

# Promoting social competence in school-aged children: The effects of the open circle program

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## Abstract

One hundred fifty-four fourth graders took part in an investigation of the Open Circle Program (OCP), an intervention model that encourages students, teachers and administrators to learn and practice communication, self-control and social problem-solving skills. Eight classrooms, two in each of four schools, were sampled. Two of these schools were located in middle to upper-middle class suburban areas and two served more diverse populations. Half the classrooms were headed by teachers well versed in OCP curriculum. The other half was not implementing a social competence program. Participants completed the student version of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) once in the fall and again in the spring. Teachers also rated the social competence of students at these same two points in the school year. Doubly-repeated measures mixed-design MANOVA analyses revealed that across the school year, OCP participants showed significantly greater teacher-reported improvements in both social skills and problem behaviors than did control group members. Although the largest gains were made by OCP children in urban areas, significant positive effects of program participation were shown by all students, regardless of school setting.

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The Open Circle Program (OCP) is a school-based intervention designed to enhance the social skills of elementary school children. One of a growing number of social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, OCP gives students, teachers, administrators and other adults in the school community the opportunity to learn and practice communication, self-

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control and social problem-solving skills. First piloted in 1987 in six classrooms in Framingham, Massachusetts by researchers at the Stone Center at Wellesley College, OCP is currently being implemented in close to 300 elementary schools in 98 communities in New England, New York and New Jersey.

In their original form, OCP lessons were based upon the Quality of School Life curriculum (QSL) created by Schelkun (1989). Since 1988, OCP has utilized its own curriculum incorporating aspects of the QSL, as well as a variety of other established methods of social competence instruction (e.g., Elias & Clabby, 1989; Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976; Weissberg, Gesten, Liebenstein, Doherty-Schmid, & Hutton, 1980). The Open Circle curriculum combines a theoretical basis in relational theory (emphasizing the central role that relationships play in development, see Miller, 1986) with year-long instruction in social skills both within and across classrooms.

In the 18 years since its inception, OCP has undergone an almost constant process of revision and “fine-tuning”. Drawing on the input of educators, parents and students, Open Circle staffers have worked to construct a curriculum that meets the needs of a variety of classroom populations. The negotiation of social relationships has been identified as one of the most difficult challenges facing children in their first few years of school (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). If children are to cooperate and behave responsively with peers, they must receive explicit instruction in social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Extensive research focused on other SEL initiatives has unequivocally demonstrated that social competency and problem-solving skills can be taught through school-based programs (e.g., Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger, 2001; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Osterman, 2000).

Although OCP lessons focus primarily on peer relations, decision-making and problem solving, the program is also expected to positively impact student academic achievement and learning. Previous investigations, in fact, show that nurturing the social and emotional growth of children increases their capacity to focus on academic pursuits, improves overall psychological health, and reduces the frequency of behavioral disturbances and delinquent acts (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1992). More specifically, research on peer relationships among young children has revealed a significant link between the quality of friendships formed and the development of academic skills. School-aged children who were not well liked or accepted by their classmates were found to do less well academically than their more popular age mates (Austin & Draper, 1984; Li, 1985; Wentzel, 1991). In support of this view, Malecki and Elliott (2002) reported data based on a sample of elementary school students that showed that while social skills were positively predictive of concurrent levels of academic achievement, problem behaviors were negatively predictive of academic achievement. Similarly, Wentzel (1991, 1993) found that for early adolescents, socially responsible behavior can create an optimal context for learning in which social goals work in conjunction with learning goals; and similar findings have also been reported for kindergarten through third-graders (e.g., O’Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997; Wasik, Wasik, & Frank, 1993; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O’Neil, 2001).

Another possible explanation, of course, is that children who attend to their lessons in school and who make every effort to acquire academic skills have less opportunity for disruptive behavior (see Coie & Krehbiel, 1984). Alternatively, or perhaps in addition to

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