



Book Reviews

The books reviewed here explore the myriad ways in which the relationships that children and young people experience within the family, in schools and community, and with their peers have a profound impact on their development. The first book, *L'apprendimento sociale ed emotivo. Teorie e buone pratiche per promuovere la salute mentale a scuola* by Valeria Cavioni & Ilaria Grazzani, provides an extremely useful theoretical overview of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and the various explanatory models that underpin it. The research evidence is clearly evaluated and the implications for practice explored by two renowned experts in the field. Examples of recent interventions as practised in schools today will be useful for researchers and teachers alike, as well as for those who are developing policies to enhance the emotional health and wellbeing of all children and young people, and for all healthcare professionals who work with children and youth. It is published in Italian but it is to be hoped that a translation into English will soon be forthcoming so that it will reach a wider audience.

The second book challenges us to rethink our attitudes towards fathers who fail to be involved with their children. The authors, Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson, provide in-depth insights into the thoughts and feelings of low-income, disadvantaged fathers who, too often, become distanced from their children. Contrary to expectation, these men expressed dreams and ambitions of engaging with the paternal role but described the barriers that prevented them from becoming involved. Expect to be surprised when you read the fascinating interview data that the researchers elicited from these men. The book ends with some practical suggestions for ways in which society at large might enable greater participation of absent fathers with family life and a wider acknowledgement of the importance of the paternal role to children and adolescents as they grow and develop.

We end with a book of poetry written especially for children. Evelyn Field's *Harry the Bully Blocker* has been very positively reviewed by its young readers who report that they found the guidance offered in counteracting bullying both useful and empowering. Our hearts go out to the main character, Harry, as he faces nasty behaviour from his peers at puppy school. Click on the link to see some sample verses read by Kaaren Champion, a professional actor <https://www.audible.co.uk/pd/Harry-the-Bully-Blocker-Audiobook/B09R4Y4W3R>.

Helen Cowie
Reviews Editor

1. *L'apprendimento sociale ed emotivo. Teorie e buone pratiche per promuovere la salute mentale a scuola*

Author:	Valeria Cavioni and Ilaria Grazzani
Publisher:	Il Mulino
Publication Country:	Bologna, Italy
Year of Publication:	2023
ISBN:	978-88-15-38683-0

The authors of the first book published in Italy on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) are Valeria Cavioni, Researcher of Developmental and Educational Psychology at the University of Foggia, and Ilaria Grazzani, Full Professor of Developmental and Educational Psychology at the University of Milan-Bicocca. Both are experts in socio-emotional development and have conducted numerous in-depth research projects on the topic, including some international projects funded by the European Union.

This book, entitled *L'apprendimento sociale ed emotivo. Teorie e buone pratiche per promuovere la salute mentale a scuola* [translation: *Social and Emotional Learning. Theories and Good Practices to Promote Mental Health at School*], is essential reading for all those who care about promoting mental health and psychological well-being in schools: policy makers, researchers, school administrators, teachers, and aspiring teachers. The text helps to understand the SEL construct based on a review of scientific literature and specific research that has demonstrated, through an evidence-based approach, positive results of SEL.

In the introduction, which is very useful for those approaching the SEL topic for the first time, studies on emotions are synthesized. Cavioni and Grazzani also describe the emotional intelligence model developed by Salovey and Mayer and the main studies by Saarni and Denham on emotional competence.

The first chapter focuses on mental health in schools, considering the prevalence of psychological distress and mental disorders in children and adolescents. The analysis of schools considered as a risk and a protective factor is very interesting. After examining bullying and cyberbullying, the authors describe phenomena like teacher burnout and work-related stress. They then explore the potential of schools as a protective factor, highlighting the teacher-student relationship and the sense of community as key factors in protecting mental health in schools.

The subject of the second chapter is the description of theoretical models dedicated to SEL. First, the models developed by Payton and Zins are presented, followed by a detailed analysis of the global systemic model of the CASEL group, with specific references to all components of the CASEL Wheel. Life contexts play a significant role in ensuring the effectiveness of SEL, so the systemic approach takes into account the classroom, the school, the family and caregivers, and the community.

The third chapter examines many intervention programs to promote SEL in different types of schools. In particular, some programs developed in the United States are described, as well as the European Erasmus+

Action Key 3 project called PROMEHS, "Promoting Mental Health at School," a universal multicomponent program with a curriculum dedicated to students aged 3 to 18.

The focus of the fourth chapter is a review of tools aimed at assessing the effectiveness of SEL programs. The book emphasizes that it is essential not only to measure the social and emotional skills of students but also the entire learning environment to support the development of all members of the school community.

The conclusions are particularly interesting: the authors highlight the need to create specific programs for teacher training and to change educational policies to implement pathways aimed at promoting mental health in schools. The book's conclusions serve as a starting point for designing the school of the future: the psychological well-being of teachers and students is the necessary prerequisite for improving the quality of learning and the subsequent socio-economic growth of European countries.

Luisa Broli

Istituto Tecnico Statale L. Casale, Vigevano, Italy.

2. *“Doing the Best I Can”: Fatherhood in the Inner City*

Author:	Kathryn Eden and Timothy J. Nelson
Publisher:	University of California Press
Publication Country:	USA
Year of Publication:	2013
ISBN:	978-0-520-2746-8 (hbk), 978-0-520-9551-34 (pbk)

The authors, Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson, have written a ground-breaking book that challenges the stereotypes about fatherhood in the American inner city. They offer us a story of disadvantaged fathers living in impoverished inner-city areas, based on extensive interviews and conversations with over 100 low-income, unmarried fathers. By listening carefully to the perspectives of these men, we get a sense of some of the problematic circumstances that underpin their approach to the paternal role. The authors are aware of the unconvincing justifications that the men give for their lack of involvement with their children, whether it is quitting their jobs, dropping out of college, dealing in drugs, being sentenced to terms in prison, being unfaithful to the child's mother or being generally irresponsible. The core research question was:

“Is it true that unwed inner-city fathers do not care about the children they conceive?”

Far from being “deadbeat dads”, as they are so often portrayed in the media, Edin and Nelson found that these fathers did care about their children but that they frequently had to overcome huge obstacles in order to maintain the relationship. To explore the issue more deeply, the researchers also asked:

“What does fatherhood mean in the lives of low-income inner-city men?”

“What is the process of courtship, conception and the break-up of the romantic bond?”

“What barriers do men face as they try to father their children in the way that they desire?”

The answers to these questions are illustrated through a series of case studies with men who had become fathers outside marriage at a young age. Typically, the partner was one that he “happened to be with” when pregnancy began. Yet once that happened, most of the interviewees reported that they had tried “to get it together” for the sake of the baby, and had dreamed that they would stay together as a couple and work together to raise their child.

Fatherhood seemed to be perceived as an opportunity to connect with a child in a meaningful way. But despite these high hopes, the relationship with the mother and child mostly ended quite quickly. The young mother, understandably, expected the father to go straight and find a job to maintain the new family. In reality, most of the non-custodial fathers in this study ended up contributing very little to the support of their children. Their reflections on this issue indicated a strong wish to be more than simply the breadwinner but rather to provide love to their children and to spend quality time with them.

So, why did these men so often fail as fathers? As they readily admitted, it was frequently their own behaviour that was at fault – drinking, taking drugs, engaging in crime and violence – and which led to eviction from the family home. Barriers to father involvement included substance abuse (26%), conflict with the mother (17%), gatekeeping by the mother (17%), father in prison (12%), distance from the family home (7%), economic issues (5%) and mother relocated (4%). Understandably, the mother often acted as a gatekeeper to protect the child. Furthermore, she may have become involved with a new partner and no longer welcomed visits from her child’s father. Consequently, all too often the barriers to father involvement increased. Not only were there economic barriers, but also the father needed inner resources of emotional strength and commitment to keep the relationship with his child going. Often, as the interviewees explained, it was easier to start again with someone else. Consequently, the child stays with the mother while the father moves from one household to another as relationships wax and wane – a process of “father-go-round”.

Eden and Nelson propose a paradigm shift that acknowledges, as a key resource, a father’s contribution to his child’s development. They argue that there is a strong case for honouring fathers’ attempts to build a relationship with their children in the same way that we honour the crucial role of the mother. As the authors conclude optimistically and somewhat idealistically, “ongoing involvement, in turn, might stave off additional child-bearing with new partners and leave fewer children on the father-go-round” (p. 228). In other words, society should place more emphasis on helping unwed fathers to build long-term relationships with their children, not only for the sake of the children, but also as a means of turning their own lives around by giving them more purpose and meaning. We know from other studies that children of absent fathers run the risk of emotional and cognitive difficulties through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood unless other role

models can be found. But in this book, we learn that the absent fathers also suffer. Rather than vilifying them, society needs to remove some of the barriers that impede this important relationship.

The book is well-written and brings to life the perspectives of disadvantaged men whose voices are seldom heard.

Helen Cowie

Reviews Editor

University of Surrey, Guildford, UK.

3. *Harry the Bully Blocker*

Author:	Evelyn M. Field
Publisher:	Evelyn M. Field Pty Ltd
Publication Country:	Australia
Year of Publication:	2021
ISBN:	978-0-9942791-8-7 (pbk) (also available on Kindle and as an audiobook)

This charming book of verse by Evelyn Field, a practising counselling psychologist, is designed for children of eight years and over. It features Harry, a shy little dog who is being bullied at puppy school. With the help of magical animals who appear to him in a dream, Harry learns about how to stand up to the bullies by blocking them, by using new assertive skills and by involving his friends. In real life he tries out his new strategies and finds that they work. Instead of giving away his power to the bullies, he stands strong, looks them in the eye, practises comebacks and smart repartee, seeks out better friends, and asks for help when necessary. From being fearful, Harry becomes empowered. Children love the story and find the rhyming tips very useful when they have to face up to bullies in their own lives. The book can also be used by teachers, psychotherapists and parents to help individual victims of bullying, to empower bystanders who would like to support their peers but lack confidence, and even to enable children who bully to change their behaviour. The book can be read by children on their own and their reviews are enthusiastic. As one 10-year-old wrote, "I love how this book teaches kids that there is a really easy way to stop bullies. And I really enjoy that it's not a human and it's a dog. Harry is very adorable."

Additionally, Evelyn Field has included useful questions and activities derived from each chapter, so the book can be used by adults to stimulate discussion with individual children, in small groups or with a whole class.

There is also an audio book read by Kaaren Champion with accompanying music by Paul Archer. You can listen free to a short extract on <https://www.audible.co.uk/pd/Harry-the-Bully-Blocker-Audiobook/B09R4Y4W3R>.

