Essential Self Management Skills: Summary of Research

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Child Trends is pleased to assist the Tauck Family Foundation as it sharpens its focus on programs that help children build the skills they need to succeed in the elementary school years and beyond.

Through the course of our work together, four particular skills have emerged as potential areas of focus for the Foundation: self-control, persistence, mastery orientation, and academic self-efficacy. This short paper summarizes Child Trends' review of existing research and our understanding of the Tauck Family Foundation's goals and objectives. A longer paper, "Encouraging the Development of Key Life Skills in Elementary School-Age Children: A Literature Review and Recommendations to the Tauck Family Foundation," provides a more in-depth scholarly review of the research. This document is intended as a summary for a general audience. It presents:

1) *A clear rationale for focusing on these four related skills, and*
2) *A user-friendly overview of each skill, including an understandable definition of the skill, a discussion of the outcomes it is likely to influence, and suggestions about concrete strategies that can help children improve in each area.*

At the highest level, these four self-management skills are important because they have the capacity to boost elementary-school-aged children's academic achievement, which is, in turn, critical for their long-term success. These skills are also malleable: They can be improved through strategies that can be used in both the classroom and out-of-school time settings. Fundamentally, these are skills that empower children—giving them some measure of control, in the face of serious challenges and barriers, and potentially providing a route out of poverty for the young people who master them.

Background

The achievement gap is one of our country's most pressing social problems. Although the gap between children from ethnic and racial minorities and their non-minority peers has narrowed, it is still significant, and the gap between low-income and higher-income children is growing. This contributes to a host of negative outcomes and a cycle of poverty that persists from generation to generation.

Four skills for success in elementary school & beyond:

1. Self Control
2. Persistence
3. Mastery Orientation
4. Academic Self-Efficacy

Research has shown that a variety of nonacademic self-management skills are essential to young people's success in school and in life. Yet few efforts to reverse the achievement gap have focused directly on building these skills. By investing in programs that strengthen these essential skills, the Tauck Family Foundation hopes to improve the odds of success for children from low-income families in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Why These Skills?

Child Trends reviewed the research on child and youth development to better understand the factors that contribute to positive outcomes for children and youth. From this work, we identified four essential self-management skills—self-control, persistence, mastery orientation, and academic self-efficacy —that increase children's capacity to benefit from school and boost their academic outcomes, thereby putting them on a solid path out of poverty. There are several compelling reasons that we have decided to focus on these four related, often mutually-reinforcing and sometimes overlapping skills:

These are the skills that will help low-income children succeed.

All four of these skills have been found in the literature to be strongly related to a range of positive outcomes, including academic achievement and school engagement. They may also underlie other valuable life skills, such as the ability to interact well with others and maintain positive peer relationships.

Self Control has been found to be remarkably stable over time and, once developed, is likely to persist through childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

These self-management skills are important in both the short- and long-term: In some cases, the skill contributes to a childhood outcome that predicts later success. For example, persistence contributes to faster growth in reading skills between Kindergarten and third grade. In turn, being able to read by the end of third grade is a critical predictor of later school success. In other cases, the skill itself is important to help adolescents and adults navigate their lives. One of the skills—self-control—has been found to be remarkably stable over time and, once developed, is likely to persist through childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

These skills can be fostered in both community-based out-of-school and in-school settings.

Over the last decade, after-school and other out-of-school time (OST) programs have expanded rapidly, serving more children, in more communities, for more hours each day. Research has shown that these programs are well positioned to build children's social skills and help improve their academic performance. OST programming plays a particularly important role for disadvantaged students—offering experiences and skill-building opportunities that more affluent families may take for granted.

Although teachers in schools have long recognized the importance of these skills, the extent to which they have been a focus of effort in the classroom varies. Research indicates that a significant minority of low-income children are not ready for school when they enter Kindergarten, lacking such skills as self-control, which poses challenges for educators and takes valuable time away from teaching.

Both OST programs and classrooms present ripe opportunities to develop the essential self-management skills that we have identified.

These skills empower children.

These four skills offer low-income children ways to manage their own behavior and thus exert a measure of control over their own outcomes, both in and out of school. This is powerful, given the obstacles that low-income children typically face and how "out of control" such obstacles can make a young person feel. There is something potentially transformative about arming children with this particular set of skills.

The Four Essential Skills: Definitions, Outcomes and Strategies

1. *Self-Control: "I can control my reactions to my environment."*

Self-control, sometimes called self-regulation, refers to the ability to manage one's emotions and behaviors, inhibit negative responses and delay gratification (Bandy & Moore, 2010), in ways considered socially appropriate for any given situation. For children, this means being aware of their feelings and, when necessary, adjusting their responses and actions, in order to cope with varying circumstances. One aspect of self-control that is particularly important for children's success in school, especially in the preschool and elementary school years, is *impulse control*.

Research demonstrates that children with good impulse control get along better with others and have more social confidence.

Impulse control is the ability to manage one's desire for immediate gratification, control urges (yelling out in class, for example), and instead find socially acceptable ways to have one's needs and wants met (raising a hand and waiting to be called on). Children who can exercise impulse control are able to follow simple rules, accept not having a need/want met immediately, and use adult support to cope with not having those needs/wants met immediately. Research demonstrates that children with good impulse control get along better with others and have more social confidence. Conversely, poor self-control is associated with aggression, antisocial behavior and higher rates of juvenile delinquency. The ability to self-regulate is what enables children to stay on task during academic work and to persevere in the face of frustration. Its importance emerges early in children's education; Kindergarten children with greater self-control show faster gains in math and reading skills, which puts them on track for academic success. Cultural differences can alter what is considered socially acceptable, for example, whether children are expected to stay seated in a group setting. Therefore, part of helping children develop impulse control is teaching them about the expectations of different social situations.

Outcomes

Self-control is associated with:
- Higher scores and faster growth on assessments of math and reading (Blair & Razza, 2007; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Howse et al. 2003; Mclelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006; Normandeau & Guay, 1998).
- Higher academic achievement in general (Newman, Noel, Chen, & Matsopoulos, 1998).

- Higher ratings of social competence and fewer behavior problems, as rated by teachers (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003).

Strategies for Improving Impulse Control

Research suggests a variety of strategies that can help children develop and exercise impulse control. These include:

- Goal setting and feedback loops, where the child and adult set goals for impulse control, talk about progress and provide feedback. Eventually the child can do this herself.
- Helping the child implement a simple routine that includes "self-talk"— that is, reminding one's self of the behavior one wants to display, and other ways to cope when not getting what one needs/wants immediately. For example, a child could remind themselves to "stop, look and listen," which provides the time needed to think before acting (rather than being guided by an instant emotional response). Children, particularly those in the preschool or early elementary years, will need assistance developing and maintaining these routines.
- Taking pre-emptive actions to head off potentially difficult situations, such as engaging a child in another activity while waiting to do something.
- Clarifying expectations. This is important because norms and expectations vary across contexts (for example, what's acceptable in gym class and math class are likely not the same). Adults should explain expectations for each new setting and help children adjust their self-control strategies accordingly.

2. Persistence: "Setbacks don't discourage me from reaching my goals."

Sometimes called "grit" or "stick-to-it-iveness," persistence is the capacity to maintain concentration on a task, question, set of directions or interactions, despite distractions and interruptions. Children who show persistence have the ability not only to stay focused on a task, but also to overcome setbacks and keep trying. They are able to perform a task or set of tasks with care and effort from start to finish.

Outcomes

In the past, researchers have often examined persistence as an end in itself, under the assumption that it is a good characteristic to have. More recently, however, they have begun to examine how it contributes to achievement. Persistence is associated with:

- Faster growth in reading from kindergarten through third grade (Newman, Noel, Chen, & Matsopoulos, 1998).
- Faster growth in both reading and math from kindergarten to fifth grade (Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzal, Maldonado, & Haas, 2010).
- Less anxiety and less likely to blame others while trying to solve difficult problems ((Lufi and Cohen, 1987).

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Strategies for Improving Persistence

Children learn persistence when they are successful at a challenging task. Research demonstrates several strategies that allow children to have this experience:

- Providing the opportunity to complete tasks that are just challenging enough, but not overwhelming.
- Encouraging practice.
- Offering a child a clear verbal strategy to deal with challenges (such as how to talk through a problem or use motivational words like "I will keep trying").
- Providing "coping models"—that is, role models who cope with failure and continue to persevere.

3. *Mastery Orientation: "I do my work because I want to get better at it."*

Children with a mastery orientation want to increase their competence and abilities while mastering new tasks over time. They demonstrate a desire to learn and are not afraid of new and challenging experiences. These children are not primarily motivated by external assessments or rewards, but rather value learning for its own sake. They typically view "failure" as a learning experience. The overall goal of mastery orientation is to increase knowledge (rather than simply "showcasing" that knowledge). Connected strongly with this orientation is the belief that intelligence is not fixed but can be nurtured and developed.

Outcomes

- Higher science grades (Meece & Holt, 1993)
- Higher grades and achievement test scores at end of school year than children who believe intelligence is fixed (Stipek & Gralinksi, 1996)

Strategies for Developing Mastery Orientation

To influence children's orientation toward learning, research suggests focusing on the structure of tasks and evaluation, as well as adult-child interactions. Specific strategies include:

- Providing tasks that are meaningful to children, given their interests and environments.
- Presenting children with realistic but challenging tasks and placing the emphasis on mastery of the skill, rather than performance.
- Focusing on the value of learning (and what can be gained), in both adult-child interactions and in formal and informal evaluations.

4. *Academic Self-Efficacy: "I can do well in school if I try."*

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to accomplish a task and the understanding that actions one takes will influence this task's outcome. Academic self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to perform an *academic* task—is particularly important for success in school. An individual's sense of self-efficacy influences the level of effort they put forth in activities. It is closely connected with persistence (described more

An individual's sense of self-efficacy influences the level of effort they put forth in activities

below) and influences a child's perseverance when confronted with challenges and their resilience in the face of obstacles. Research finds that children's sense of self-efficacy can differ across subjects and even across specific tasks within subjects. Children who have strong self-efficacy believe that they can successfully complete their work, based on their abilities and prior experience.

Outcomes

Academic self-efficacy is associated with:

- Higher literacy/reading and math achievement (Liew, McTigue, Barrois, & Hughes, 2008).
- Higher math and science achievement (Phan, 2012).
- Higher homework completion and better classroom conduct, leading to higher grades (Duckworth, A. L., Tsukayama, E., Quinn, P. D., 2012).

Strategies for Improving Academic Self-Efficacy

Research has documented a number of strategies that are effective for improving academic self-efficacy:

- Assisting children with goal setting, particularly in the short-term. Focusing on specific, immediate, and somewhat challenging goals is essential, because it helps children demonstrate that they can complete a particular task and then internalize the belief that they can do it again the next time.
- Engaging in self-assessment, which is typically done with adult assistance and then eventually by the child himself. This helps the child understand the steps needed to successfully reach a goal and develop a sense of "making progress."

Conclusion

As seen in the research, briefly summarized here and presented in more depth in, "Encouraging the Development of Key Life Skills in Elementary School-Age Children," these four skills—self-control, persistence, mastery orientation, and academic self-efficacy —are strongly related to a diverse set of positive outcomes. In addition, strategies to build these skills are complementary and overlapping. Programs that incorporate these strategies and focus consciously on helping children develop these essential self-management skills will be well positioned to have a positive impact on children's social, behavioral and academic outcomes in the elementary school years and beyond.