

Improving Classroom Behavior and Emotional Understanding in  
Special Needs Children: The Effects of The PATHS Curriculum

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Poster presented at the 1991 Biennial Meeting of The Society for Research in  
Child Development (SRCD), Seattle, WA, April 20, 1991.

## ABSTRACT

The present study examined the short-term effects of a school-based, psychosocial educational curriculum on the adaptive classroom functioning and emotional understanding of 69 children in special needs classes (grades 1 through 5). Children were randomly assigned to intervention and comparison groups by classroom and school. Intervention children were taught The PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) Curriculum 4 days each week over a 7 month period. The lessons focused on teaching self-control, self-esteem, emotional understanding and problem-solving skills. At posttest, the intervention children showed significant improvement in Frustration Tolerance, Assertive Social Skills, Orientation, Peer Social Skills, and Emotional Labeling. These findings suggest that PATHS is effective for promoting adaptive classroom behavior and emotional understanding in special needs children.

## RATIONALE

Children assigned to self-contained, special education classes frequently demonstrate maladaptive behaviors, such as difficulties with frustration tolerance, appropriate assertiveness, task orientation, and peer social skills. A major goal for educators of special needs children is therefore to facilitate improved classroom behavior. This study examined the short-term effects of such a psycho-educational approach, The PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) Curriculum, on the adaptive functioning and emotional understanding of special needs children.

## AIMS

The major aims of the present study were as follows:

1. To improve the classroom behavior of special needs children
2. To improve emotional understanding in special needs children

## SUBJECTS

1. Total N of children = 69
2. Number of boys = 49  
Number of girls = 20
3. Experimental N = 31  
Control N = 38
4. Mean Age of Total Sample at Pretest = 8 years old
5. All children educated in self-contained, special needs classrooms, Grades 1 through 4
6. Randomly assigned, Experimental or Control, by classrooms and school
7. Ethnicity: White = 77%, Black = 15%, Other = 8%
8. Pretesting: Spring 1988  
Posttesting: Spring 1989

## MEASURES

1. Teacher-Child Rating Scale, Part II [T-CRS2] (Hightower, Work, Cowen, Lotyczewski, Spinell, Guare, & Rohrbeck, 1986) A 20-item teacher rating form that assesses the following domains of adaptive classroom functioning (the higher the score, the better):
  - a. Total Score (Overall Classroom Behavior)
  - b. Frustration Tolerance
  - c. Assertive Social Skills
  - d. Task Orientation
  - e. Peer Social Skills
  
2. The Kusché Emotional Inventory [KEI] (Kusché, 1984). A multiple-choice, pictorial test for children that assesses 20 emotions in the following two domains (the higher the score the better):
  - a. Emotional Recognition
  - b. Emotional Labeling

## INTERVENTION

1. The PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) Curriculum (Kusché, Greenberg, Gustafson, Calderon, & Coady, in press)
2. Approximately 60 lessons
3. Focused on the following domains:
  - a. self-control
  - b. self-esteem
  - c. emotional understanding
  - d. problem-solving skills
4. Taught by classroom teachers for approximately 30 minutes, four days a week, from October to May
5. All experimental teachers and assistants were given a three-day workshop prior to teaching PATHS and were supervised weekly

## RESULTS

### Method of Analysis

The effect of the intervention at post-test was examined through a series of MANOVAs of residualized change scores.

### Findings

1. Compared to the control group, the intervention children showed significant improvement in all scores on the T-CRS2 including:
  - a. Total Score (p < .01)
  - b. Frustration Tolerance (p < .05)
  - c. Assertiveness (p < .05)
  - d. Task Orientation (p < .05)
  - e. Peer Social Skills (p < .05)
  
2. The intervention children showed improvement on both scores of the KEI, although the Recognition Score only approached significance:
  - a. Emotional Recognition (p = .06)
  - b. Emotional Labeling (p < .01)

## CONCLUSIONS

1. PATHS was effective in improving classroom behavior in all areas measured, including frustration tolerance, assertive social skills, task orientation, and peer social skills. PATHS thus appears to promote adaptive classroom behavior in special needs children.
2. PATHS was effective in improving emotional understanding in this sample of special needs children. Emotional labeling was significantly improved, while emotional recognition approached significance. However, both the experimental and control groups scored near ceiling level on the Recognition portion of the KEI at pretest, which left little room for change.
3. Follow-up data are currently being analyzed to see if the findings noted above were maintained over time.



Table 1

## Mean Scores for Teacher and Child Measures at Pre and Posttest

	Control Group		Intervention Group	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
T-CRS2				
Total	58	55	55	59 **
Frustr. Tolerance	13	12	12	13 *
Assertive Soc. Skills	16	16	14	16 *
Task Orientation	13	13	13	15 *
Peer Social Skills	16	15	16	16 *
KEI				
Emo. Recognition	70	70	67	71 a
Emo. Labeling	43	47	47	58 **

a p = .06  
 \* p > .05  
 \*\* p > .01