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Recommended Practices

Linking Social Development and Behavior to School Readiness

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“From the last two decades of research, it is unequivocally clear that children’s emotional and behavioral adjustment is important for their chances of early school success.” (Raver, 2002)

There is mounting evidence showing that young children with challenging behavior are more likely to experience early and persistent peer rejection, mostly punitive contacts with teachers, family interaction patterns that are unpleasant for all participants, and school failure (Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior, 2003). Conversely, children who are emotionally well-adjusted have a greater chance of early school success (Raver, 2002). Social and behavioral competence in young children predicts their academic performance in the first grade over and above their cognitive skills and family backgrounds (Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

Science has established a compelling link between social/emotional development and behavior and school success (Raver, 2002; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Indeed, longitudinal studies suggest that the link may be causal....academic achievement in the first few years of schooling appears to be built on a foundation of children’s emotional and social skills (Raver, 2002). Young children cannot learn to read if they have problems that distract them from educational activities, problems following directions, problems getting along with others and controlling negative emotions, and problems that interfere with relationships with peers, teachers, and parents. “Learning is a social process” (Zins et al., 2004).

The National Education Goals Panel (1996) recognized that a young child must be ready to learn, e.g., possess the pre-requisite skills for learning in order to meet the vision and accountability mandates of academic achievement and school success. Academic readiness includes the prosocial skills that are essential to school success. Research has demonstrated the link between social competence and positive intellectual outcomes as well as the link between antisocial conduct and poor academic performance (Zins et al., 2004). Programs that have a focus on social skills have been shown to have improved outcomes related to drop out and attendance, grade retention, and special education referrals. They also have improved grades, test scores, and reading, math, and writing skills (Zins et al., 2004).

Social skills that have been identified as essential for academic success include:

- 🌀 getting along with others (parents, teachers, and peers),
- 🌀 following directions,
- 🌀 identifying and regulating one’s emotions and behavior,
- 🌀 thinking of appropriate solutions to conflict,
- 🌀 persisting on task,





- 🌀 engaging in social conversation and cooperative play,
- 🌀 correctly interpreting other's behavior and emotions,
- 🌀 feeling good about oneself and others.

And yet, many children are entering kindergarten and first grade without the social, emotional, and behavioral skills that are necessary for learning and success in school. One survey of over 3000 kindergarten teachers found that 30% claimed at least half of the children in their classes lacked academic skills, had difficulty following directions and working as part of a group; and 20% reported that at least half of the class had problems in social skills (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

Research indicates that children who display disruptive behavior in school receive less positive feedback from teachers, spend less time on tasks, and receive less instruction. They lose opportunities to learn from their classmates in group-learning activities and receive less encouragement from their peers. Finally, children who are disliked by their teachers and peers grow to dislike school and eventually have lower school attendance (Raver, 2002).

What can we do to increase school readiness in young children?

- 🌀 **Policy** – Federal and state policies need to reflect the importance of these foundational skills by removing barriers and providing incentives and resources to communities and programs: (1) to improve the overall quality of early care settings; (2) to support families so that they are able to promote positive relationships and social competence in their infants and young children; (3) to prevent problem behavior by addressing social and educational factors that put children at risk for challenging behavior; and (4) to provide effective services and interventions to address social/emotional problems and challenging behavior when they occur.
- 🌀 **Public Awareness** – Federal, state, and local governments and community agencies need to raise the visibility of importance of social competence in school success.
- 🌀 **Knowledge and Skills** – Early care and education professionals need training and on-site technical assistance in evidence-based practices for: (1) promoting social skills (e.g., identifying and regulating emotions, playing cooperatively, following directions, getting along with others, persisting with tasks, problem solving, etc.); (2) preventing problem behavior (through classroom arrangements, individualizing to children's interests and abilities, etc.); and (3) providing effective intervention strategies when needed (e.g. positive behavior support, peer mediated strategies, etc.) (Fox et al., 2003). Early childhood education professionals need to know how to integrate social/emotional learning with literacy, language, and other curricular areas. Professionals need to know how to provide parents with information and support around parenting practices that prevent problems and effectively address challenging behavior.
- 🌀 **Research** – Studies are needed on specific promotion, prevention, and intervention strategies to establish their efficacy for specific groups of children in particular settings. Research is also needed on policy and programmatic features that result in more effective services for children and families related to social development.

“The emotional, social, and behavioral competence of young children is a strong predictor of academic performance in early elementary school.” (Zero to Three, 2003)

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On the web

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Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior

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Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

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ZERO TO THREE