

# Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by Ann S. Epstein

**C**hildren's early social and emotional relationships shape them for life. Interactions with family members set the stage for how children see themselves, whether they feel secure venturing out into the world, how they get along with others, and how they begin to understand moral behavior. Early childhood programs build on these home experiences and profoundly influence children's expanding relationships at school and in the community.

Early childhood educators have long recognized the importance of supporting early social-emotional learning (SEL; also variously referred to in the field as social-emotional development, social-emotional competence, or even just social competence, with the emotional component implied). Today there is a growing awareness among early childhood and other professionals (such as pediatricians), parents, policymakers, and the general public that SEL is equally, if not more important than, early academics in determining school readiness. A good beginning in this



*A sense of competence — having the confidence to handle a task with an expectation of success — is one component of social-emotional learning.*

content area affects not only whether young children succeed in school but also whether they will grow up to have rewarding personal and work lives, and contribute to society.

Landmark publications, such as *Eager to Learn* (National Research Council, 2001) and *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000), summarize research showing that SEL is as much a part of a young child's school readiness as academic knowledge and skills. According to W. Steven Barnett, Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, "One misconception about preschool education is that it's mostly about giving children an early start on the academic

skills they'll need later. Maybe it's because early reading and math skills are more easily assessed or because parents and those who market to them often emphasize the academic side of children's early learning. Whatever the case, we run the risk of shortchanging the role preschool education plays in the broader cognitive, social, and emotional development of young children" (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007, p. 2).

Accompanying the general spotlight on SEL is a specific focus on the many benefits of play in promoting SEL development. A report by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2006) received wide media coverage when it pleaded for the restoration of play to develop social-emotional skills such as building resilience, managing stress, and forming relationships with adults and peers, within and outside the family. The report advised, "As parents choose child care and early education programs for their children, pediatricians can reinforce the importance of choosing settings that offer more than 'academic

## Milestones in Social and Emotional Development

### Infants

- Learn to regulate behaviors (e.g., crying, moving, focusing)
- Create bonds with primary caregivers and form a sense of trust from nurturing attachments

### Toddlers

- Identify and gain control of their feelings
- Test their skills and begin to see themselves as capable
- Increasingly differentiate themselves from others and venture into the world of social interaction

### Preschoolers

- Develop understanding of their own and others' feelings
- See themselves as doers, based on their ability to achieve self-initiated goals
- Widen their social network, developing preferences and forming friendships, and associating with new communities at home and school

— Epstein (2009, p. 13)

preparedness.' They should be guided to also pay attention to the social and emotional development needs of the children" (p. 18).

### Defining Social-Emotional Learning

Emotional learning is the knowledge and skills needed to recognize and self-regulate feelings. Social learning comprises the principles and strategies for interacting successfully with others. Dealing with one's emotional state is often a prerequisite to socializing effectively with others, but these dimensions often overlap. Conflict resolution, for example, involves both emotional self-regulation and social problem-solving skills. Because of their interdependence, the joint term social-emotional learning (or development or competence) best captures this vital area of human growth.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), founded in 1994 and currently based in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is widely recognized as a leader in advancing

the science and evidenced-based practice of social-emotional learning. CASEL defines social-emotional competence as "the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life's tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development" (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2).

In the revised Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, social and emotional development "refers to the skills necessary to foster secure attachment with adults, maintain healthy relationships, regulate one's behavior and emotions, and develop a healthy concept of personal identity" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011, p. 9). As the second domain in the framework, Social & Emotional Development comprises the following domain elements: Social Relationships, Self-Concept & Self-Efficacy, Self-Regulation, and Emotional & Behavioral Health.

## What Is Social-Emotional Learning?

**Emotional self-regulation and self-awareness:** Responding to experiences with an appropriate range of immediate or delayed emotions and recognizing and being able to control one's own feelings.

**Social knowledge and understanding:** Knowledge of social norms and customs.

**Social skills:** The range of strategies for interacting with others; assisted by cognitive development, especially perspective-taking and empathy.

**Social dispositions:** Enduring character traits, such as curiosity, humor, generosity, open- or closed-mindedness, argumentativeness, and selfishness; shaped by innate temperamental differences and environmental influences.



*The relationships that preschoolers form with their peers help guide their later interactions with teachers and fellow students when they begin elementary school.*





When adults interact with children in a genuine and authentic manner, they sense this respect and respond in kind in their interactions with adults and peers.

Similarly, in the National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation Standards (2013), the curriculum standard for social-emotional development (2B) includes interacting positively with others (adults and peers); recognizing and naming feelings; regulating one's emotions, behavior, and attention; developing a sense of competence and positive attitudes toward learning; resolving conflicts; and developing empathy.

### The Importance of Social-Emotional Development in the Preschool Years

**Social-emotional learning and overall development.** The definitions of SEL noted earlier make the case that this domain of development affects all other areas of behavior. Rima Shore, in her book *What Kids Need* (2002), says that scientific and practical lessons, including those from brain research, teach us that social and cognitive skills are linked. Many of the abilities involved in learning reading, mathematics, and other subjects are elements of social and emotional development, namely listening, task persistence, and flexible problem solving. The best way to help young children grow into curious, confident, and able learners is to provide them with warm, emotionally secure, and positive social experiences. Conversely, restricted social environments

and early emotional trauma can place children at risk for a wide variety of short- and long-term developmental delays, including cognitive, perceptual-motor, and social.

**The best way to help children grow into curious, confident, and able learners is to provide them with warm, emotionally secure, and positive social experiences.**

Head Start takes a similar position in its Child Development and Early Learning Framework: "Positive social and emotional development provides a critical foundation for lifelong development and learning. In early childhood, social and emotional well-being predicts favorable social, behavioral, and academic adjustment into middle childhood and adolescence" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011, p. 9).

**Social-emotional learning as a valuable end in itself.** Dr. Daniel Goleman, who was a science writer for *The New York Times* (and a cofounder of CASEL) when he wrote his ground-breaking book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995),

## CASEL Cites HighScope Preschool Curriculum for Effectiveness

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a national leader in promoting the inclusion of effective social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula in schools from prekindergarten through grade 12. It published the *2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (2012), the first review of its kind in a decade. Based on extensive research and analysis, the guide identifies 23 programs that "successfully promote students' self-control, relationship building, and problem-solving, among other social and emotional skills" (p. 4). For the second time, the guide includes the HighScope Curriculum on its list of "SElect" preschool programs (one of seven so named).

To earn the CASEL SElect designation, programs had to meet three requirements:

- Be **well-designed** classroom-based programs that systematically promote social and emotional competence
- Deliver high-quality **training** and other support for implementation
- Be **evidence-based**, documenting positive impacts on student behavior and academic performance

Moreover, the programs chosen had to be universal in their application, that is, not limited to students designated as having pre-existing social or emotional challenges. Further, the programs had to be capable of being delivered by existing school personnel during the regular school day.

In addition to being named a SElect program, HighScope was specifically cited for integrating SEL content with other academic areas, providing instructional practices for teachers, giving children daily opportunities to practice social and emotional skills, monitoring curriculum implementation, and measuring student behavior with validated observational tools. HighScope also received the maximum rating on all four student evaluation outcomes: improved academic performance, increased positive social behavior, reduced conduct problems, and reduced emotional distress.

argues in the book that skills such as self-awareness, self-discipline, persistence, and empathy could be of greater consequence in life than those measured by IQ and achievement tests. He said children and society were at risk if schools exclusively taught academics at the expense of these other abilities. In his later book, *Social Intelligence* (2006), Goleman makes the case that interpersonal relationships can actually shape our brains and affect cells throughout our bodies, with significant effects on study, work, and physical and mental health. He also argues that rapport and empathy can and should be taught from preschool through adulthood.

Since its introduction, the concept of emotional intelligence has gained in popularity and impact, particularly among educators. On his website, Goleman (n.d.) notes that when his 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* was first published, there were only a handful of programs on SEL, but 10 years later, “tens of thousands of schools worldwide offer children SEL” and many states set competency standards for SEL just as they do for math and language. A typical standard might state, for example, that young children should be able to recognize and label their emotions and how they lead them to act.

Decades of research, synthesized in a CASEL meta-analysis of more than 200 scientifically valid studies (Viadero, 2007; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004), show that students in SEL programs do better academically, have higher attendance, and have more positive attitudes

than nonprogram students. (The HighScope Preschool Curriculum has been cited twice by CASEL [2003, 2013] as one of the most effective preschool programs in the nation in its approach to supporting young children’s social and emotional development; see the sidebar on p. 7). Goleman posits that the effects on the brain of positive social and emotional experiences can actually improve attention and working memory, which are key factors in learning. In this hypothesis, neuroplasticity, the shaping of the brain by repeated experience, may explain why SEL provides such significant benefits to program participants. Schools that offer such programs are also safer than those that do not, extending the benefits from the individual to the community.

**Social-emotional learning and school readiness.** In the edited volume *School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten in the Era of Accountability* (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007), social-emotional development features prominently in the section on what it means to be ready for school. Ruby Takanishi and Fasaha Traylor argue in the book’s foreword that “the integration of cognitive and learning motivational skills in aligned educational programs for young children from ages 3 to 8 holds great promise to narrow (not close) the achievement gap” (p. xvii).

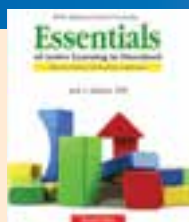
In support of their argument, note the complex interplay of cognitive skills (using representational props, demonstrating an awareness of number and measurement concepts) and social interaction

(listening to and conversing with an adult) in this seemingly simple exchange between a child and his teacher:

*At work time in the block area, Leon dresses in a firefighter coat and hat. He says that there is a fire and points to the toy area. When Benedette (the teacher) asks him what he can do to stop the fire, Leon says he needs a hose. He pulls out a tape measure and says, “I have to open it ’till a big number shows because the hose needs to be really long.” He directs the hose at the fire and makes “swishing” noises. “There,” he says to her, looking satisfied. “Now it’s out and we can go back to the firehouse.”*

**Research shows that students in social-emotional learning programs do better academically than nonprogram students.**

Summarizing the research on cognitive-social integration and school readiness, child development expert Kyle Snow (2007) identifies several thought-provoking connections. For example, although the direction of the relationship is not yet clear, behavioral problems and reading difficulties appear linked. Work-related skills (a subclass of social skills including paying attention to directions, participating in groups, and focusing on classroom tasks) are positively related to later academic achievement. Children with poor work-related skills have higher rates of special education, while having stronger work-related skills can buffer against socioeconomic risk factors in early learning. Finally, research shows a young child’s social relationships with other children and teachers can smooth the transition to kindergarten. A child’s ability to form friendships leads to peer acceptance in the classroom, which, in turn, supports school engagement and emerging aca-



## Just Published! Essentials of Active Learning in Preschool, 2nd ed.

Reflecting the most up-to-date research on child development and effective teaching practice, this revised edition presents a comprehensive and user-friendly introduction to the HighScope Preschool Curriculum. The book’s appealing format offers examples, checklists, photos, child and teacher anecdotes, and thoughtful questions and hands-on exercises to help both experienced and new teachers reflect on their beliefs and practices.

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demic achievement. At the same time, the more children establish close and conflict-free relationships with teachers, the more they “acquire the skills taught in school, maximizing the impact of instruction and deriving the most benefit from school” (Snow, 2007, p. 208).

In *The Emotional Development of Young Children*, Marion C. Hyson (2004) argues that if we expect children to enter school “ready to learn,” they must have the underlying security and emotional foundations for that learning. Most school reform movements focus on academic instruction without paying corresponding attention to the personal and interpersonal factors that contribute to school readiness and lifelong success and satisfaction. Reviewing two decades of research on early learning, and the role of adults in supporting social-emotional competence, Hyson concludes that this domain must be an essential component of the early childhood curriculum. Social-emotional development, she says, “is too important to be left to chance” (p. 9).

### Social-Emotional Learning and the HighScope Curriculum

HighScope has nine key developmental indicators (KDIs) in Social and Emotional Development: 7. Self-identity, 8. Sense of competence, 9. Emotions, 10. Empathy, 11. Community, 12. Building relationships, 13. Cooperative play, 14. Moral development, and 15. Conflict resolution. (See the sidebar on this page for a more detailed description of the KDIs.)

In SEL, perhaps more than any other content area of development, the components are highly interdependent. It is like a tree whose trunk grows from a newborn’s undifferentiated self to a gathering awareness of emotional states and social relationships. Once the trunk reaches a certain height and thickness, limbs begin to form. Each limb corresponds to one of the Social and Emotional Development KDIs. As the tree — the child — grows, each limb

## Key Developmental Indicators (KDIs) in Social and Emotional Development

### B. Social and Emotional Development

#### 7. Self-identity: Children have a positive self-identity.

*Description:* Children are aware of the characteristics that make up their identity, such as gender, ethnicity, culture, and abilities. They perceive their uniqueness and develop a healthy self-image.

#### 8. Sense of competence: Children feel they are competent.

*Description:* Children make discoveries and solve problems with an expectation of success. They believe they can acquire the knowledge or skills they need.

#### 9. Emotions: Children recognize, label, and regulate their feelings.

*Description:* Children identify and name their emotions, and recognize that others have feelings that may be the same as or different from their own. They regulate the expression of their feelings.

#### 10. Empathy: Children demonstrate empathy toward others.

*Description:* Children understand the feelings of others by drawing on their own experiences with the same emotions. They respond empathically by sharing the happiness of others and offering assistance when they see that others are emotionally upset or physically hurt.

#### 11. Community: Children participate in the community of the classroom.

*Description:* Children act as members of the classroom community by participating in routines, cooperating with social expectations, and sharing responsibility for maintaining the classroom.

#### 12. Building relationships: Children build relationships with other children and adults.

*Description:* Children relate to others in the classroom. They refer to teachers and peers by name. Children develop friendships, seek out others, and engage in give-and-take interactions.

#### 13. Cooperative play: Children engage in cooperative play.

*Description:* Children involve adults and peers in their play. They engage in cooperative play with others by sharing materials, space, conversation, and ideas.

#### 14. Moral development: Children develop an internal sense of right and wrong.

*Description:* Children develop ethical behavior. They understand that there are moral principles that do not vary by situation (e.g., people should not hit others).

#### 15. Conflict resolution: Children resolve social conflicts.

*Description:* Children engage in conflict resolution, or social problem solving, to settle interpersonal differences. They identify the problem, offer and listen to others’ ideas, and choose a solution that is agreeable to all.

*Teachers can create situations in which children with similar interests get to know each other.*







Conflict resolution includes both emotional self-regulation skills and social problem-solving skills.

in turn sprouts branches and twigs. So, for example, in the limb for “emotions,” children become aware that they have feelings and begin to label them, grow in their capacity to regulate their emotions, pay attention to the emotions of others, and consider how their own feelings are or are not like those of the people they interact with. In the limb for “building relationships,” children build a primary relationship with an adult, relate to other adults, begin to interact with peers, and eventually form genuine friendships. Thus, a child’s SEL becomes increasingly differentiated. Like a tree, however, all branches lead back to and are dependent upon having a solid trunk.

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Current research shows that social-emotional learning is a vital part of a young child’s educational experience. It affects not only a child’s readiness for school but also his or her overall development as a person. Thus, early childhood educators should feel supported in their teaching practices that promote and encourage positive social experiences. ■

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