

The Me and Us of Emotions: Preliminary results of a program to promote children's empathy, compassion and cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

Given the challenges of the modern world, specifically at schools, and the alarming increase in mental health difficulties in young people, it is crucial to universally foster social and emotional skills in the school context. This study aims to present the development and preliminary results of a program to promote socioemotional skills for children in the 3rd and 4th grade. This program named "The Me and the Us of Emotions" consists of 10 group sessions included in the school curriculum. The specific objectives are to promote the capacity for emotion recognition; to teach emotional self-regulation strategies focused on reassurance and compassion; and to encourage behaviors of social connection and cooperation.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The program is based on the cognitive-behavioral model (CBT) and the compassion focused approaches (Bluth, 2017; Coles, 2015; Gilbert, 2010). Table 1 presents the program overview. All sessions can be delivered in person or online. Several sessions are complemented with interactive and online games, which use the session theme to promote emotional identification and effective strategies to deal with difficult emotions (e.g., sadness, fear, anger; cf. Figure 1).

Table 1. Program Overview

Session 1: What are Emotions?

- Establishment of the group rules and presentation of the participants;
- General approach to the importance and adaptive function of emotions, as well as the universality of emotions.

Session 2: Joy

- Psychoeducation about the emotion of joy based on the cognitive-behavioral model;
- Identification of the sensations, thoughts and behaviors associated with joy.

Session 3: Self-reassurance

- Psychoeducation about self-reassurance based on the cognitive-behavioral model;
- Familiarization and training in strategies to promote the self-reassurance.

Session 4: Self-compassion

- Recognition that we can experience many difficult emotions when facing difficult situations;
- Familiarization and training in strategies to promote self-compassion.

Session 5: Empathy and perspective taking

- Promote perspective-taking and empathy skills.
- Promote the ability to understand other's feelings and the multiple perspectives for one situation.

Session 6: Compassion for others

- Promote cooperative and compassionate behavior towards others, such as offering help, support, sharing;
- Encourage prosocial behaviors to help alleviate the other's suffering.

Session 7: Sadness

- Psychoeducation about the sadness emotion based on the cognitive-behavioral model;
- Normalization of the sadness emotion and promoting the adoption of adaptive strategies to make the sadness emotion less difficult.

Session 8: Fear

- Psychoeducation about the emotion of fear based on the cognitive-behavioral model;
- Normalization of fear emotion and promotion of strategies to ask for help and to approach unpleasant emotion.

Session 9: Anger

- Psychoeducation about the emotion of anger based on the cognitive-behavioral model;
- Adaptive function of the anger emotion versus externalizing anger behaviors as problematic.
- Familiarization and training in strategies to manage anger emotion.

Session 10: Emotions for life

- Identification of the diverse emotions addressed throughout the program.
- Identification and reflection on the gains obtained with the program.
- Anticipation of strategies to deal with emotions in the future.

METHOD

Design

This study has a randomized experimental nature: students with a class were randomly assigned to either an experimental group (EG) or control group (CG).

Participants

This study includes a total sample of 224 children aged between 8 and 12 years old ($M = 8.87$, $SD = 0.80$). In the EG there are 74 boys and 70 girls. In the CG there are 47 boys and 33 girls. There are no differences in this distribution among groups, Cramer's $V = .071$, $p = .290$

Procedures

Ethical and deontological requirements were followed. Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and anonymity were guaranteed.

References:

- Bluth, K. (2017). *The self-compassion workbook for teens: Mindfulness and compassion skills to overcome self-criticism and embrace who you are*. New Harbinger Publications.
Coles, M. I. (Ed.). (2015). *Towards the Compassionate School: From golden rule to golden thread*. Institute of Education press.
Gilbert, P. (2010). An introduction to compassion focused therapy in cognitive behavior therapy. *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy*, 3(2), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.1521/ijct.2010.3.2.97>

METHOD (CONT.)

Instrument

Study on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES; OCDE, 2019; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2020) is a large-scale international survey that assesses the social and emotional skills of children and adolescents. In the present study three subscales were used to assess (i) emotional control (8 items; e.g., "I keep my emotions under control"), (ii) empathy (8 items; e.g., "I care about what happens to others."), and (iii) cooperation (8 items; e.g., "I like to help others"). For each item participant is asked to answer about agreement with the sentence according to a 5-points Likert scale. In this study the internal consistency was .70 for both emotional control and empathy and .82 for cooperation at baseline. At post-intervention the Cronbach alphas were .77 for emotional control and empathy and .86 for cooperation.

RESULTS

Mixed ANOVA were performed to analyze within time, between groups, and interaction effects in children's emotional control, empathy and cooperation.

As can be seen in Table 2, results for emotional control point to a significant effect only for group. Post-hoc comparison revealed that the CG had more levels of emotional control than experimental group at baseline.

In addition, results showed significant main effects of time for empathy and cooperation. Pairwise comparisons show that the experimental group showed increased levels of empathy and cooperation (mean difference = $-.230$, $p < .001$; mean difference = $-.158$, $p < .001$) whereas no significant differences were found for control group ($p = .121$; $p = .695$, respectively).

Table 2. Means and SDs of the Outcome Measures at Baseline (M0), Post-intervention (M1) and Mixed Analysis of Variance (N = 224).

Outcome measures	Experimental Group (n = 144)		Control Group (n = 80)		Time	Group	Time * group	Partial η^2	Partial η^2	Partial η^2
	Baseline	Post-intervention	Baseline	Post-intervention						
Emotional Control	3.33 (0.06)	3.39 (0.07)	3.60 (0.08)	3.54 (0.09)	.000	.00	5.038*	.022	1.502	.08
Empathy	3.75 (0.05)	3.98 (0.06)	3.86 (0.07)	3.97 (0.07)	14.848***	.06	0.425	.002	1.883	.01
Cooperation	4.16 (0.05)	4.32 (0.05)	4.26 (0.07)	4.28 (0.07)	5.843*	.03	0.164	.001	3.183	.01

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

- ✓ When compared to the control group, children who received the program show improved social emotional skills, particularly empathy and cooperation.
- ✓ These social emotional skills contribute to children's emotional regulation and promote prosocial behaviors.
- ✓ The Me and the Us of Emotions seems to be a useful universal program to foster children's psychological well-being and, more broadly, to developing more positive and compassionate environment at schools.



Figure 1. Examples of the digital component of the program.