

'It's Not Enough To Be Smart': Students With High 'Emotional Intelligence' Get Better Grades

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by John Anderer



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SYDNEY — Formative years spent in school can be a

turbulent time for adolescents and teens, and it's common for emotions to be at an all-time high. [Each student](#) deals with their emotions in her or his own way, and some are naturally better equipped to cope than others. Now, a new study conducted in Sydney, Australia finds that adolescents who are more adept at recognizing and managing their emotions usually end up attaining higher academic grades and standardized test scores.

This ability to understand and control one's emotions has been dubbed "emotional intelligence" by the scientific community, and is a relatively new concept, only dating back to the 1990s.

"Although we know that high intelligence and a conscientious personality are the most important psychological traits necessary for [academic success](#), our research highlights a third factor, emotional intelligence, that may also help students succeed," comments lead author Carolyn MacCann, PhD, of the University of Sydney, in a [release](#). "It's not enough to be smart and hardworking. Students must also be able to understand and manage their emotions to succeed at school."

While there was some pre-existing evidence that school-based emotional learning programs can be helpful at improving students' test scores, McCann believes her work is the first ever comprehensive meta-analysis to investigate

the relationship between high emotional intelligence and academic performance.

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To come to their conclusions, the research team analyzed a huge dataset consisting of more than 160 previous studies published between 1998-2019. This data encompassed over 42,000 students spread across 27 different countries (just over 76% were English speaking nations). Age-wise, the population sample was diverse, including students as young as elementary school and as [old as college](#).

Overall, students with higher emotional intelligence were found to [achieve higher grades](#) and standardized test scores than other students with less control over their feelings. After accounting for other factors such as traditional intelligence and personality traits, the findings stayed consistent. Even age, which the research team expected to influence results, did not seem to affect the association between emotional control and grades.

As far as *why* emotional intelligence plays such a significant role in academic performance, the study's authors offered up a few possible explanations.

“Students with higher emotional intelligence may be better able to manage negative emotions, such as anxiety, [boredom and disappointment](#), that can negatively affect academic performance,” McCann says. “Also, these students may be better able to manage the social world around them, forming better relationships with teachers, peers and family, all of which are important to academic success.”

Additionally, it is also hypothesized that the same skills that contribute to emotional intelligence, such as the ability to empathize with and understand human emotion and motivation, probably also help students excel in certain [academic subjects](#), such as history or language courses.

However, the research team were sure to warn against specifically testing for emotional skills, and subsequently singling out those with lower emotional intelligence for extra guidance. Doing so, they believe, would only stigmatize those students and make matters worse.

“Programs that integrate emotional skill development into the existing curriculum would be beneficial, as research suggests that training works better when run by teachers rather than external specialists,” McCann concludes.

“Increasing skills for everyone – not just those with low emotional intelligence – would benefit everyone.”

The [study](#) is published in the scientific journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

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