



Research Report:
Parent Perceptions of
Social Emotional
Learning (SEL)
Competencies and
Parent-Child
Relationships in
Children and
Adolescents

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The development of SEL (Social Emotional Learning) skills can help improve emotional and behavioral challenges and can strengthen relationships and build pro-social behaviors. While teachers have good insight into their student's social and emotional well-being and skills, parents have a different perspective and more history to evaluate their child's SEL competencies. Parent-child relationships are a critical part of a child's well-being and it is typical for this relationship to have challenges and more conflict during the teen years. Similarly, it is common for teens to demonstrate more challenges in their social and emotional skills and peer relationships. In this report, parents of K-12 students were asked to rate their relationship with their child or teen and to rate their child or teen's social emotional skills and peer relationships in an online survey. This data is part of a larger 3-year clinical trial evaluating the effectiveness of the Rethink Ed SEL platform. Parents of teens rated their teens as having more externalizing behaviors (i.e. hyperactivity and conduct problems) and more internalizing behaviors ((i.e. emotional and peer-related problems) than the parents of elementary children. In addition, parents of teens rated their relationships as having more conflict and less closeness than the parents of elementary children. This initial data highlights the importance of SEL during secondary grades. While implementation may pose more difficulties (e.g. class changes, rigorous academics, etc.), SEL may be needed even more during the teen years.

KEYWORDS

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Parents, Children, Teens, Adolescents, Relationships, Conflict, Closeness, Internalizing Behaviors, Externalizing Behaviors, Research

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Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

In addition to improving academic outcomes and attendance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is essential for successful relationships, emotional development, and prosocial behaviors and for preventing and reducing behavioral challenges (Zinsler, Bailey, Curby, Denham, & Bassett, 2013). SEL skills such as emotions, empathy, cultural competence, conflict resolution, goal setting, stress management, and self-awareness help us to build more successful relationships, build equity, and make better decisions in our lives (CASEL, 2020). Learning and developing SEL can help with emotional and behavioral challenges while improving relationships and pro-social behaviors.

Parents are one of the most influential components of social emotional development in children yet are often not included in the development of curriculum or evaluation of outcomes (Dinallo, 2016).

The gradual development of growth mindset and SEL skills is essential for building a positive school climate (Yeager, 2017), and according to the latest CASEL updates on SEL programming, it is extremely important to provide developmentally sequenced grade-level curricula (as opposed to grade bands or one-size-fits-all curricula for all grades) that allows for more positive identity formation, healthy peer relationships, student voice, and using students as change agents throughout adolescence (Skoog-Hoffman, et al., 2020). Rethink Ed's SEL curriculum addresses the core SEL competencies from early childhood through high school with a strong focus on developing independent thinking and student ownership and collaboration.

While teachers may have a good sense of their student's SEL competencies, parents (and the students themselves) also provide good insight. Parents are one of the most influential components of social emotional development in children yet are often not included in the development of curriculum or evaluation of outcomes (Dinallo, 2016). Teacher ratings offer value into what the student is doing currently in the school environment and student ratings offer value into their perceptions of their own skills and behaviors at a given time. Parent ratings offer value in that they have a history and can rate the child over time. In addition, they have the opportunity to observe their child in a variety of different settings (not just in school) (Culp et al., 2001).

Parent perspectives may not be the same as teacher or student perspectives and to get a true sense of the student's success in an SEL intervention, using ratings from different perspectives is more reliable and informative than just collecting teacher data alone (Renk & Phares, 2004). Agreements in ratings can vary by age with stronger agreements being more common with younger children than with adolescents so collecting parent data is particularly valuable when looking at SEL outcomes for middle and high school students.

Parent-Child Relationships

Successful and healthy relationships are one of the primary outcomes from SEL interventions and it is important to look at relationships between teachers and students, students and students (peers), and parent-child relationships. Relationship quality is a strong predictor of empathy, compassion, conflict resolution, and other important SEL skills (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010) as well as academic success and mental well-being (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). While good relationships with teachers are essential for all students (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003), family engagement is critical for the mental health and academic success of children (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016) and adolescents (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016).

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Rethink Ed understands the importance of family engagement and provides SEL resources, strategies, and activities in Parent Connection Letters to keep families informed and equipped to participate. During COVID-19 school closures and remote learning, parents were essential in keeping students engaged and emotionally and socially healthy. Having access to Rethink Ed's teaching tools for their children and educational videos to improve their own understanding of SEL helped parents work on their relationships with their children and helped them better manage their own well-being.

Development of SEL and Relationships in Adolescence

While there is a great need for SEL for all students (and adults), it may be

particularly important for adolescents. Disengagement from school, family, and a healthy and productive lifestyle become increasingly problematic as children progress into middle and high school. Having strong SEL skills is one of the top priorities for college and career readiness and preparing for adulthood. In fact, SEL skills such as growth mindset, self-awareness, self-management, cultural competence, and conflict resolution are indicative of better academic performance both in high school and in college and are predictive of more success in the workplace than technical skills or intelligence (Farrington, et al., 2012).

Improving SEL skills for the student as well as the parent can improve communication, understanding, and conflict resolution and help build a stronger and healthier relationship.

Increases in conflict and strained relationships with parents are common during adolescence. Due to the biological, neurological, and cognitive changes that develop during the teen years, it is normal for teens to struggle for their own independence while still needing help from their parents and this leads to challenges in the parent-teen relationship and increased conflicts (Branje, 2018). Improving SEL skills for the student as well as the parent can improve communication, understanding, and conflict resolution and help build a stronger and healthier relationship.

Research Purpose

The Rethink Ed research team is conducting a 3-year quasi-experimental effectiveness trial on our SEL program. Participants will conduct assessments in the fall and spring of each school year and teachers will complete professional development modules in SEL and implement the student SEL lessons over the course of the study. As part of this study, we are collecting data from teachers, parents, and students on the SEL skills of students and on their relationships with one another. Parent ratings are collected annually to evaluate parent perceptions of their child's SEL competencies and their relationship with their child. The present report shares our initial descriptive results from our parent surveys.

This report addresses the following questions:

1. How do parents perceive relationships with their child or teen? What are the differences between children and teens?

2. How do parents perceive SEL competencies, behavior, and well-being in their child or teen? What are the differences between children and teens?

Participants and Measures

Participants were recruited from school districts interested in starting an SEL program with Rethink Ed. We confirmed 8 classrooms across two districts in New York and Arizona. We then randomly assigned classrooms to treatment and control conditions. 123 parents responded to the survey and 77 completed it. Our sample included parents of primary students in grades K-5 (N=54) and secondary students in grades 6-12 (N=23). A similar percentage of parents completed the parent survey in District 1 (51%) and in District 2 (49%).

All participating classroom teachers were sent a link to the parent or guardian of the students in their classroom that allowed them to opt-in or out of the study and complete a survey about their child. The survey included the following measures:

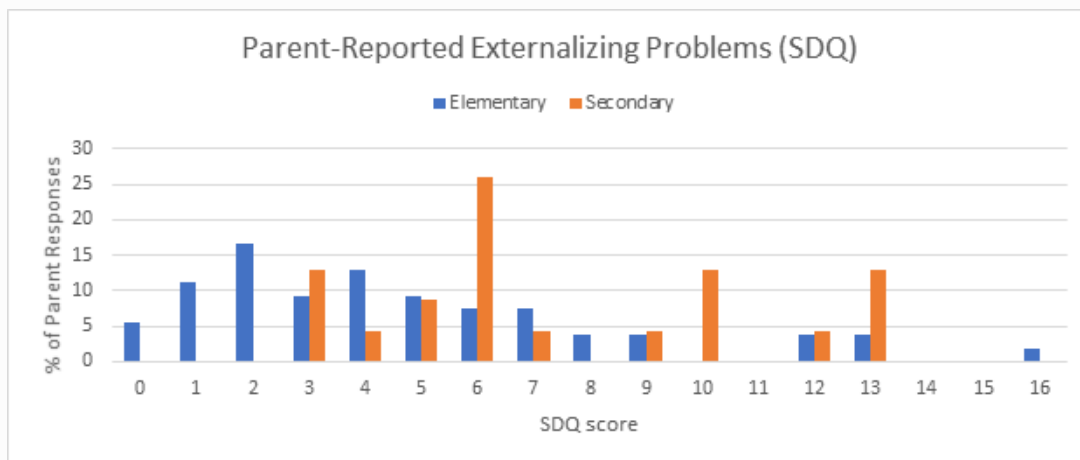
- *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)* (Goodman, 2001) is a brief emotional and behavioral screening questionnaire for children and teens. The tool can capture the perspectives of children and teens, their parents, and teachers. Parents and guardians were asked to complete the parent version of the questionnaire. The 25 items are rated on a 3-point scale and ratings are summed into groups of items corresponding with five subscales (i.e., emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial subscales). For community samples, such as the one used in this study, the authors recommend using the externalizing (i.e., a sum of the hyperactivity and conduct problems subscales) and the internalizing (i.e., a sum of the emotional and peer problem subscales).
- *Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS)* (Pianta, 1992) is a self-report instrument completed by mothers or fathers that assesses their perceptions of their relationship with their son or daughter. The 15 items are rated on 5-point Likert scales and the ratings can be summed into groups of items corresponding to conflict and closeness subscales.

Differences in Social Emotional Competence in Children and Adolescents

Externalizing behaviors (i.e. hyperactivity and conduct problems) were measured using parent responses from the SDQ. Almost all parents rated their child or teen to be in the low clinical risk range (0-13). Most elementary parents reported low-moderate externalizing problems (Mean=4.6) while secondary parents reported more externalizing problems overall (Mean=7.5). This difference was statistically significant ($p < .01$) using independent t-tests and regression analyses.

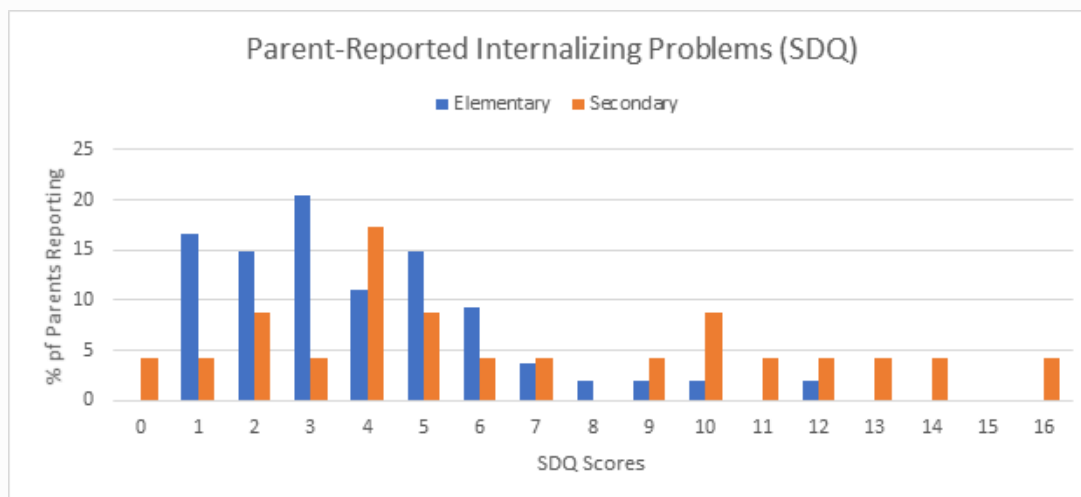
While challenging behaviors and conflict are common in adolescence, it is important to continue to foster social emotional development during these years.

While challenging behaviors and conflict are common in adolescence, it is important to continue to foster social emotional development during these years. Building SEL skills can decrease conduct problems and help teens make healthier, more responsible decisions and research shows that this can improve the probability of teens choosing not to engage in drinking, smoking, violence, etc. and can improve attendance, academic success, college and career readiness, and engagement in activities (Kuo, Casillas, & Allen, 2019).



Internalizing behaviors (i.e. emotional and peer-related problems) were also measured using parent ratings on the SDQ. While parents of elementary students all rated their children below the clinical risk range (0-13), some parents of secondary students rated their teens in the possible clinical risk range (over 13). Elementary parents rated their children significantly ($p < .01$) lower overall (Mean = 3.8) than the parents of secondary students (Mean = 6.8).

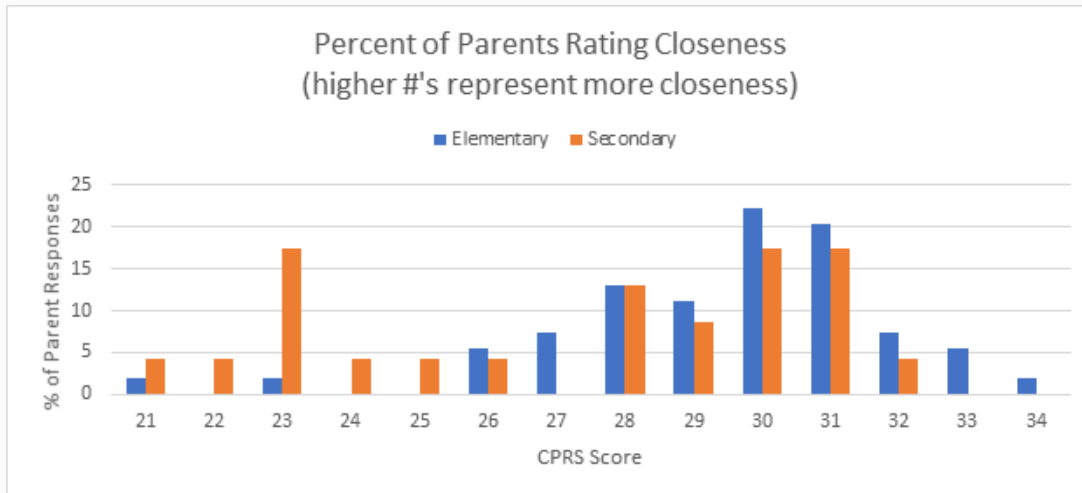
Strong emotional skills and positive peer relationships predict greater happiness, fewer mental health issues, and healthier relationships over time (Gillham, et al., 2011). Higher degrees of emotional and peer-related problems can be remediated through the development of SEL skills such as resilience, stress management, emotion regulation, conflict solution, empathy, and growth mindset.



The SDQ Total Difficulties scores between elementary and secondary students also varied significantly ($p < .01$) with an average score of 8.5 for elementary students and 14.2 for secondary students. This data supports research findings that indicate more behavioral challenges and social emotional needs during adolescence. This highlights the importance of SEL programming for middle and high school students.

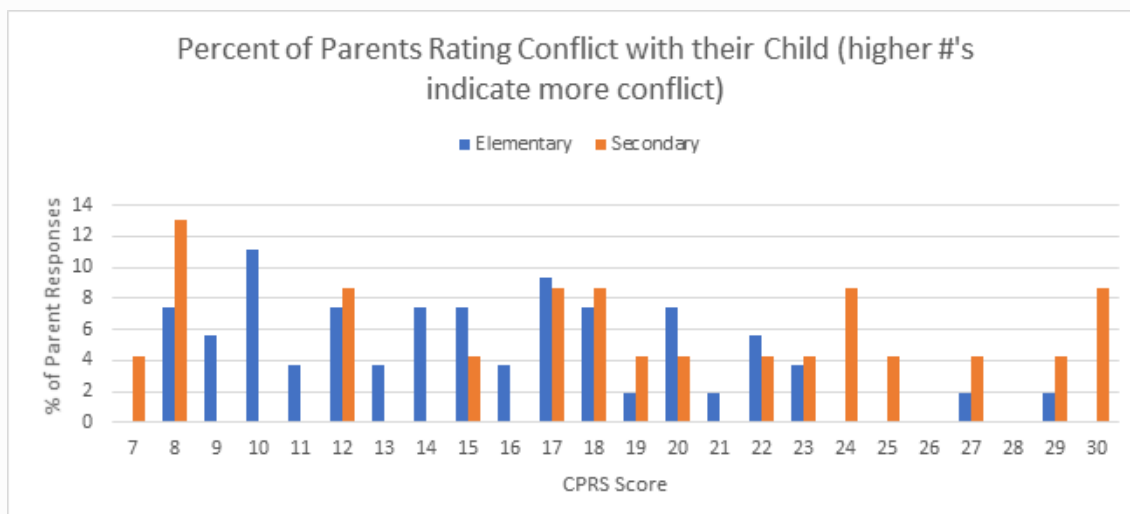
Differences in Parent-Child Relationships in Children and Adolescents

Relationships between parents and children/teens were measured using the CPRS. Parents of elementary students rated their closeness with their child (Mean = 29.5) significantly higher ($p < .01$) than parents of secondary students (Mean = 27.3). A temporary decrease in closeness with parents during adolescence is common as teens struggle with their growing need for independence (Branje, 2018).



Parents rated conflict significantly higher for secondary students (Mean = 19.35) than parents of elementary students (Mean = 15.25). This is again a common trend during adolescence where conflict tends to increase with parents as changes in cognition lead to teens perceiving things that were previously under their parent's control to now be their personal choices (Smetana, 1989).

While these decreases in closeness and increases in conflict are to be expected during the teen years, too much of this can be high-risk for a teens social and emotional well-being and can lead to lower levels of self-esteem, problems in school, substance use, and other challenges (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003). SEL programming can help to improve relationships, communication, conflict resolution, and other skills to help teens (and parents) through these challenging years.



Conclusions and Future Directions

This report highlights the need for SEL for all students but demonstrates how secondary students may have an even greater need as they struggle with gaining independence, conflict with parents, and trying to fit in with peers. Their growing dependence on peers and distancing from parents may be an even greater challenge during the COVID pandemic and school closures as teens are more socially isolated, in closer quarters with their parents, and maybe struggling even more than usual with their need for independence. SEL may be a great solution for helping students learn the skills that they need prior to adolescence such as self-advocacy, stress management, resilience, self-awareness, and relationship skills. As children move into the teen years, SEL may prove to be an even greater benefit helping teens with responsible decision making, conflict resolution, goal setting, and other skills to help them transition into college or careers.

This report does not demonstrate pre-post intervention results but is a preliminary report on parent survey data from a larger clinical trial evaluating the outcomes of the Rethink Ed SEL platform over a 3-year study. Upcoming reports will show how teacher and student ratings compare to parent ratings on relationships and SEL competencies. Subsequent reports will show initial findings comparing fall to spring data. Year 2 of the study will yield more comprehensive data on the effectiveness of the SEL program. Future reports will share findings on professional development, student lessons, and further reports of assessment and survey data.

Teens are more socially isolated, in closer quarters with their parents, and may be struggling even more than usual with their need for independence.

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