

# Students' Social and Emotional Skills and Behaviors During the Onset of COVID-19

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Social and emotional (SE) skills can be defined as interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors that are important for adaptation to and successful performance in educational and workplace settings (Casillas et al., 2015). SE skills are related to important life outcomes such as academic achievement (e.g., Mammadov, 2022; Poropat, 2009). Additionally, students can improve these skills through social and emotional learning interventions (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2018). Existing research shows that these skills are related to students' positive behaviors at school (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011). We were interested in examining how SE skills relate to other positive behaviors in which students may engage, particularly when faced with adverse circumstances.

We examined data collected at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic between April 20 and May 4, 2020. Six hundred forty-two high school students who had taken the ACT<sup>®</sup> during the February 2020 National test administration were invited to participate in a survey on SE skill development. Students identified themselves as the following genders: 74.6% female and 25.4% male. Students from the following racial/ethnic groups were represented: American Indian/Alaska Native (0.2%), Asian (7.6%), Black/African American (7.9%), Hispanic/Latino (10.6%), Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (0.3%), White (64.8%), two or more races (4.6%); and 3.7% of students chose not to report their race/ethnicity. Of the 70.2% of respondents who reported family income levels, their reported family income per year was < \$24,000 (6.7%), \$24,000–\$36,000 (6.2%), \$36,000–\$50,000 (8.0%), \$50,000–\$60,000 (5.8%), \$60,000–\$80,000 (9.1%), \$80,000–\$100,000 (14.6%), \$100,000–\$120,000 (14.6%), \$120,000–\$150,000 (12.0%), or > \$150,000 (23.1%). The sample's average ACT Composite score was 25.9.

In the survey, we asked participants to report a variety of behaviors (listed in Table 1) in which they engaged during the onset of the pandemic. We considered these behaviors to be positive in that engaging in these behaviors indicates adapting to and coping positively with the shifting conditions caused by the onset of the pandemic (with the exception of one item, having trouble sleeping at night, which was negatively keyed). Respondents self-reported how often they engaged in these behaviors within the past week using 4-point frequency scales (i.e., never, 1–2 times per week, 3–5 times per week, or 6–7 times per week). Respondents also completed 40 Likert items from the Mosaic<sup>™</sup> by ACT<sup>®</sup> Social Emotional Learning Assessment measuring five SE skills: Sustaining Effort, Getting Along with Others, Maintaining Composure, Keeping an Open Mind, and Getting Along with Others (see ACT, 2021, for more information on the Mosaic assessment). We hypothesized that students with higher SE skill scores would report engaging in more positive behaviors during the onset of the pandemic. Table 1 shows correlations

between each of the 14 behaviors included in the survey and each of the five SE skills measured.

**Table 1.** Correlations Between Behavioral Frequency Items and Social and Emotional Skills

How often do you . . .	Sustaining Effort	Getting Along with Others	Maintaining Composure	Keeping an Open Mind	Social Connection
Work toward your goals?	.40*	.17*	.21*	.15*	.25*
Set a schedule for your day?	.30*	.11*	.10*	.13*	.22*
Complete all of your tasks and chores?	.28*	.15*	.17*	.18*	.14*
Help family members around the house?	.25*	.22*	.22*	.24*	.18*
Engage in activities (e.g., meditation, exercise) to help calm yourself down?	.24*	.15*	.19*	.16*	.25*
Think about things you are grateful for?	.31*	.34*	.24*	.25*	.26*
Have trouble sleeping at night?	-.04	-.00	-.05	.04	-.24*
Watch or read the news to learn more about COVID-19?	.21*	.15*	.21*	.15*	.14*
Encourage others around you to stay positive?	.25*	.38*	.25*	.34*	.38*
Initiate calls or video calls with friends or family members?	.16*	.20*	.16*	.21*	.29*

How often have you . . .	Sustaining Effort	Getting Along with Others	Maintaining Composure	Keeping an Open Mind	Social Connection
Volunteered to grocery shop or run other errands for those who need help?	.11*	.20*	.17*	.17*	.16*
Tried learning something new?	.13*	.13*	.25*	.24*	.18*
Tried something new (e.g., a new activity, a new TV show, a new recipe)?	.16*	.10*	.13*	.20*	.13*
Initiated a relief effort in response to COVID-19 (e.g., organized a group to make face masks)?	.09*	.10*	.17*	.12*	.16*

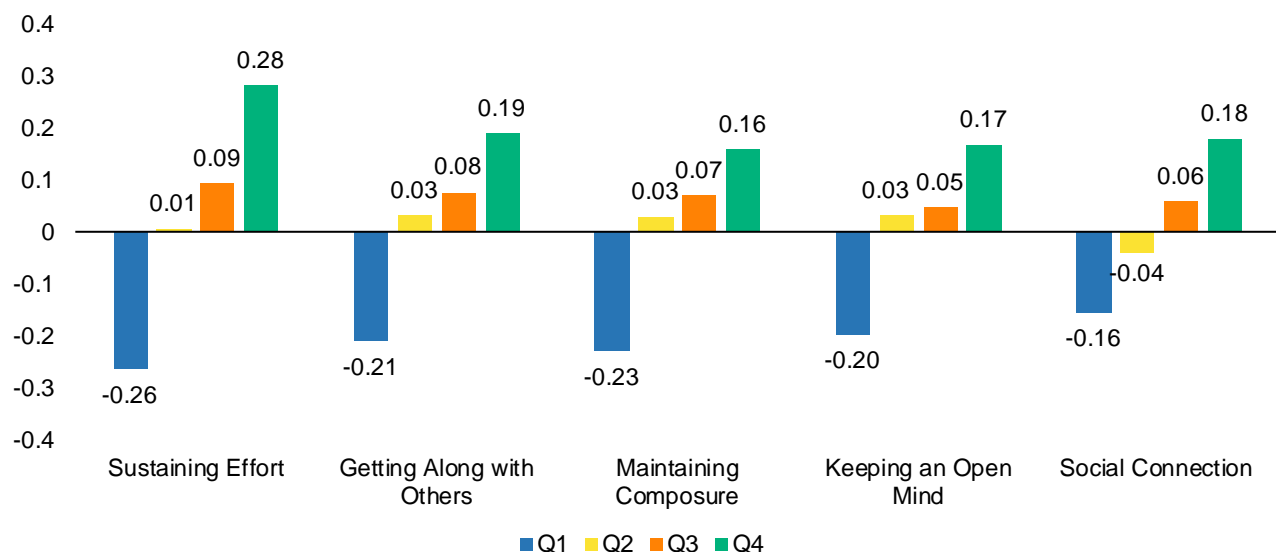
Note. \*Correlation is significant at the .05 level.

As shown in the table, behaviors were significantly correlated with various SE skills. In general, higher scores on the SE skill scales were associated with greater engagement in behaviors that demonstrate positive adaptive behavioral responses to the new realities caused by the pandemic's onset. Moreover, the pattern of associations was largely as expected in terms of

which SE skills had the strongest correlations with particular behaviors. For example, as one would expect, Sustaining Effort had the strongest association with working toward goals, and Social Connection had the strongest association with initiating calls with friends and family members.

We also examined students' average engagement in positive behaviors by SE skill quartiles. All 14 behavioral items were standardized to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 (z-scored) and averaged to create one composite score reflecting a student's use of all the positive coping behaviors. Quartile scores were computed for each SE skill scale score by identifying students as scoring in the first (bottom 25%), second (second 25%), third (third 25%), or fourth (top 25%) quartile. Figure 1 shows students' average engagement in positive coping behaviors by each quartile of SE skills.

**Figure 1.** Students' Engagement in Positive Coping Behaviors by SE Skill Quartiles



Taken together, these findings show that students' SE skill scores are related to the types of behaviors in which they engage. In this sample, students with higher SE skills engaged in more positive behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as setting goals for themselves, keeping daily routines, helping others in need, and regulating negative emotions. This is an important finding given that SE skills can be developed and because doing so can help students—particularly those falling in the bottom quartile on SE skills—act adaptively even when faced with challenging situations. We must note, however, that this sample may not be wholly representative of students. This sample's mean ACT score is notably higher than the national average, and the participating students are presumably highly conscientious given that they self-selected into the study. Despite this, the correlations reported here might actually be attenuated because of the restriction of range in the sample.

## References

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