

**‘Me and My Mates’: Development and Evaluation of an Emotional and Social
Competence Programme for Pre-Primary Children**

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree in any other university and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text.

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Abstract

A well-accepted finding from past research is that children from low socio-economic status (SES) suburbs have a higher proportion of emotional and social competence problems that later manifest into psychopathology and social maladjustment than children from high SES suburbs. This thesis reports the development, trial and evaluation of a classroom-based emotional and social competence programme, 'Me and My Mates' for pre-primary-aged Western Australian children from low SES suburbs. It was hypothesised that children who participated in Me and My Mates would show significantly greater increases in emotional and social competence, as well as lower rates of emotional and behavioural problems, than children who did not participate.

A primary concern in developing the Me and My Mates programme was to identify crucial emotional and social competencies that constituted accepted emotional and social competence in pre-primary children. The identified competencies were: understanding emotions in self, emotional expressivity, emotional knowledge, emotional regulation, attribution of intent, empathy, sympathy, increased prosocial behaviour and minimal aggressive behaviour.

A pilot trial was undertaken and changes were made to the programme in light of the results. A second trial consisted of an experimental evaluation of the modified version. Four schools consented to participate in both trials, with one government and one private school in each of the experimental and control conditions. In Trial One, 110 child assessments, teacher questionnaires and parent questionnaires were completed at pre-intervention, post-intervention and three-month follow-up. In Trial Two, 68 child assessments were completed at pre-intervention, post-intervention and three-month follow-up.

Results from the child assessments in both trials indicated that emotional knowledge, sympathy, empathy and prosocial behaviour were significantly higher in children who participated in the programme at post-intervention and three-month follow-up compared to children in the control group, whereas hostile attribution of intent and aggression were significantly lower. Teacher and parent findings were also supportive of increases in children's emotional and social competence and partially supportive of lower rates of emotional and behavioural problems in children.

When assessed at three-month follow-up, 80% of the children in Trial One and 91% of the children in Trial Two used the emotional regulation techniques taught in the programme. Effect sizes were generally moderate to high, and were larger in Trial Two for most competencies.

The findings were similar to those described in previously published reports of programme evaluations in pre-primary children, supporting findings that classroom-based programmes can enhance and sustain emotional and social competence in five-year-old children. Extending on previous findings, empirical support was also provided for the enhancement of competencies that have previously not been measured including important social functions such as sympathy, empathy and lower hostile attribution of intent.

The goal of future research will be to investigate whether longer term positive outcomes for children who completed the Me and My Mates programme continue in their primary school years.

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