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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN SOCIAL ADAPTATION

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Abstract: Emotional intelligence has emerged as a key construct for understanding how individuals manage their inner emotional life and navigate complex social environments. Defined as the ability to perceive, use, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others, emotional intelligence contributes directly to social adaptation across the lifespan. Research shows that higher emotional intelligence is associated with better peer and family relationships, lower social stress, and more effective adjustment in school and community contexts. Emotional competencies such as accurate emotion perception, empathy, self-regulation, and social skills enable individuals to interpret social cues, respond flexibly to interpersonal demands, and maintain constructive relationships, even under stress or in culturally diverse settings. Studies in adolescents, university students, and adults in vulnerable environments consistently find that emotional intelligence and related socio-emotional competencies predict psychosocial adaptation, resilience, and reduced risk of maladjustment more strongly than many traditional cognitive measures. This article reviews definitions and models of emotional intelligence, analyzes empirical evidence on its relationship with social adaptation in educational and broader social contexts, and discusses implications for interventions and policy. The analysis highlights emotional intelligence as both an individual resource and a socially embedded capacity that can be cultivated through systematic education and training to promote healthier, more adaptive societies.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; social adaptation; socio-emotional competence; resilience; social adjustment; adolescence; education.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has gained prominence in psychology and education as a framework for explaining why some individuals manage to adapt effectively to social demands despite stress, diversity, or disadvantage. Early theoretical work conceptualized EI as a set of abilities for perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions. Ability-based approaches view EI as a form of intelligence, measured by performance tests that assess accuracy in identifying emotions in faces, voices, or situations, and skill in choosing adaptive emotion regulation strategies. Trait and mixed models, in contrast, emphasize self-perceived emotional competence, including self-control, sociability, empathy, and adaptability as relatively stable dispositions. Across these perspectives, emotional intelligence is understood as closely tied to social functioning: it involves not only internal awareness and regulation of one's own emotions, but also sensitivity to others' emotional states and the capacity to guide interactions toward constructive outcomes.



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The link between emotional intelligence and social adaptation becomes particularly visible in adolescence, a developmental period characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social change. In a study of Spanish adolescents, the ability to accurately perceive emotions—one core component of EI—predicted better personal and social adjustment, including higher self-confidence, better relationships with peers and parents, and lower social stress. Importantly, emotional perception remained a significant predictor of adjustment even after controlling for age, sex, and personality traits, suggesting that emotional abilities add unique explanatory power beyond general personality. Another investigation using a performance measure of EI found that adolescents who scored higher on understanding and managing emotions received more favorable teacher ratings of social and academic adaptation to school; for girls, these emotional abilities were also associated with higher peer friendship nominations. These associations held even when IQ and Big Five personality traits were statistically controlled, indicating that emotional intelligence is not reducible to general intelligence or broad personality dimensions but contributes specifically to how youth adapt to school as a social environment.

Cross-sectional studies in different cultural contexts corroborate the idea that emotional intelligence supports social adaptation. Research on adolescents in Arunachal Pradesh, India, reported high levels of EI but only moderate social adjustment, while finding a strong positive correlation between the two constructs: adolescents with higher emotional intelligence tended to show better adjustment to social demands in family, school, and community settings. Similarly, a study of Indonesian tenth-grade students demonstrated that EI significantly influenced social adjustment at school, explaining about 65% of the variance in how effectively students interacted with teachers, peers, and situational demands. These findings converge on the idea that emotional abilities—such as recognizing and naming emotions, managing anger or anxiety, empathizing with others, and using emotions constructively—are central factors in whether young people can form positive relationships and respond adaptively to social expectations.

At a more fine-grained level, emotional intelligence can be viewed as a cluster of socio-emotional competencies that function as developmental assets promoting psychosocial adaptation. Research on socially vulnerable secondary school students in Colombia found that socio-emotional competencies associated with EI—empathy, attention to emotions, emotional clarity, and emotional repair—were significantly related to psychosocial adaptation, even in the context of economic disadvantage and environmental stress. Students with stronger socio-emotional competencies reported better adaptation, suggesting that EI-related skills can buffer against the risks associated with social vulnerability. A larger study of adults living in socially and economically vulnerable contexts in Chile similarly identified self-regulation, internal locus of control, self-esteem, and social support as key factors distinguishing those with effective psychosocial adaptation from those with poor adaptation. Although not limited to EI, these factors are closely linked to emotional and social intelligence: individuals who can regulate their emotions and behavior, maintain self-confidence, and build supportive relationships are better able to cope with adversity and maintain functional social roles.



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From a theoretical standpoint, emotional intelligence can be understood as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal capacity that underpins social adaptation. Intrapersonally, EI includes awareness of one's own emotions, the ability to evaluate their causes and functions, and the capacity to regulate them in ways that support goals rather than undermine them. Interpersonally, EI involves recognizing others' emotional states through verbal and nonverbal cues, understanding how emotions influence behavior, and managing emotional exchanges to maintain relationships, resolve conflicts, and collaborate effectively. Some authors conceptualize emotional intelligence as a component of broader social intelligence, emphasizing its role in empathic understanding, perspective-taking, and effective communication. In this view, EI serves as the affective and empathic aspect of social intelligence, complementing cognitive components such as social perception and social problem-solving. Social adaptation—defined as the capacity to maintain satisfying social relationships, fulfill social roles, and meet the demands of one's environment—relies heavily on this integration of emotional and social capacities.

Empirical work on emotion perception highlights its specific contribution to social adjustment. A study using performance and self-report measures of EI found that accurate perception of others' moods and feelings was associated with better social adjustment, suggesting that being able to detect and interpret subtle emotional signals improves one's ability to respond appropriately in social situations. Individuals who perceived emotional cues more accurately were better able to gauge when others needed support, when to withdraw or persist, and how to adapt their behavior to maintain social harmony. This supports the hypothesis that emotion perception is a foundational skill for social adaptation, providing the information necessary to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics.

Emotional intelligence also plays a crucial role in adaptation to specific social contexts, such as academic environments and culturally diverse communities. Research with first-year university students showed that emotional and social skills, particularly emotional regulation competencies, were positively related to adaptation to academic life, including integration into peer groups and engagement with academic tasks. Students who managed their emotions effectively were more likely to form supportive relationships and experience psychological well-being, which in turn reduced the likelihood of academic dropout. Another study examining college students' adaptation to cultural diversity found that higher EI was associated with better cultural flexibility and ability to adapt to diverse cultural environments. Students with greater emotional intelligence were more successful in understanding their own and others' emotional responses to cultural differences, which facilitated harmonious relationships in a multicultural university setting. These findings demonstrate that EI is not only relevant for general social adaptation but also for navigating specific, increasingly common contexts of academic transition and cultural diversity.

The importance of emotional intelligence becomes especially visible in difficult or rapidly changing social situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, EI was found to influence adaptability, psychological well-being, and subjective success in



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challenging social conditions. Certain EI components, such as emotional management and interpersonal emotional intelligence, supported adaptability, enabling individuals to adjust behavior and maintain relationships under stress, while understanding one's own emotions and empathizing with others' difficulties contributed to psychological well-being and a sense of subjective success. Other work on resilience in emerging adulthood suggests that EI may mediate the relationship between empathy and resilience: empathy predicts resilience, but EI fully mediates this association, indicating that the ability to cognitively process and regulate emotions is key to transforming empathic concern into adaptive coping and recovery. These findings position EI as a central cognitive-emotional mechanism through which individuals convert emotional experiences—both their own and those of others—into resilient and adaptive responses.

At the level of prevention and intervention, social-emotional competencies closely tied to emotional intelligence have been identified as essential targets for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in school-age children. A comprehensive review of school-based programs concluded that social-emotional competence predicts important social, behavioral, and academic outcomes in childhood and adulthood and can be improved through feasible, cost-effective interventions. Programs that explicitly teach self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—core dimensions overlapping with EI—have been shown to enhance resilience, improve classroom behavior, and support better school adjustment. More recent systematic reviews of social-emotional learning strategies confirm that strengthening emotional intelligence-related skills leads to improved learning, school adaptation, and well-being, and argue for integrating these competencies into the regular curriculum involving students, teachers, families, and communities. Such universal interventions suggest that emotional intelligence is not a fixed trait but a set of skills that can be cultivated to support social adaptation on a large scale.

Beyond individual and educational settings, emotional intelligence also has implications for social management and organizational life. Analyses of social administration highlight EI—often framed as emotional leadership and emotion management—as a critical factor for successful social management, enabling leaders to connect with people, inspire and motivate them, and create a constructive emotional climate in organizations and communities. Higher levels of emotional intelligence are linked to social success and psychological adaptability to the environment; individuals with well-developed EI are more likely to become effective organizers and leaders, while those with lower EI may struggle with social success and adaptation. At a societal level, emotional competencies such as well-being, self-control, adaptability, and sociability have been conceptualized as collective reserves of psychological capital that shape patterns of commercial and social entrepreneurship. Societies with higher levels of these emotionally intelligent competencies have greater capacities for social initiatives and innovation, indicating that EI contributes to macro-level forms of social adaptation as well.

Conclusion



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In conclusion, emotional intelligence is a multifaceted construct that plays a pivotal role in social adaptation across individual, educational, organizational, and societal levels. Empirical research with adolescents, students, and adults demonstrates that core emotional abilities—perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions—are consistently associated with better social adjustment, including higher quality relationships, lower social stress, effective adaptation to school, cultural flexibility, resilience, and psychological well-being. Emotion perception helps individuals decode social cues; self-regulation enables them to manage stress and impulses; empathy and interpersonal skills foster supportive relationships and cooperative behavior. These capacities are particularly important in challenging or changing environments, where emotional intelligence supports adaptation by transforming emotional experiences into constructive action. At the same time, EI is not fixed: social-emotional learning programs and targeted interventions can meaningfully strengthen emotional competencies, improving social and academic adjustment and reducing risk for maladjustment. Recognizing emotional intelligence as both a personal resource and a socially cultivated capacity suggests that education systems, organizations, and policy makers have significant leverage to promote healthier, more resilient, and more socially adapted populations by prioritizing the development of emotional and social competencies alongside traditional cognitive skills.

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