

Chronic Absenteeism and Bullying

Strategies for Social Emotional Learning in Advancing success in School

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the research evidence tying absenteeism and bullying and how social emotional learning strategies can improve attendance and overall success at school.



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Abstract



Chronic Absenteeism is one of the gravest challenges our nation faces when it comes to educating our kids. What we know about it is little since only six states track attendance by class. And yet, whatever little we know gives cause for serious concern.

A study by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of school shows some alarming evidence of the gravity of this issue:

- Chronic absence in kindergarten was associated with lower academic performance in first grade. The impact is twice as great for students from low-income families.
- Chronic absenteeism increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
- Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent in poor and/or rural communities, regardless of race and gender.
- The study postulates that strategies that reduce absenteeism can drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates even more than any changes in improvements of the education system.
- The negative impact of absenteeism on school success increases with each passing year as students who are chronically absent tend to continue this pattern year to year unless steps are taken to change this. In other words, achievement gaps worsen with each passing year as such students end up missing a year's worth of school in a five-year period.

Missing too many classes has the effect of widening the learning gap between the regularly attending and regularly absent students—which further discourages the regularly absent students from coming to school. This leads to chronic absenteeism, which further leads to ever-widening learning gaps, eventually ending in dropping out from school altogether.

We also see studies that show kids who are bullied or harassed are twice as likely to dislike school, impacting attendance, and ultimately, graduation from high school.

But it is not all bad news. We also know that young kids show high levels of empathy and are relatively easily taught not to bully others, and that we can stop bullying if we intervene early enough.



This paper provides the research evidence that ties three important points that school and district administrators should fully appreciate:

- Efforts that reduce chronic absenteeism and improve attendance have a higher impact on success at school than practically any other change a school can make
- There is strong correlation between absenteeism and bullying, and efforts that reduce bullying strongly contribute in fighting absenteeism
- The best time to reduce bullying and chronic absenteeism is in early elementary grades 3 and 4.

Finally, this paper outlines how video animation is the most effective and most accessible way to deliver the social emotional skills that our kids need to not only avoid bullying others, but to understand the value of diversity and embrace rather than stigmatize it.

Chronic Absenteeism

Education researchers are finding out that chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest predictors of success in school, impacting not only performance but high school graduation rates. Kids who are chronically absent find it very difficult to keep up with their schoolwork and eventually may drop out.

We are also seeing research evidence tying bullying at school with chronic absenteeism. Any strategy to combat chronic absenteeism must also include strategies for combating bullying at school.

In the next sections, we will explore these issues in more detail.

DEFINING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

The Federal guideline states that a student is considered chronically absent if she/he misses 10 percent or more of the school year—for any reason. That is roughly 18 school days, or about a month per school year.

However, since actual attendance is taken at a local level, definitions of absenteeism vary from state to state. For example, in some states, absence as a result of observance of a religious holiday may be excused. In others, absence due to care for a family member may be excused and not count as lack of attendance. Still more complicating the definition of absenteeism is whether attendance is recorded at the beginning of the school day or at the beginning of each class.

With that said, the vast majority of schools do not really keep attendance record by student, but mostly track percentage attendance per day. Therefore, a 90% daily attendance simply means that 90% of students showed up that particular day (and perhaps didn't stay all day). It does not in any way provide information on which students missed 10% or more of school that year.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ABSENTEEISM

In a comprehensive study on the effects of chronic absenteeism (Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012): *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know from Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools), raises an alarm that all educators should heed:

- Chronic absence in kindergarten was associated with lower academic performance in first grade. The impact is twice as great for students from low-income families.
- Chronic absenteeism increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
- Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent in poor and/or rural communities, regardless of race and gender.
- The study postulates that strategies that reduce absenteeism can drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates even more than any changes in improvements of the education system.
- The negative impact of absenteeism on school success increases with each passing year as students who are chronically absent tend to continue this pattern year to year unless steps are taken to change this. In other words, achievement gaps worsen with each passing year as such students end up missing a year's worth of school in a five-year period.

The study also found out that only six states—Oregon, Rhode Island, Maryland, Florida, Georgia, and Nebraska—collected any data on chronic absenteeism. The picture from this data is not encouraging. The percentage of students who are chronically absent (miss 10% or more school days in a year) are from 6% (Nebraska) to as high as 23% (Oregon).

When looked at by specific counties, rural and/or poor counties tend to have a disproportionate rate of chronic absenteeism, reaching as high as 20% to 34% of students who are chronically



absent. The problems are especially more urgent in high schools, and particularly among seniors. In many of these impacted areas, half or more of the students are chronically absent, missing as much as a month or more per school year.

For example, in one county in Maryland the percentage of students who are chronically absent are 24% of elementary students; 41% of middle school students, and 67% of high school students.

Furthermore, when a cohort of sixth-graders in Florida were tracked for seven years from 1997-98 through 2003-04, 46% of the students were found to have been chronically absent at least during one year (missed at least one month) and 18% of these sixth graders missed at least two months of school that year.

This long term tracking found that while for one-third of the students the chronic absenteeism occurred only once (only in one year), for two-thirds of the students, it was more persistent, occurring at least two out of the seven years: 39% were chronically absent three years or more; 22% were absent four years or more; and 10% were absent five years or more. The last group missed an average of 171 days of school in the seven years—practically a whole year of school.

Although we have data for only six states, the numbers in Florida and Maryland are likely representative of the nation due to the diverse nature of their population. It appears that anywhere from 10-11% of students nationally are chronically absent, missing one or more months of school per year, and that half of these are likely to be chronically absent at least two years. Millions of students nationwide are missing months of school.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

From the John Hopkins study, we see that chronic absenteeism starts high in Kindergarten, gradually decreases to its lowest level in third and fourth grade before rising again to peak in high school. This seems to indicate that initially, children miss school as parents adjust to new circumstances, and that this adjustment has reached its peak by elementary school. The fact that absenteeism rises again especially in high school indicates that new circumstances are the cause of it later on. There seems to be a correlation between key transitions in schooling.

The John Hopkins study further showed that gender does not seem to be a factor—those that are chronically absent tend to be equally divided by gender. Nor does it seem to matter whether the school site is urban, sub-urban, or rural.

However, the study shows a high degree of correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism—students from poor areas (regardless of gender, race, or geographic location) showed high levels of chronic absenteeism. For example, in Maryland, the study found that chronic absenteeism were three times higher for economically disadvantaged students for middle and high schools, and at least twice as high for high school students. Similar results were shown for Oregon, Nebraska, and Georgia.

What may be more revealing is that the study consistently found that chronic absenteeism seemed to be concentrated within a few schools. Whether this is solely due to concentration of disadvantaged or poor students in that school or whether there are additional factors is not clear.

DOES ATTENDANCE MATTER?

Now that we have a better understanding of what chronic absenteeism is and whom it impacts, the next question is: How big an impact does it really have on learning success?

Various studies show that chronic absenteeism impacts students at all stages from kindergarten through high school graduation.

- A study by Change and Romero (“Present, Engaged, and Accounted For. The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades”) showed that chronic absence in kindergarten had an immediate impact on academic performance on all

children, with long term consequences being most significant for poor children. The study found that not only the chronically absent children were affected, but so were the regularly attending children due to the constant disruption and changing dynamics.

- A 2010 paper by Douglas Ready (“Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development: The Differential Effects of School Exposure”) showed that chronically absent students had 14% less literacy skills in kindergarten than regularly attending students. These gaps became more pronounced by first grade with 15% less literary skills and 12% less mathematical skills.
- More significantly, The Ready study showed that children from low-income households with good attendance gained more literacy skills than their higher income family peers.
- Research by Michael Gottfried (“Evaluating the Relationship between Student Attendance and Achievement in Urban Elementary and Middle Schools: An Instrumental Variables Approach”) states, “The findings support the premise that a significant and practically meaningful relationship exists between attendance and achievement across multiple grades in urban schools: students with a higher number of days present have higher GPAs. Attendance also appears to be more strongly correlated with a higher GPA as students advance through years of schooling.”
- Research by Chicago University Allensworth and Easton (“What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools. A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year”) showed that how well students did in ninth grade was a strongest predictor of high school graduations and that, in turn, attendance was found to be the strongest predictor of academic performance.

These and various researches have indicated that from kindergarten through high school, attendance is highly correlated with academic performance—regardless of gender, geographic location or socio-economic status. In fact, these studies show that regular attendance was the single most reliable antidote to performance gaps shown between students from low-income households and more students from more affluent households.

CAUSES CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

So far, we have examined absenteeism and the incontrovertible evidence of significant impact on k-12 academic performance. The next question becomes, what are the causes of chronic absenteeism and how do we effectively deal with these to improve student attendance?

Various studies show that there are primarily two categories of reasons why students are absent from school:

- **They cannot go to school** because they are required to be elsewhere (as in working to help support family or taking care of a family member) or are too sick to attend school
- **They will not to go to school** because are trying to avoid unpleasant or even dangerous situations at school or on the way to and back from school.

Considering the fact that chronic lack of attendance for any reason is highly detrimental to academic success and high school graduation, it is imperative that schools find effective strategies to deal with each type of reason for such absence. However, as the reasons for absence are different, it is important to understand that the strategies must also be customized to address the reason for absence.

In this paper, we look a little further into the second reason for chronic absenteeism—why children make a conscience effort to avoid school.

WHY KIDS WILL NOT GO TO SCHOOL

While it is true that some kids are chronically absent because they find school boring and would rather be elsewhere, a significant portion of chronically absent students who make a conscience decision to avoid school do so avoid being harassed or bullied by other kids, either in school or on their way to and back from school.



The 2014 Olweus report, “Bullying in US Schools. 2014 Status Report” indicates the following:

- About 17% of all US public school students report being involved in bullying (12% were bullied only; 3% were both bullied and bullied others; and 2% reported bullying others).
- However, the report found that bullying was the highest among 3rd grade students who reported being involved in bullying with 4th graders being the second highest at 19%. We will recall from the section on chronic absenteeism that this was precisely when chronic absenteeism was lowest, perhaps contributing to the higher number of students reporting being bullied.
- This could also be indicative of why absenteeism continues to rise after 4th grade as more kids try to avoid being involved in bullying.
- The report also shows a strong correlation between bullying and liking school: in grades 3-5, one out of five students exposed to bullying reported strongly disliking school. This number goes to one out of two students involved in bullying reporting strongly disliking school.
- The report further showed that the level of empathy for those bullied was highest among 3-5th graders, and decreased with each increase in grade—from a high of 73% of 3-5th grade girls who want to help those being bullied dropping to 48% by the time they are 9-12th graders; and from a high of 69% of 3-5th grade boys who want to help dropping down to 42% of boys by 9-12th

This report tells us two important pieces of information we need to address regarding bullying in schools:

1. It is highest among 3-4th graders
2. That is the age when kids have the highest sympathy or empathy for those who are being bullied.

Therefore any strategy that focuses on teaching 3-4th graders to reduce bullying—by teaching those that are bullying that it is wrong; by teaching those that are being bullied how to properly respond so they are not bullied in future; and by teaching bystanders what the appropriate way is to help those that are being bullied—will have the highest impact on reducing bullying in schools or grades going forward.

The classroom curriculum should include instructions that help kids know how to appropriately respond to being bullied so that they are less likely to be bullied again. It should further teach compassion so that other kids know how to appropriately step in and help those that are being bullied. Ultimately, the goal is to teach kids why it is wrong to bully others so those likely to bully others stop doing so.

In a bullying-free school zone, kids would have fewer reasons to dislike school and avoid it, improving attendance, which improves performance at school.

This is born by evidence. A 2011 BERC study showed a strong correlation between 6th grade attendance and high school graduation rates. For kids who missed less than 10 days of 6th grade school, the high school graduation level was 70%. On the other hand, only 13% of students who missed 40 days or more of school year in 6th grade ended up graduating from high school.

The BERC study strongly indicates that reducing the number of school days missed at an early age increases high school graduation rates. Any effort that goes towards reducing absenteeism increases graduation and overall academic success.



Bullying in Schools

OVERVIEW

The “Bullying in US Schools—2014 Status Report” by the Olweus organization provided some provocative insights into the characteristics of bullying in US elementary and high schools. More than 150,000 questionnaires were administered to students in the 2013-2014 school year. The survey was limited to schools that intended to, but not yet had administered the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program.

The same questions were asked of kids in grades three to twelve across the US, providing a fairly consistent picture across the nation’s schools.

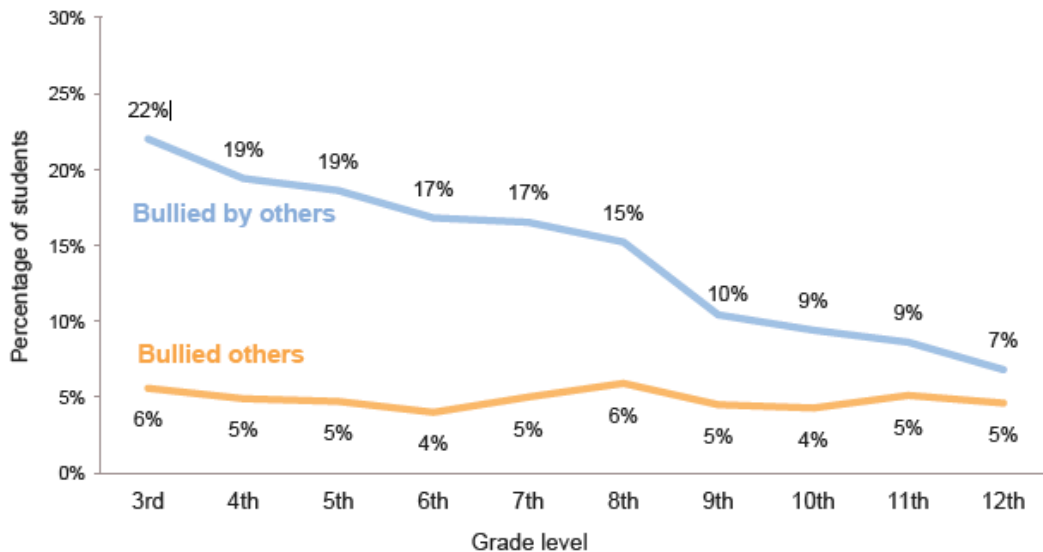
The study findings show that bullying continues to be one of the most prevailing and pressing issues that kids in school face.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT BULLYING

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS INVOLVED IN BULLYING

The chart below provides a number of interesting insights:

- The percentage of students who were bullied was highest in the lower elementary grades 3-5 and appears to taper down with increasing age. We see from the data on absenteeism that the highest attendance rate generally was reported in grades 3 and 4—more students are present at school, thereby experiencing more bullying.
- However, the percentage of students that bullied others remained fairly constant through out their school life.



BY TYPE OF BULLYING

The pattern for both boys and girls were found to be very similar.

- Verbal bullying was the most prevalent for both boys and girls, with both groups reporting being verbally abused three times or more per month. Bullying by spreading rumors and exclusion were second and third most prevalent types of bullying—again, showing nearly identical patters for girls and boys.

- Taken together, over 70% of all students reporting bullying said that they were bullied in one or more of these types of bullying at least 2-3 times per month.

Type	Girls	Boys
Verbal	16%	15%
Rumors	15%	11%
Exclusion	14%	11%
Sexual	8%	7%
Racial	6%	8%
Physical	5%	8%
Threat	5%	5%
Cyber	6%	4%
Damage	4%	5%

CORRELATION BETWEEN BULLYING AND DISLIKING SCHOOL

The chart below shows us two alarming trends:

- At each grade level, the percentage of students who reported **disliking school** was roughly double of those that were not involved in bullying at all.
- The percentage of students who reported **disliking school** increased with increase in grade (age).

These two trends taken together indicate that the correlation between bullying and disliking

Grades	3-5	6-8	9-12
Bullied by others	17%	27%	39%
Bullied others	23%	30%	38%
Both	19%	30%	49%
Not involved	9%	14%	18%

WHO DO KIDS TELL ABOUT BULLYING

- For every age group, far more kids tell siblings or friends rather than adults about being bullied
- Teachers or other adults at school are the least likely to be told of bullying
- The number of students that **do not tell anyone** increase with age from about 25% of boys and 18% of girls in 3-5th grade to 38% and 34% of girls in 9-12th grade

The above two trends seem to indicate that kids start by telling others (including adults) but stop doing so because they end up believing telling others does not stop the bullying or help them in any way



EMPATHY AND BULLYING

Those who reported feeling sorry for and wanted to help those being bullied were highest in 3-5th grade and drops to lowest levels in 9-12 grade. The chart below shows the following trends:

- Empathy starts high for both boys and girls and drops with increasing age
- The rate of drop is higher for boys than girls, perhaps because showing empathy (or kindness) is not considered a trait appropriate to boys as they grow older

However, what the data shows is that there is built-in characteristic of empathy in young children that can be used to effectively combat bullying.

Grades	Feel Sorry		Want to help	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
3-5	96%	89%	73%	69%
6-8	93%	83%	57%	52%
9-12	92%	76%	48%	42%

ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS WE CAN DRAW

- The Olweus study data indicates that bullying is at the highest level at lower grade levels than it does in higher grade and that that the most frequent types of bullying are verbal, false rumors, and exclusion types of bullying
- We also see that students involved in bullying are twice as likely to dislike school than those that are not involved in bullying.
- Furthermore, kids that are being bullied are far more likely to tell their friends and siblings rather than their parents, let alone teachers and school staff. Furthermore, they become less likely to tell anyone with increasing age—perhaps because they feel no one cares or can help.
- On the other hand, the data shows that most kids feel sorry for and want to help those that are being bullied. However, they become less empathetic as they grow older, perhaps for the same reason that those being bullied stop telling anyone of what is happening to them.

What does this all mean?

The data seems to clearly indicate that the best time to address bullying is in early elementary grades 3-5 for the following reasons:

- This is the time that kids are most likely to attend school and develop lasting impressions of whether they like school or not. Anything that builds a positive impression of school will likely last a long time.
- Kids are highly empathetic at this age and are likely to be most receptive to teachings showing regard and respect for others.
- This is the time when kids are most likely to listen to adults including teachers.

In later sections, we will discuss what kinds of programs are likely to be most effective at addressing bullying in schools.



Survey: What Schools are doing about Bullying

OVERVIEW

Cool School recently conducted a survey that went out to 2,260 staff within schools and districts and collected 103 responses (4.6% response rate). The results are shown below

SURVEY GOALS

The purpose of the survey was to determine how schools perceive bullying, what programs they may have in place to reduce or prevent bullying, whether they measured the effectiveness of these programs, and how they funded these programs.

DEMOGRAPHICS

When asked where they worked, respondents selected:

Elementary School	80.58%
Middle School	5.83%
High School	2.91%
K-12 School	3.88%
School District	6.80%

When asked in which state they worked, the five states with the most respondents were:

Texas	35.92%
California	14.56%
Florida	13.59%
Illinois	9.71%
New York	8.74%

When asked their roles in the work place

Counselors	37.86%
Principals	20.39%
Assistant Principals	10.68%
Social Workers	10.68%
Superintendents	0.97%
Teachers	1.94%
Others	17.48%

RESPONSES REGARDING BULLYING

When asked how serious a challenge they faced in bullying at their school

Very serious	7.07%
Somewhat Serious	50.51%
Not Serious at all	42.42%

When asked what kinds of bullying they saw at their school, they highest reported types were:

Verbal	66.67%
Spreading rumors	46.46%
Cyber	43.43%
Exclusion	43.43%
Physical	28.28%
Threats	21.21%

PREVENTING BULLYING

When asked if they have implemented any measures or programs to prevent bullying:

Yes	71.72%
We are in the process of implementing one	18.18%
We haven't but would like to	7.07%
Have no plans to implement any program	3.03%

Of those that have implemented a program, 84.27% reported that it was an ongoing program.

When asked if they have trained their teachers and staff on how to recognize and stop bullying?

Yes	73.40%
No, but would like to	23.40%
No, we have no plans to do so	3.19%

When asked how often they provided training for bullying prevention to their staff and teachers:

Once only	6.52%
Every two years or less frequently	8.70%
Once a year	48.91%
More frequently than once a year	21.74%
Don't know	14.13%

MEASURING RESULTS OF ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAMS

When asked if they measured the outcome of their bullying programs:

Yes	43.62%
Would like to but don't have the capability to do so	41.49%
No, we have no plans to do so	14.89%

For those measuring results, when asked **how often** they measured the outcome of their programs:

Once only	4.65%
Every two years or less frequently	2.33%
Once a year	27.91%
More frequently than once a year	29.07%
Don't know	36.05%

For those measuring results, when asked how they measured results, they responded:

Analyzed changes to other data (reports)	38.37%
Surveyed students	24.42%
Surveyed teachers	4.65%
Other	11.63%
Don't know	20.93%

FUNDING FOR ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAMS

When asked if they received funding for their bullying program

Yes	9.57%
No	90.43%

When asked to rate the sufficiency of the funding for bullying programs, they responded:

Very sufficient	8.79%
Somewhat sufficient	24.18%
Not sufficient	17.58%
No funding at all	49.45%

When asked what sources of funding were available to them:

Federal	6.49%
State	9.09%
District	48.05%
Parent / Community	33.77%

Other	28.57%
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Addressing Chronic Absenteeism and Bullying in Schools

WHAT WE KNOW

1. As detailed in previous sections, we now have sufficient and conclusive data regarding Chronic Absenteeism, Bullying in schools, and possible correlation between the two. Specifically, we know:
2. Of the changes a school can make to increase the success rate of students at school, reducing chronic absenteeism yields one of the highest return on a school's investment.
3. We know that kids involved in bullying are twice as likely to dislike school (and therefore likely avoid going to school) as are kids not involved in bullying.
4. Attendance is highest during the third and fourth grade level, which is also the time when bullying in schools is the highest.
5. Addressing bullying in lower elementary grades will, therefore, have a strong impact on attendance, which in turn has a strong impact on success at school.
6. The empathy levels within kids is highest during the early elementary grades, which means they are more likely to understand and respond to messages regarding showing regard and respect for others.
7. Finally, it is a well-understood premise that children learn well from video animation, a medium that is well suited for combining entertainment with educational messages.

WHAT WE CAN CONCLUDE

We can therefore make three conclusions that can inform where we can make the most effective investments when it comes to educating our children:

- Fighting chronic absenteeism should be a key strategic initiative for schools in order to increase academic success of their students
- Fighting bullying is a powerful strategy for reducing chronic absenteeism.
- Catching children early in life, while they still are open to new ideas and belief principles, and educating them to hold open, appreciative and welcoming views to diversity is increasingly an important element of educating our kids.
- A curriculum that utilizes video animation to teach children why bullying is wrong, how to handle a bullying situation properly, and what the appropriate options are when they witness a bullying incident is likely the most effective addition to the arsenal schools have to provide students with safe, enjoyable, and satisfying learning environment.

In the end, creating such an environment requires a partnership between schools, parents, the overall community, and innovative companies that are committed to addressing these challenges and coming up with new and effective ways to address the challenges that schools and school districts face.



About CoolSchool

Designed for elementary school learners, Cool School's six-week curriculum has been designed to teach your students about bullying through interactive videos and offline activities. The program also addresses bystander behavior and how it can contribute to and increase bullying within the school environment. Watch our tutorial video to learn more.

OUR PHILOSOPHY

From the very beginning, our company has set the bar high by mandating that we create the most innovative teaching tools. We use high quality animation, interactivity, and relatable characters to provide each child with a unique and invaluable experience. It is our goal to create exciting, innovative new products to assist with social and life skills for every developmental stage that children go through.

HOW WE WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Social skills are the foundation for getting along with others. There is an immediate need for quality educational tools that focus specifically on social and emotional learning.

OUR MISSION

To innovate quality programs and services that help people live successful lives.

OUR VISION

To significantly reduce the impact of social-emotional challenges through next generation learning software.

HOW TO REACH US

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