

# The Cost of Emotional Illiteracy, Part 1

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**By Daniel Goleman**

It had begun as a small dispute, but it had escalated. Ian Moore, a senior at Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, and Tyrone Sinkler, a junior, had had a falling-out with a buddy, 15-year-old Khalil Sumpter. Then they had started picking on him and making threats. Now it exploded.

Khalil, scared that Ian and Tyrone were going to beat him up, brought a .38 caliber pistol to school one morning, and, 15 feet from a school guard, shot both boys to death at point-blank range in the school's hallway.

The incident, chilling as it is, can be read as yet another sign of a desperate need for lessons in handling emotions, settling disagreements peaceably, and just plain getting along. Educators, long disturbed by schoolchildren's lagging scores in math and reading, are realizing there is a different and more alarming deficiency: emotional illiteracy(1). And while laudable efforts are being made to raise academic standards, this new and troubling deficiency is not being addressed in the standard school curriculum. As one Brooklyn teacher put it, the present emphasis in schools suggests that "we care more about how well schoolchildren can read and write than whether they'll be alive next week."

Signs of the deficiency can be seen in violent incidents such as the shooting of Ian and Tyrone, growing ever more common in American schools. But these are more than isolated events; the heightening of the turmoil of adolescence and troubles of childhood can be read—for the United States is a bellwether of world trends—in statistics such as these(2).

In 1990, compared to the previous two decades, the United States saw the highest juvenile arrest rate for violent crimes ever; teen arrests for forcible rape had doubled; teen murder rates quadrupled, mostly due to an increase in shootings(3). During those same two decades, the suicide rate for teenagers tripled, as did the number of children under 14 who are murder victims(4).

These alarming statistics are like the canary in the coal miner's tunnel whose death warns of too little oxygen. Beyond such sobering numbers, the plight of today's children can be seen at more subtle levels, in day-to-day problems that have not yet blossomed into outright crises. Perhaps the most telling data of all—a direct barometer of dropping levels of emotional competence—are from a national sample of American children, ages 7 to 16, comparing their emotional condition in the mid-1970s and at the end of the 1980s(8). Based on parents' and teachers' assessments, there was a steady worsening. No one problem stood out; all indicators simply crept steadily in the wrong direction. Children, on average, were doing more poorly in these specific ways: [exhibiting] withdrawal or social problems...[feeling] anxious and depressed...[evidencing] attention or thinking problems...[acting] delinquent or aggressive...

While any of these problems in isolation raises no eyebrows, taken as a group they are barometers of a sea change, a new kind of toxicity seeping into and poisoning the very experience of childhood, signifying sweeping deficits in emotional competences. This emotional malaise seems to be a universal price of modern life for children...No children, rich or poor, are exempt from risk; these problems are universal, occurring in all ethnic, racial, and income groups. Thus while children in poverty have the worst record on indices of emotional skills, their rate of deterioration over the decades was no worse than for middle-class children or for wealthy children: All show the same steady slide.

This is not just an American phenomenon but a global one, with worldwide competition to drive down labor costs creating economic forces that press on the family. These are times of financially besieged families, in which both parents work long hours so children are left to their own devices or the TV babysits; when more children than ever grow up in poverty; when the one-parent family is becoming ever more commonplace; when more infants and toddlers are left in day care so poorly run that it amounts to neglect. All this means, even for well-intentioned parents, the erosion of the countless small, nourishing exchanges between parent and child that build emotional competences...

## Rethinking Schools: Teaching by Being, Communities That Care

As family life no longer offers growing numbers of children a sure footing in life, schools are left as the one place communities can turn to for correctives to children's deficiencies in emotional and social competence. That is not to say that schools alone can stand in for all the social institutions that too often are in or nearing collapse. But since virtually every child goes to school (at least at the outset), it offers a place to reach children with basic lessons for living that they may never get otherwise. Emotional literacy implies an expanded mandate for schools. This daunting task requires two major changes: that teachers go beyond their traditional mission and that people in the community become more involved with schools....

...Many [emotional literacy] courses and the momentum for their spread come from an ongoing series of school-based prevention programs, each targeting a specific problem: teen smoking, drug abuse, pregnancy, dropping out, and more recently violence....The W.T. Grant Consortium's study of prevention programs found they are far more effective when they teach a core of emotional and social competences, such as impulse control, managing anger, and finding creative solutions to social predicaments(68)....[An effective prevention program's] main, ongoing subject is the core competence that is brought to bear on any specific dilemmas: emotional intelligence.

This new [focus on emotional intelligence] makes emotions and social life themselves topics, rather than treating these most compelling facets of a child's day as irrelevant intrusions.... The classes themselves may at first glance seem uneventful, much less a solution to the dramatic problems they address. But that is largely because, like good childrearing at home, the lessons imparted are small but telling, delivered regularly and over a sustained period of years. That is how emotional learning becomes ingrained; as experiences are repeated over and over, the brain reflects them as strengthened pathways, neural habits to apply in times of duress, frustration, hurt. And while the everyday substance of emotional literacy classes may look mundane, the outcome—decent human beings—is more critical to our future than ever....

*Continued in [The Cost of Emotional Illiteracy, Part 2.](#)*

# The Cost of Emotional Illiteracy, Part 2

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By Daniel Goleman

*Continued from [The Cost of Emotional Illiteracy, Part 1](#).*

## An Expanded Mission for Schools

...Emotional literacy expands our vision of the task of schools themselves, making them more explicitly society's agent for seeing that children learn these essential lessons for life—a return to a classic role for education. This larger design requires, apart from any specifics of curriculum, using opportunities in and out of class to help students turn moments of personal crisis into lessons in emotional competence. It also works best when the lessons at school are coordinated with what goes on in children's homes. Many emotional literacy programs include special classes for parents to teach them about what their children are learning, not just to complement what is imparted at school, but to help parents who feel the need to deal more effectively with their children's emotional life.

That way, children get consistent messages about emotional competence in all parts of their lives. In the New Haven schools, says Tim Shriver, director of the Social Competence Program, "if kids get into a beef in the cafeteria, they'll be sent to a peer mediator, who sits down with them and works through their conflict with the same perspective-taking technique they learned in class. Coaches will use the technique to handle conflicts on the playing field. We hold classes for parents in using these methods with kids at home."

Such parallel lines of reinforcement of these emotional lessons—not just in the classroom, but also on the playground; not just in the school, but also in the home—is optimal. That means weaving the school, the parents, and the community together more tightly. It increases the likelihood that what children learned in emotional literacy classes will not stay behind at school, but will be tested, practiced, and sharpened in the actual challenges of life.

Another way in which this focus reshapes schools is in building a campus culture that makes it a "caring community," a place where students feel respected, cared about, and bonded to classmates, teachers, and the school itself(12)....

In short, the optimal design of emotional literacy programs is to begin early, be age-appropriate, run throughout the school years, and intertwine efforts at school, at home, and in the community....Whether or not there is a class explicitly devoted to emotional literacy may matter far less than how these lessons are taught. There is perhaps no subject where the quality of the teacher matters so much, since how a teacher handles her class is in itself a model, a de facto lesson in emotional competence or the lack thereof. Whenever a teacher responds to one student, 20 or 30 others learn a lesson...

While many teachers may be reluctant at the outset to tackle a topic that seems so foreign to their training and routines, there is evidence that once they are willing to try it, most will be pleased rather than put off. In the New Haven schools, when teachers first learned that they would be trained to teach new emotional literacy courses, 31 percent said they were reluctant to do so. After a year of teaching the courses, more than 90 percent said they were pleased by them, and wanted to teach them again the following year....

## Does Emotional Literacy Make a Difference?

...A revealing moment came when I was observing a seventh-grade class in social development in the New Haven schools, and the teacher asked for "someone to tell me about a disagreement they've had recently that ended in a good way."

A 12-year-old girl shot up her hand: "This girl was supposed to be my friend, and someone said she wanted to fight me. They told me she was going to get me in a corner after school."

But instead of confronting the other girl in anger, she applied an approach encouraged in the class—finding out what is going on before jumping to conclusions: "So I went to the girl and I asked why she said that stuff. And she said she never did. So we never had a fight."

The story seems innocuous enough. Except that the girl who tells the tale had already been expelled from another school for fighting. In the past she attacked first, asked questions later or not at all. For her to engage a seeming adversary in a constructive way rather than immediately wading into an angry confrontation is a small but real victory.

Perhaps the most telling sign of the impact of such emotional literacy classes are the data shared with me by the principal of this 12-year-old's school. An unbendable rule there is that children caught fighting are suspended. But as the emotional literacy classes have been phased in over the years there has been a steady drop in the number of suspensions. "Last year," says the principal, "there were 106 suspensions. So far this year we're up to March and there have been only 26."

These are concrete benefits. But apart from such anecdotes of lives bettered or saved, there is the empirical question of how much emotional literacy classes really matter to those who go through them. The data suggest that although such courses do not change anyone overnight, as children advance through the curriculum from grade to grade, there are discernible improvements in the tone of school and the outlook—and level of emotional competence—of the girls and boys who take them.

There have been a handful of objective evaluations, the best of which compare students in these courses with equivalent students not taking them, with independent observers rating the children's behavior. Another method is to track changes in the same students before and after the courses based on objective measures of their behavior, such as the number of schoolyard fights or suspensions. Pooling such assessments reveals a widespread benefit for children's emotional and social competence, for their behavior in and out of the classroom, and for their ability to learn [Appendix F]:

- Emotional self-awareness...
- Managing emotions...
- Harnessing emotions productively...
- Empathy: reading emotions...
- Handling relationships...

One item on this list demands special attention: [in "harnessing emotions productively"] emotional literacy programs [were shown to] improve children's academic achievement scores and school performance. This is not an isolated finding; it recurs again and again in such studies. In a time when too many children lack the capacity to handle their upsets, to listen or focus, to rein in impulse, to feel responsible for their work or care about learning, anything that will buttress these skills will help in their education. In this sense, emotional literacy enhances schools' ability to teach. Even in a time of back-to-basics and budget cuts, there is an argument to be made that these programs help reverse a tide of educational decline and strengthen schools in accomplishing their main mission, and so are well worth the investment.

[In the long run, emotional literacy] courses seem to help children better fulfill their roles in life, becoming better friends, students, sons and daughters—and in the future are more likely to be better husbands, wives, workers and bosses, parents, and citizens.... Being able to put aside one's self-centered focus...opens the way to empathy, to real listening, to taking another person's perspective. Empathy, as we have seen, leads to caring, altruism, and compassion. Seeing things from another's perspective breaks down biased stereotypes, and so breeds tolerance and acceptance of differences. These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society, allowing people to live together in mutual respect and creating the possibility of productive public discourse. These are basic arts of democracy (17)....

...While not every boy and girl will acquire these skills with equal sureness, to the degree they do we are all the better for it. "A rising tide lifts all boats," as Tim Shriver put it. "It's not just the kids with problems, but all kids who can benefit from these skills; these are an inoculation for life."...

## A Last Word

...[Today's] teenagers are the first generation to have not just guns but automatic weaponry easily available to them, just as their parents' generation was the first to have wide access to drugs. The toting of guns by teenagers means that disagreements that in a former day would have led to fistfights can readily lead to shootings instead. And, as another expert points out, these teenagers "just aren't very good at avoiding disputes."

One reason they are so poor at this basic life skill, of course, is that as a society we have not bothered to make sure every child is taught the essentials of handling anger or resolving conflicts positively—nor have we bothered to teach empathy, impulse control, or any of the other fundamentals of emotional competence. By leaving the emotional lessons children learn to chance, we risk largely wasting the window of opportunity presented by the slow maturation of the brain to help children cultivate a healthy emotional repertoire.

Despite high interest in emotional literacy among some educators, these courses are as yet rare; most teachers, principals, and parents simply do not know they exist....Of course no program ...is an answer to every problem. But given the crises we find ourselves and our children facing, and given the quantum of hope held out by courses in emotional literacy, we must ask ourselves: Shouldn't we be teaching these most essential skills for life to every child—now more than ever? And if not now, when?

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