

# Hope For the Future:

## Social-Emotional Strengths in the Context of Early Childhood Education at the Learning Enrichment Foundation

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Learning Enrichment Foundation, Toronto, ON

FamilyPsyche® Laboratory at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON

# BRIEF REPORT

Fall 2023



At LEF, we have learned to acknowledge the land we are on, and the land we come from, as a way of sending blessings to the First Peoples and our ancestors. An important part of this process is ensuring these acknowledgements contain meaning, continued learning, and sharing about the history of the land. Please see the link below to engage actively in our land acknowledgement:

<https://youtu.be/voXySM-knRc>

The authors of this report would like to thank the children, parents, caregivers, families, and educators of the Learning Enrichment Foundation. Without their support, dedication and enthusiasm, this project would not have been possible.



# Hope For the Future:

## Children's Strengths in the Context of Early Childhood Education at The Learning Enrichment Foundation

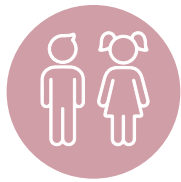
The goal of this project was to explore children's social and emotional strengths in the context of licensed early childhood education during a time of substantial change with the introduction of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care program in Ontario. This work will help us to understand patterns of children's social and emotional strengths within LEF programs. Such information helps us to plan accordingly and ensure we are meeting our commitment to quality, and of course, strive to exceed!

Educators used the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), a tool designed to assess social and emotional competence from a strengths-based perspective. This approach ensures we are viewing children as the capable and competent beings we know they are.

### Research Questions



## Children Who Participated in the Research



137 Students

**2-10**  
YEARS OLD

\*mean age of participants  
was 5.09 (SD = 1.67)



22 Classrooms

18%

Preschool

44%

Kindergarten

34%

School Aged

## How and When We Measured Student Strengths

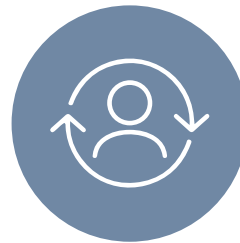
ECEs completed the Devereux Student Strength Assessment (DESSA), which is a survey asking questions like how often does a child “cooperate with peers”, “stay calm when faced with a challenge”. Areas of the assessment include:



SELF  
AWARENESS



SOCIAL  
AWARENESS



SELF  
MANAGEMENT



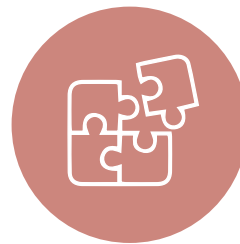
GOAL DIRECTED  
BEHAVIOUR



RELATIONSHIP  
SKILLS



PERSONAL  
RESPONSIBILITY



DECISION  
MAKING



OPTIMISM

While the tool itself was designed for assessing individual children, for the purposes of this research at LEF we only view findings at the group level. This preliminary research took place in four of our centres and we look forward to expanding this project to include more centres in the near future.



### SELF AWARENESS

A child's realistic understanding of their strengths and limitations and consistent desire for self-improvement.

#### EXAMPLE:

*Given an opinion when asked?  
Describe how they were feeling?  
Ask somebody for feedback?*

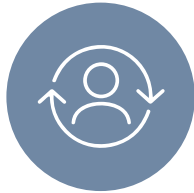


### SOCIAL AWARENESS

A child's capacity to interact with others in a way that shows respect for their ideas and behaviours, recognizes their impact... and uses cooperation and tolerance in social situations.

#### EXAMPLE:

*Get along with different types of people? Cooperate with peers?  
Forgive someone that hurt or upset them?*



### SELF MANAGEMENT

A child's success in controlling his or her emotions and behaviours, to complete a task or succeed in a new or challenging situation?

#### EXAMPLE:

*Wait their turn? Stay calm when faced with a challenge? Adjust well to changes in plans?*



### RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

A child's consistent performance of socially acceptable actions that promote and maintain positive connection with others.

#### EXAMPLE:

*Keep trying when unsuccessful?  
Seek out additional information?  
Take steps to achieve goals?*



### PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

A child's tendency to be careful and reliable in her/his actions and in contributing to group efforts.

#### EXAMPLE:

*Complement or congratulate somebody? Offer to help somebody?  
Express concern for another person?*



### DECISION MAKING

A child's approach to problem solving that involves learning from others and from their own previous experiences, using values to guide action, and accepting responsibility for decisions.

#### EXAMPLE:

*Remember important information?  
Serve an important role at school?  
Handle their belongings with care?*



### OPTIMISTIC THINKING

A child's attitude of confidence, hopefulness, and positive thinking regarding their self and their life situations in the present, past and future.

#### EXAMPLE:

*Follow the example of a positive role model? Accept responsibility for what they did? Learn from experience?*



### GOAL DIRECTED BEHAVIOUR

A child's initiation of, and persistence in completing, tasks of varying difficulty?

#### EXAMPLE:

*Say good things about themselves?  
Look forward to classes or activities at school?*

## Results:

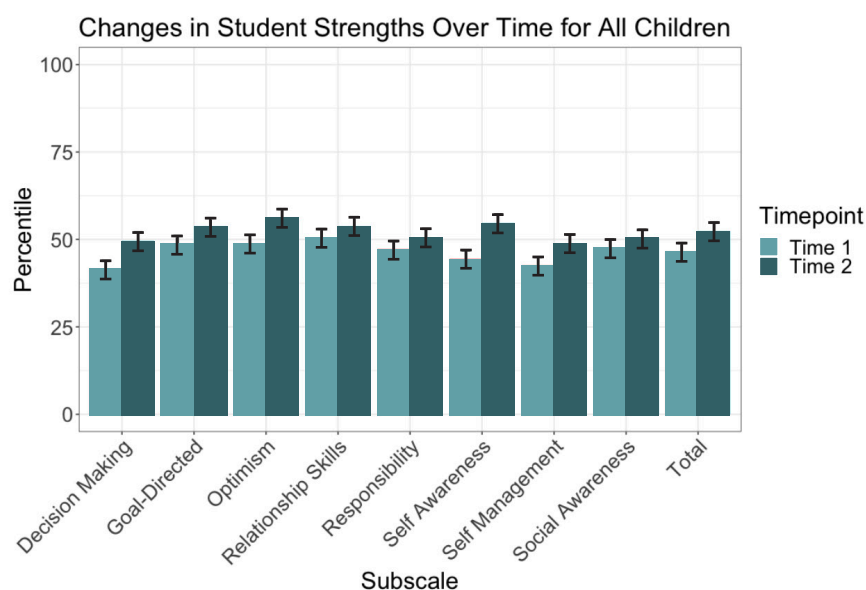
### How are children at LEF doing in terms of their social and emotional strengths?

Children at LEF participating in this research were not significantly different from the population average (50th percentile) in most areas at the initial wave of assessment (Jan 2023). At the second wave of assessment (April 2023), children were 7 percentile points higher in optimism compared to the average population. This effect was statistically significant and medium size (i.e., they were “moderately” more optimistic).

**7 percentile points higher in optimism**

### Do children grow in their strengths throughout the year?

**Children improved significantly in their strengths over the course of the study (see Figure 1).** Specifically, children showed improvements in self awareness, self management, goal directed behaviour, decision making, optimism and totals scores. **Some of these improvements were fairly large. For example, improvements in self awareness were over 10 percentile points.** Total scores improved over 5 percentile points. Improvements over the study are presented in the figure below.



Over the course of the study (Time 1=Jan 2023, to Time 2=April 2023), children improved in self awareness, self management, goal directed behaviour, decision making, optimism and totals scores.

## Percentage Improvement

**23%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
SELF AWARENESS

**7%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
RESPONSIBILITY

**6%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
SOCIAL AWARENESS

**19%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
DECISION MAKING

**15%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
SELF MANAGEMENT

**15%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
OPTIMISM

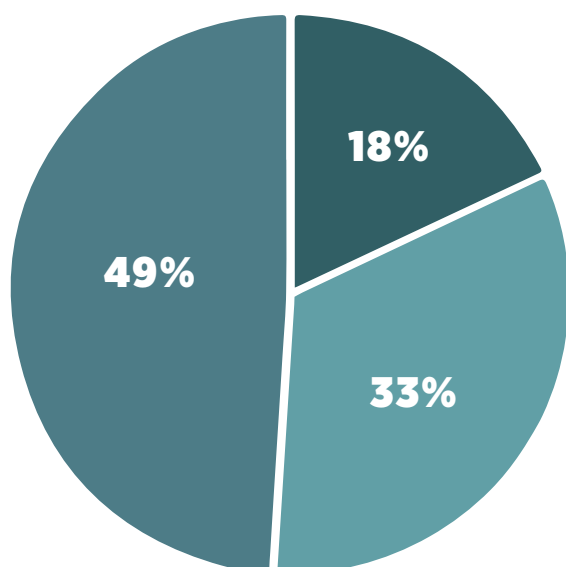
**7%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

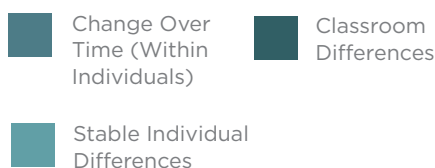
**10%**

IMPROVEMENT WITH  
GOAL DIRECTION

## How are strengths different across classrooms, children, and time?



There was significant variability in strengths across classrooms, children, and over time.. A greater proportion of classroom variance means that children in the same classroom are more alike. This could mean that specific classroom environments are important for cultivating strengths.. Child variance refers to stable individual differences. That is, across the study, some children tend to have higher strengths than others. Lastly, the largest variance component is for change over time.



## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Key Findings: Among children at LEF (n=137) who participated in this study...

1. Substantial improvements in strengths were observed, overall.
2. By the end of the academic year, participants showed significantly higher levels of optimism about the future compared to children in the average population.
3. Subgroup differences in patterns of change should be interpreted with caution. A larger sample is needed to unpack these differences with greater accuracy.
4. Improvements in strengths are irrespective of program type (i.e., pre- school, FDK, school-age) and number of absences.
5. Longer time educators knew children corresponded to profiles characterized by higher levels of strengths or improvement, over time. This was true even when we accounted for the educator's years of experience.
6. Classroom-wide differences in strengths are observed. This likely is related, at least in part, to educator effects, such as pedagogical style.
7. Approximately half of the variability in strengths was related to change-over-time.

## Recommendations for Practice and Policy

- A. The national ECE transformation should be accompanied by a strengths-based and quantitative approach to accountability, allowing the monitoring of children's strengths, for educators and families, while facilitating program evaluation.
- B. The monitoring of socioemotional strengths should be incorporated into standard operating procedures. Since educators are already completing monitoring to facilitate quality assurance, these data can support program evaluations, with the consent of caregivers.
- C. Program-wide implementation of strengths-based and quantitative tools will create opportunities for program evaluation, allowing us to understand how the implementation of policies and pedagogical interventions correlate with changes in strengths.
- D. Initiatives for monitoring strengths in children cannot happen without substantial investment in the ECE labor force. This is a time and resource intensive enterprise, albeit one that has substantial power to promote strengths-based pedagogies in Canadian ECE.



## How LEF is Responding:

LEF is committed to a strengths-based approach throughout our work and believe this is essential to the development of resilience at both the individual and community levels. The transition to implementing strengths-based monitoring across all child care services will continue as we expand this research. In keeping with LEF's key priority to share our knowledge, the findings from this research are distributed to our employees, families, and key stakeholders. Equipping educators with information specific to children's socioemotional strengths will inform both practice at the centre level and communication with families. This knowledge will also complement LEF's strategic approach to professional learning as we pan for continued improvements in children's social and emotions strengths. LEF is proactive in our approach to the changing face of child care and the workforce implications. We implement, and advocate for, policies and processes that have positive impact for educators and children. Salaries and benefits well beyond those proposed by governing bodies support the retention and well being of employees. This ensures the people children need to have those long term positive relationships with are valued, consistent, and able to contribute to the development of social emotional strengths.

