

# The PATHS curriculum for promoting social and emotional well-being among children aged 7–9 years: a cluster RCT

Neil Humphrey,<sup>1\*</sup> Alexandra Hennessey,<sup>1†</sup>  
Ann Lendrum,<sup>1</sup> Michael Wigelsworth,<sup>1</sup>  
Alexander Turner,<sup>2</sup> Margarita Panayiotou,<sup>1</sup>  
Craig Joyce,<sup>1</sup> Kirsty Pert,<sup>1</sup> Emma Stephens,<sup>1</sup>  
Lawrence Wo,<sup>1</sup> Garry Squires,<sup>1</sup> Kevin Woods,<sup>1</sup>  
Mark Harrison<sup>3</sup> and Rachel Calam<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Manchester Institute of Education, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

<sup>2</sup>Division of Population Health, Health Services Research and Primary Care, School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

<sup>4</sup>Division of Psychology and Mental Health, School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

\*Corresponding author [neil.humphrey@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:neil.humphrey@manchester.ac.uk)  
†née Barlow

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## Plain English summary

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## Plain English summary

Universal social and emotional learning interventions, such as the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum, are delivered to all children by their class teacher and consist of lessons on topics such as identifying and labelling feelings.

Our study focused on six questions: (1) what is the impact of PATHS on children's social skills and other outcomes?, (2) is any impact maintained 2 years after it has been delivered?, (3) does PATHS impact on how well children adjust to secondary school?, (4) does how PATHS is taught make a difference to outcomes?, (5) are children's social skills related to their later academic attainment? and (6) does PATHS provide value for money?

A total of 45 primary schools (approximately 5000 children) were randomly allocated to deliver PATHS for 2 years or to continue as normal. Outcome data were collected annually while PATHS was being delivered, and for a 2-year follow-up period thereafter. PATHS lessons and interviewed school staff, children and parents were also observed to assess how it was being taught, and the factors that influenced this.

There was tentative evidence that PATHS led to very small improvements in children's social skills and perceptions of peer and social support, and reduced school exclusions. Very small but significant improvements in children's psychological well-being were also found. However, there were no differences between children from PATHS and usual provision schools for any outcomes in our follow-up analyses.

It was found that higher-quality teaching of PATHS was associated with improvements in some outcomes. However, our interviews indicated that teachers struggled to fit it in among competing priorities.

Our analyses showed that children's social skills influenced their later academic attainment indirectly, by protecting them from experiencing mental health difficulties.

Finally, it was found that, despite its limited and rather modest impact, PATHS was likely to offer value for money.

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