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The grand challenge in social and emotional development: building a harmonious world for children and adolescents

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This paper marks the launch of the Social and Emotional Development section of a new journal, *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*. This launch is momentous because it represents the first concentrated effort to bring accessible, rigorous, scientific focus on improving the social and emotional wellbeing of children and adolescents to the world. Because *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology* is an open-access publication, anyone from young person to adult and from scientist to practitioner to entrepreneur to parent (and beyond) will have the opportunity to engage with, learn from, and apply the best science about children's and adolescents' social and emotional lives. What might we achieve with this opportunity?

There is no more important achievement than that of building a world in which every child, with no exceptions, has the opportunity to experience the socially and emotionally healthy life that co-occurs with living in harmony with those around them. This is, in fact, the grand challenge that awaits the field. In this paper, I describe the vision that accompanies this grand challenge and provide an assessment of our progress to date and steps we might take in the future.

The vision

What if every child in the world, with no exceptions, enjoyed the comfort, and security that comes with socially harmonious relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and others in their lives? What if every child in the world, with no exceptions, grew to be socially, and emotionally healthy, prepared to live up to their fullest potential? What would that world look like? The ramifications of this are enormous. Social and emotional functioning early in life lay the foundation for human functioning over the lifespan, in domains ranging from achievement and attainment (Coffey, 2020) to health (Mrug et al., 2022) to wealth (Chetty et al., 2022). Focusing our collective efforts on the relationships and social and emotional wellbeing of children and adolescents is akin to making a substantial investment in the world in which we live. Supporting children in learning how to capably manage emotions, to understand their own and others' emotions and perspectives, to interact effectively with those who are both similar to and different from themselves, to communicate in ways that enable ideas to be spoken and heard, to successfully solve interpersonal problems, and to build relationships grounded in trust

can reap benefits many times over. These benefits accrue to the children themselves, to others whose lives they directly touch, and to future generations. At a time when the world faces many serious problems—divisiveness, climate change, economic insecurity, and global health threats, to name just a few—focusing on young people's social and emotional wellbeing is essential to building our capacity for solving these problems (Prime et al., 2020). The costs of failing to do so are tremendous. These include the disruption and damage to lives due to less than optimal social and emotional functioning, the monetary costs (in many billions each year) that accrue when individuals experience social and emotional problems, and even the impact on the world that comes from insufficient development of the skills needed to address societal challenges.

Progress

What is the state of children today? Encouraging trends over time that suggest that improvements can be made. For instance, data from the US show a decline in adolescent suicidal ideation from a high of nearly 30% in 1991 to 17% in 2017 and a decline in high school dropout rates from 17% in 1966 to 6% in 2017 (Child Trends Databank, 2018, 2019). However, we are still far from meeting our challenge. To illustrate, recent data from a study of 5-year-olds in England, Estonia, and the US suggest that as many as 30% of young children are rated by parents or teachers as below average in self-regulation skills and that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds fare considerably worse than those from high socioeconomic backgrounds on measures of emotion recognition, prosocial behavior, and trust (OECD, 2020).

Moreover, child and adolescent wellbeing is dynamic; ups and downs are apparent. COVID-19, for example, has been implicated in worsening social and emotional functioning for young people. It has been associated with elevated anxiety and depression among adolescents (De France et al., 2022). Indeed, the US saw increases in emergency room visits for suspected suicide attempts of 50.6% for adolescent girls and 3.7% for adolescent boys from pre-pandemic to pandemic periods (Yard et al., 2021). As another example, rates of gun violence in the US spiked between 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2020 (pandemic). In fact, in 2020, death by gunshot was the leading cause of death for children and adolescents, surpassing death rates due to accidents and disease. The risk was greatest for youth who are Black (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2022). Whether gun violence touches children's lives as victim or bystander, the effects of trauma are staggering.

Further, findings from a study of youth in 41 countries suggest that there are notable country-level variations in youth wellbeing. For instance, although 90% of adolescents in the Netherlands and 86% of adolescents in Mexico report high life satisfaction, the rates are much lower in other countries, such as Japan and Turkey, where only 62 and 53% of adolescents, respectively, report high life satisfaction. And body dissatisfaction among 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds (an indicator of self-esteem) ranges from 33% in Iceland to 55% in Poland (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). Clearly, there are still many worldwide challenges with regard to child and adolescent social and emotional development to overcome.

Knowledge gleaned thus far is important for advancing wellbeing. Looking back on a few of the field's accomplishments

reveals the depth and breadth of existing knowledge in social and emotional development. For example, Bowlby and Ainsworth's groundbreaking early research on maternal separation and infant attachment (as cited in Bretherton, 1992) has led to discoveries related to the parent-child relationship as well as other relationships that are important in children's lives. Indeed this line of work has implications for childhood friendships (Dunn et al., 2002), emotion regulation in the context of young people's romantic relationships (Girme et al., 2021), and the quality of teacher-child interactions (Penttinen et al., 2020). Bandura's (1973) theoretical and empirical work on childhood aggression has spurred multinational efforts to understand not only aggressive behaviors and their mitigation but also prosocial behaviors and their promotion (Huesmann et al., 1984; Caprara et al., 2000; Olweus et al., 2020; Cirimele et al., 2022). Importantly, this line of work highlights how knowledge can be translated in ways that contribute to young people's wellbeing and that extend beyond what might have been initially imagined. In addition, discoveries about peer relationships have contributed to understanding of developmental processes, such as how peer socialization occurs and how to apply social forces to change behavior (Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011). Moreover, advances in measurement (Poulin and Dishion, 2008) and statistical methods (Snijders et al., 2010)—such as peer nomination methods and longitudinal social network analysis—have come from and advanced the work on peer relationships. These, in turn, have led to further discoveries, including those related to outcomes in other developmental domains, such as those related to learning and achievement (DeLay et al., 2016). Finally, theoretical ideas that got their start decades ago in areas outside of social and emotional development are today influencing both research and practice. Intergroup Contact Theory, which was initially developed to address prejudice reduction among adults (Allport, 1954), has more recently been applied to children's development (Bigler and Liben, 2007). This has led to insights related to children's gendered relationships and the effective implementation of collaborative learning procedures in schools (Van Ryzin and Roseth, 2018; Hanish et al., 2021). These examples, and many more, represent, not only how knowledge exists within social and emotional topic areas, but the spread of knowledge from one discipline and/or dimension to another. This is a sign of a field that is maturing and ready to take the next steps in the grand challenge that awaits us.

The future

Meeting the grand challenge of ensuring that all children experience social and emotional wellbeing will take dedication and goal-directed effort. It will be necessary to build on existing strengths while also seizing new opportunities. It will be necessary to think outside of the box and seek innovation. It will be necessary to collaborate cross-nationally and interdisciplinarily. It will be necessary to create partnerships between science and practice communities. And, it will be necessary that the knowledge gained spreads widely, such that every individual who contributes to the life of a child can use what is learned. It is my intention that the work disseminated here contributes to meeting these goals.

The inspiration for how to meet these goals is in plain view. New opportunities abound. World events and shifting social norms

contribute to these. For instance, societal changes with regard to how gender and sexual orientation are understood are reflected in a recent expansion of knowledge related to issues such as variations in youth gender identity, the impact of homophobic name-calling on adolescent wellbeing, and the socio-emotional development of transgender youth (Olson et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Rinehart et al., 2020). Similarly, recent advances are evident in topic areas related to race and ethnicity. As a result, more is now known about how children's race-based behaviors are socialized, the socio-emotional developmental correlates of having cross-ethnic friends, and the ways in which racism operates in young people's lives, among other topics (Graham et al., 2014; Sladek et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2022). In these examples, as well as others, the scientific community has become inspired to tackle new and harder questions and topics, leading to a wealth of discoveries that can be disseminated.

Exemplars of innovation, collaboration, and partnerships are also evident. By working across neuroscience and socio-emotional domains, we are, for example, learning about the evolutionary basis of neurological processes that facilitate both understanding of music and understanding of others' emotions (Tabak et al., 2022). Whether such work might ultimately lead to discovering new ways to support the development of empathy via musical education activities is an exciting question for the future. Working at a larger scale is also worthy of consideration. Much of the existing knowledge generated in the social and emotional fields comes from small teams. Yet, small and big teams contribute different, and complementary, value to a field (Wu et al., 2019). Small teams have the potential to spur innovation. Big team science, which entails collaboration among numerous investigators, working across boundaries (e.g., as defined by labs, universities, disciplines, or nations) and aggregating resources (e.g., intellectual, financial, and material), has the potential to boost knowledge beyond what is possible from small teams alone. Big teams, via their potential for a more in-depth look at an issue, may reduce the interpretive confusion that can arise when findings from discrete small teams with limited resources are not easily generalizable or reproducible by other small teams with similarly limited resources (Forscher et al., 2022).

Moreover, as we work toward accessibility and impact, research on the potential benefits of wise interventions and intervention kernels suggest that the translation of science to effective practice need not be resource-demanding (Embry and Biglan, 2008; Walton, 2014). Rather, small, simple, and focused efforts to nudge children's social and emotional functioning in ever more adaptive directions can be useful. Further, considerations of the role of policy related

to social and emotional development exist to guide future efforts (Kärnä et al., 2011; Elias and Moceri, 2012).

Conclusion

It is my intention that the work included in the Social and Emotional section of *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology* takes advantage of the opportunity to move forward in new and exciting ways. I encourage you to join me in this endeavor, to think in big and bold ways, and to make a difference in children's lives. There is still much to be done. The possibilities are endless, and the costs of failing to act are astronomically high.

Author contributions

This Specialty Grand Challenge article has been solely authored by the Specialty Chief Editor of the Social and Emotional Development section of *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*, LH.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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