

Students Have Shown Significant Social and Emotional Skill Development During COVID-19

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Social and emotional skills change naturally over time (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006) and as the result of intervention efforts designed to improve social and emotional skills (Mahoney et al., 2018). Given the known malleability of social and emotional skills and significant changes to students' environments due to COVID-19, we examined whether mean levels of high school students' social and emotional skills significantly changed in response to the pandemic.

The key findings include:

- Students showed significant growth on four of the five social and emotional skills we assessed. Students showed growth on Sustaining Effort ($d = .10$), Maintaining Composure ($d = .19$), Getting Along with Others ($d = .08$), and Keeping an Open Mind ($d = .06$). Students showed no development on Social Connection ($d = -.00$), which, given social distancing orders, is not surprising.
- The biggest gains were on Maintaining Composure. This is consistent with what one might expect given the COVID-19-related challenges we are facing. Students are adapting to a life of social distance, online learning, and watching their parents struggle financially and emotionally. The challenging times undoubtedly require adapting and maintaining composure.
- The gains in the skill of Maintaining Composure are much larger than what has been reported in previous research examining social and emotional skill development in similarly aged kids, despite a much shorter interval in the current study. In the absence of a major social crisis, on average, we see little change in the skill of Maintaining Composure, even during spans of one to two years (Klimstra et al., 2009; Pullmann, Raudsepp, & Allik, 2006). In other words, in the face of COVID-19, students are learning to be much more composed, and they are doing so quickly.

We surveyed 642 American college-bound high school students in early February 2020, before COVID-19 hit the United States, and approximately two months later. At both time points, we administered the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), a 44-item measure of the Big Five personality constructs, which align directly to the skills outlined in the ACT[®] Holistic Framework[®] (Camara et al., 2015; see Table 1). Figure 1 shows the mean-level trends during this two-month period.

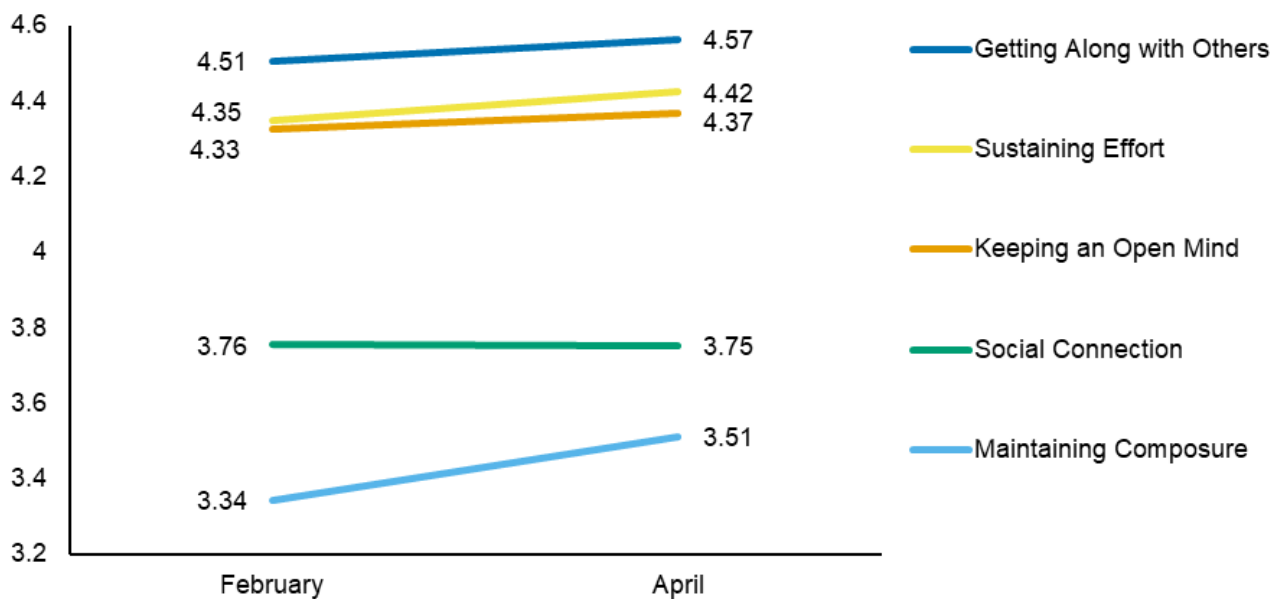


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Table 1. ACT Holistic Framework Skills

Skill	Definition
Sustaining Effort	Describes a person’s level of diligence, effort, organization, self-control, and compliance
Getting Along with Others	Describes the extent to which a person interacts positively and cooperates with others, and is generally kind, friendly, and tactful
Maintaining Composure	Describes the extent to which a person is relatively calm, serene, and able to manage emotions effectively
Keeping an Open Mind	Describes a person’s level of open-mindedness and curiosity about a variety of ideas, beliefs, people, and experiences
Social Connection	Describes a person’s preferred level of social interaction, behavior in interpersonal situations, and optimism

Figure 1. Social and Emotional Skills Show Significant Growth During COVID-19



Note. Possible scale scores ranged from 1-6.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19—or perhaps due to the challenges of COVID-19—students are showing positive social and emotional development. In addition to requiring resilience and maintaining composure, the pandemic offers opportunities for students to practice and sharpen their skills related to pursuing goals and persisting in the face of challenge, having empathy and showing kindness to others, and exercising curiosity and flexibility.

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