



# Beyond behavior modification: Benefits of social–emotional/self-regulation training for preschoolers with behavior problems



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## ABSTRACT

The current study evaluated the initial efficacy of three intervention programs aimed at improving school readiness in preschool children with externalizing behavior problems (EBP). Participants for this study included 45 preschool children (76% boys;  $M_{\text{age}} = 5.16$  years; 84% Hispanic/Latino background) with at-risk or clinically elevated levels of EBP. During the summer between preschool and kindergarten, children were randomized to receive three newly developed intervention packages. The first and most cost effective intervention package was an 8-week School Readiness Parenting Program (SRPP). Families randomized into the second and third intervention packages received not only the weekly SRPP, but children also attended two different versions of an intensive kindergarten summer readiness class (M–F, 8 a.m.–5 p.m.) that was part of an 8-week summer treatment program for pre-kindergarteners (STP-PreK). One version included the standard behavioral modification system and academic curriculum (STP-PreK) while the other additionally contained social–emotional and self-regulation training (STP-PreK Enhanced). Baseline, post-intervention, and 6-month follow-up data were collected on children's school readiness outcomes including parent, teacher, and objective assessment measures. Analyses using linear mixed models indicated that children's behavioral functioning significantly improved across all groups in a similar magnitude. Children in the STP-PreK Enhanced group, however, experienced greater growth across time in academic achievement, emotion knowledge, emotion regulation, and executive functioning compared to children in the other groups. These findings suggest that while parent training is sufficient to address children's behavioral difficulties, an intensive summer program that goes beyond behavioral modification and academic preparation by targeting socio-emotional and self-regulation skills can have incremental benefits across multiple aspects of school readiness.

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## 1. Introduction

Externalizing behavior problems (EBP), including aggression, defiance, inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity are the most common reason for early childhood mental health referral (Cormier, 2008). In addition to having a highly stable and persistent course (Lee, Lahey, Owens, & Hinshaw, 2008), early-onset EBP are associated with a developmental trajectory of psychosocial impairment, including increased risk for later antisocial behavior (Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002), substance use disorders (Lee, Humphreys, Flory, Liu, & Glass, 2011), peer rejection (Hoza, 2007), and negative academic outcomes (Loe & Feldman, 2007). The transition to kindergarten marks a particularly important period as preschool children exhibiting EBP are more likely to have

poor school readiness outcomes including academic and social difficulties (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011; Keane & Calkins, 2004). Therefore, preschool children with EBP represent an optimal at-risk population for early intervention.

### 1.1. *Self-regulation and social–emotional competence in children with EBP*

When conceptualizing the host of factors that contribute to the challenges that children with EBP face upon school entry, it is important to examine the self-regulation deficits that are inherently part of EBP. Broadly speaking, self-regulation refers to the skills and processes associated with the direction, planning, and control of attention and/or cognition, emotion, and behavior/action that are necessary for optimal adaptive functioning (Calkins, 2007). Children with EBP are more likely to exhibit self-regulation difficulties across behavioral, attentional, and/or cognitive, and emotional domains compared to typically developing children (Barkley, 2010; Calkins, 2007).

A related, yet distinct, construct to self-regulation is social–emotional competence, which includes children's social skills, social problem solving, emotional expressiveness, and understanding or knowledge of emotions (Denham, 2006). Children's social competence typically involves active enactment of prosocial behaviors such as sharing, helping others, and expressing concerns for others (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006). Children's emotion understanding and/or knowledge includes the ability to recognize and verbally label various internal states (Denham, 2006). Similar to the self-regulation deficits previously mentioned, young children with EBP are also more likely to have lower levels of social–emotional competence (DuPaul, McGoey, Eckert, & VanBrakle, 2001), perform more poorly on emotion recognition and/or knowledge tasks (Dyck, Ferguson, & Shochet, 2001), and are more likely to demonstrate deficits in social skills (see Nixon, 2001 for a review).

### 1.2. *Importance of self-regulation and social–emotional competence for school readiness*

As outlined by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, the kindergarten environment is markedly different from that of preschool with novel academic and social demands under higher expectations of autonomy. This can be challenging and/or stressful for children as they must then use their self-regulation skills and social–emotional competence to learn and effectively interact with teachers and peers (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Indeed, research has linked higher levels of social–emotional competence with more positive student–teacher relationships (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and greater academic skills, even when earlier academic success is taken into consideration (Denham, 2006; Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010).

Self-regulation skills, such as executive function (EF) and emotion regulation (ER), are particularly important for children's early school success (Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2012). Effective use of EF in the classroom allows children to attend to teacher instructions despite other classroom distractions, enables children to remember classroom rules while participating in activities, and enables inhibition of impulsive responses in favor of a more adaptive response (e.g., raising hand instead of shouting an answer). Not surprisingly, individual differences in EF have been shown to be concurrently and longitudinally associated with young children's math and literacy scores (Clark, Pritchard, & Woodward, 2010; McClelland et al., 2007), as well as with social outcomes (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Similarly, effective use of ER in the classroom allows children to modulate arousal levels that typically arise when faced with a novel and more demanding environment, which contributes directly to their academic performance by facilitating cognitive processes (Blair, 2002; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007).

### 1.3. *Early interventions that target social–emotional and behavioral difficulties*

Given that preschoolers with EBP have significant deficits across self-regulation skills and social–emotional competence, both of which are critical for school readiness, it is not surprising that significant efforts have been made towards developing early intervention programs that directly target these concerns.

#### 1.3.1. *Parent training*

Behavioral parent training (PT) programs such as Community Parent Education Program (COPE; Cunningham, Bremner, & Secord-Gilbert, 1998), Triple P-Positive Parenting Program (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully, & Bor, 2000), The Incredible Years (IY; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008), and Parent–Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT; Eyberg et al., 2001) are among the most well-established evidence-based interventions for EBP in young children (Eyberg, Nelson, & Boggs, 2008). The common treatment components of PT programs (e.g., increasing positive parent–child interactions, promoting consistency, and use of time out) are associated with large effect sizes on behavioral outcomes (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). However, despite substantial support, PT programs tend to have low participation rates and high attrition rates. Most relevant to the current study, PT programs do not directly address multiple aspects of school readiness, most notably academic impairment (Chronis, Chacko, Fabiano, Wymbs, & Pelham, 2004).

#### 1.3.2. *Classroom based*

Classroom-based interventions, on the other hand, attempt to improve school readiness and increase academic success by targeting the social–emotional competency of preschool and young children at the classroom level. There are numerous evidence-based programs for (a) increasing social–emotional competence (e.g., Peaceworks: Peacemaking Skills for Little Kids; Pickens, 2009) and (b) decreasing EBP (e.g., promoting alternative thinking skills; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995).

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