

The path towards social and emotional competence

Bobby and the adults who are important to him

by Mona Grace Kim, Peggy Daly Pizzo, and Yolanda Garcia

“This child is really, really bugging me,” says Teacher Anita to the director of the Three Oaks Child Care Center. “Bobby constantly pushes the other kids, grabs their toys, and won’t listen. I think you should call his parents. Maybe we



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should explore a different preschool for this child.” Director Mary reflects how hard this teacher tries with Bobby — and with several other children whose behavior creates problems in the classroom. She replies, “Anita, I’ve just been to a conference where new thinking was presented about social and emotional competence in preschool children. Let’s sit down, and really think through which social and emotional skills Bobby has and where he needs to develop better skills. Then you and I can develop specific social and emotional learning activities that will help him develop these skills. Once we’ve done that we’ll call his parents to talk and get some of their ideas. And in the meantime, I will do my best to offer greater support for you as we all work with Bobby.” Teacher Anita eyes Director Mary skeptically but agrees to give it one more try.

The five components of social and emotional competence

What is social and emotional competence? The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has spent years defining the skills that make up these competencies in children from preschool through high school. Here’s what they offer as

the five main components of social and emotional competence in children:

- self-awareness
- self-management or self-regulation
- social awareness
- relationship skills
- responsible decision-making.

In preschool children, the skill of responsible decision-making is more appropriately termed ‘problem solving leading towards responsible decision-making.’ (Denham & Weissberg, 2004; S. A. Denham, personal communication, July 2, 2008)

As research shows, we can all learn these skills throughout our lives — and they help us acquire academic skills. Social and emotional competence (SEC) also greatly matters to life success generally.

But for young children, these competencies cannot be acquired without the help of adults who are important to them. It starts with attachment. Through warm and responsive attachment relationships, teachers can promote social and emotional competence, confidence, and resilience in their students (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). Good working partnerships among staff — and

between staff and parents — also create an environment where challenges to social and emotional competence (among adults as well as among children) can be more effectively met (Daniel, 2009; Bruno, 2008).

What's involved in each of these five competencies?

- *Self-awareness* involves identifying and understanding one's own emotions. This can be hard for young children. Four-year-old Bobby, for example, may be just beginning to learn the distinctions between feeling 'sad' and 'angry.' (He may simply know that he feels *badly* about something.) It will be a while then before Bobby can understand the **causes** or **consequences** of his angry feelings. This may be one reason why Bobby is having such a hard time relating well to the other children. On the other hand, three-and-a-half-year-old Ryan may already have enough self-awareness that he can identify and label his own emotions. He may even understand what has caused those feelings to arise in him.
- *Self-regulation* (otherwise known as self-management) involves appropriately inhibiting (or occasionally intensifying) emotions and related behaviors. Once Bobby has learned to stop himself from becoming deeply angry when Graciela refuses to hand over the toy that he wants — and when he holds back from simply grabbing Graciela's toy — he will be displaying self-regulation. With enough skilled adult help, young children can learn to control negative emotions and the negative behaviors that flow from such emotions.
- *Social awareness* involves empathy and understanding the emotions of **others**. When Bobby pushes other children, he may not understand how much being pushed may frighten another child. Four year olds are just learning to see situations from another person's perspective. Whether a child's culture

emphasizes group harmony and participation — or promotes individual self-assertion and independence — influences the kind of social awareness that children develop (Day, 2006).

- *Relationship skills* involve the ability to develop positive relationships with teachers, parents, and peers. Language is especially important here. For example, research shows that teacher language skills in a Spanish-speaking child's home language improve the child's social skills and relationship with the teacher (Chang et al., 2007).
- *Problem-solving* involves the ability to generate and consider alternative solutions while taking into account the other's point of view. When Bobby and Dylan start fighting because they both want to play with the red fire truck, Teacher Anita can help the children come up with alternative strategies to fighting. Maybe Bobby could first wear the police chief's hat and direct Dylan's driving of the fire truck to the scene of the fire. Then, giving Dylan the police chief's hat and donning the fire chief's hat himself, Bobby could drive the fire truck home while Dylan wears the police chief's hat and sounds the police siren.

As children develop increased skill in problem-solving over time, they begin to resolve conflicts and choose actions based on broader considerations (e.g. concern with the consequences of certain actions and/or of the needs and perspectives of others as well as one's own). This lays the basis for later decision-making that is responsible and ethical.

What is social and emotional learning?

In the introduction to this article, we talked about both social and emotional competence (SEC) *and* social and emotional *learning* (SEL). How is social and emotional *learning* different from social

and emotional competence?

Social and emotional competence (SEC) is *developed through* social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL comprises activities and choices that teachers and administrators engage in with young children. These help promote the five skill sets of SEC. For example, take self-awareness. Teachers can help enhance a young child's understanding of his or her own emotions by deliberately using and encouraging the use of something researchers call 'emotion language.' Emotion language is vocabulary that identifies and describes emotions. Teacher Anita can help Bobby realize, identify, and label what he is feeling as 'anger' when Toby pushes him — or when he pushes Toby. Other kinds of social and emotional learning, as Teacher Anita used when she suggested alternative ways to share the fire truck, in the example above, can help Bobby develop self-regulation and express his emotions in an appropriate way. (See 'For More Information' for additional ideas.)

Sensitivity to cultural and linguistic differences

When expressed in language, emotions are likely to be voiced in a child's primary language. And all emotions are shaped by the child's culture. So teachers using social and emotional learning need to be sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences. For example, if Ling, who speaks only Mandarin Chinese, is encouraged by a teacher who speaks only English to "use your words," this may not be that helpful to her, since she may not even understand what the teacher is saying.

English language-learners may also be inaccurately perceived as fearful and in need of greater self-confidence. When Manuel, who speaks primarily Spanish, does not participate or speak up in English-based class discussions, it may

not necessarily mean that he is disinterested or feeling shy. For one thing, he may be mostly relying on his observational skills to figure out what is happening in the classroom. But even for Maria, who is fully bilingual, not speaking up may be a sign of respect, since many Latino children are encouraged not to challenge an adult's point of view (Espinosa, 2006).

Bilingualism may actually help children develop better social and emotional skills. Studies have found that bilingualism is associated with higher voluntary selective attention in young children — an ability that helps promote emotional self-regulation (Bialystok 2001, as cited in Espinosa 2007).

Why do these social and emotional competencies matter?

Do these social and emotional skills matter so much that special, sustained teacher attention to their development should be encouraged and supported? Research would say: Yes!

Preschool children with better developed social and emotional competence are:

- more likely to behave with empathy and show less aggression (Denham, 1998)
- better able to follow classroom rules, inhibit negative reactions, and manage their attention (Bierman et al., 2008)
- rated more positively by teachers and peers (Denham, 2006).

In contrast, children with low levels of these skills are:

- less liked by and receive less positive feedback from teachers (Raver, 2002)
- less likely to develop 'school attachment' (liking school and wanting to participate in it)
- at greater risk for expulsion from pre-kindergarten (Gilliam, 2006).

Helpful Social and Emotional Learning Curricula

The Incredible Years
www.incredibleyears.com

Preschool PATHS
www.channing-bete.com/prevention-programs/paths-preschool/

Social-Emotional Intervention for At-Risk Four-Year-Olds
 *No website, but this curriculum is well described in *Social and Emotional Prevention and Intervention Programming for Preschoolers* (2003) by Susanne Denham and Rosemary Burton

Head Start REDI (Research-based, Developmentally Informed)
www.prevention.psu.edu/projects/Head_Start_REDI.html

Hyson, M. (2004). *The emotional development of young children: Building an emotion-centered curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.

*This is not a curricula, but is a book filled with an abundance of research-based practical suggestions for teachers.

Summary and practical steps

In this article, we describe a set of skills and competencies that young children can learn in preschool classrooms (as well as at home). Returning to Teacher Anita and Director Mary, and the challenges they face with Bobby, we hope that teachers and administrators will sense our strong respect for their hard work.

Faced with children whose social and emotional skills are not well-developed, teachers and administrators need information, support, and respect. You might explore, in our 'For More Information' sections on the Exchange web site:

- Special curricula designed to explicitly foster social and emotional learning
- Resources available from the Center for the Social and Emotional Foundation for Early Learning
- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
- Research about mental health consultants who help teachers problem-solve around children with challenging behaviors

Strengthened by these resources, Director Mary and Teacher Anita will be better prepared to sit down with Bobby's parents and share ideas. Together they can develop an action plan that will help Bobby become more aware of himself and of others, more capable of self-regulation and problem-solving — and a child whose relationships with parents, peers, and teachers are more positive.

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Helpful Websites

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)
www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
www.casel.org/

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)
www.challengingbehavior.org/

Helpful articles that include information about Mental Health Consultants and Early Care and Education Programs

Resources to Promote Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness in Young Children and Families
www.caseyfoundation.net/upload/publicationfiles/ec3655k745.pdf

Promoting Social and Emotional Development in Young Children: The Role of Mental Health Consultants in Early Childhood Settings
www.researchconnections.org/location/2423

Raver, C., Jones, S. M., Li-Grining, C., Zhai, F. (In Press). *Reducing Young Children's Risk of Behavioral Difficulties in Head Start: Benefits of a Classroom-Based Approach*. NHSA Dialog.

Note: Mental health consultation is provided by trained mental health professionals who help early care and education staff reduce challenging behaviors in children, families, or staff, through a variety of coaching, training, assessment, and other activities.

Do you find this article to be a helpful resource? Visit www.childcareexchange.com or call (800) 221-2864 for further information about this article and many other exceptional educator and trainer resources.