among adolescent girls, benefits from the INTEMO program would be higher among adolescent boys because they have more room for improvement in socio-emotional aspects of empathy than their female counterparts.

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