

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool

Early childhood teachers can have a strong impact on children's social and emotional development.

Michelle DeMeulenaere

Social/emotional learning (SEL) focuses on helping children gain knowledge about feelings and getting along with others (Marion, 2011). SEL is the process in which children are able to acknowledge and recognize the emotions of others, develop empathy, make good decisions, establish friendships, and handle challenges and situations effectively. Children with social and emotional challenges may exhibit difficulty connecting with teachers and classmates, develop internalizing behavior problems, or use of physical aggression to convey their needs (Campos, Mumme, & Saarni, 1998). Early childhood teachers have a strong impact on guiding children's social and emotional development by creating a safe and supportive environment, focusing on the child's feelings, helping children develop language, and discussing the topics of how children develop SEL.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Early Childhood Environment

Preschool children flourish in a positive, trusting building environment (Day & Kunz, 2009). A positive, trusting environment includes:

- a daily schedule
- an orderly classroom arrangement
- respect between both teacher and students, and
- clear open communication between the student, parent, and teacher.

It is a safe place where children are protected from the elements and easily supervised, and it's where important activities of the day take place such as eating, sleeping, washing hands, and going to the bathroom. It is an environment for young children to learn and explore through developmentally appropriate hands-on activities.

A suitable daily schedule for an early childhood classroom should include a balance between active and quiet activities, as well as a balance between teacher initiated and child-initiated activities. There should be expanded periods of the day for interacting with their peers. It is through this balance of scheduled activities that a child will begin to correlate the concept of continuity, time, and clear expectations of the teacher.

Include a balance of active and quiet activities in the daily schedule.

The physical aspect of an early childhood classroom allows for active learning where children interact with each other and make choices. Classrooms for young children are clean, in good repair, and provide child-size equipment for comfort and safety. Adequate lighting and/or natural lighting are important components as well. Early childhood classrooms ideally are arranged with clear paths, labeled centers, a management system, and areas for both quiet and active play. Such classrooms allow children to move freely throughout the space without interrupting another child's play.

The stability and security of the teacher student relationship directly influences social and emotional learning. Effective teachers encourage children to participate in classroom activities, listen to what children say and expand upon their language, building vocabulary and knowledge. Since children think concretely rather than in abstract terms, they understand and learn when



Photo courtesy of Fannie Battle Day Home for Children, Inc., Nashville, TN

Activities that require collaboration help support social/emotional learning.

they take part in hands-on learning experiences and can actively participate in the lessons (Cople & Bredekamp, 2009). Teachers who provide stability and security plan activities that have a purpose and challenge the children. Teachers also encourage children to respect each other and their surroundings.

Student-teacher relationships foster a sense of well being in children, and a belief that they are safe and worthy (Hyson, 2004). Daily positive and caring communication about and with the child helps build the child's sense of self-worth. Open communication should also occur daily be-

tween the parents and the teachers. Communication with a parent may consist of a daily conversation, phone call, or a note home. An open dialogue with parents provides the child the consistency and support needed for the transition from home to school.

Keep an open dialogue with parents.

Focus on Feelings

Early childhood is an important period in the social and emotional development of young children. At this age, children are learning about feelings and emotions and how to express and recognize those feelings. As children learn to distinguish between positive and negative feelings, they are also learning to regulate those feelings (Izard, King, Mostow, & Trentacosta, 2004).

It is through repeated experiences and exposure to SEL that children can learn techniques to manage their emotions and get along better with their peers. SEL helps children recognize emotions first in themselves and then in others so that they can develop empathy. An early childhood environment in which the children express healthy emotions, regulate them, and understand the emotion of self and others, creates a successful school experience (Bassett, Denham, & Zinsser, 2012).

The Development of Social and Emotional Learning

Children observe and model the emotions of other people in their environment. Adult emotions give children information about which situations evoke certain emotions. Children learn from observing the adult behavior that accompanies the emotion (Bassett et al., 2012). Peer groups also teach children how to express feelings. Children learn how to use language and express their feelings by interacting with adults and peers. Children have a much easier time learning to talk about emotions if they have good language development (Marion, 2011). Young children often do not understand their feelings so they look to the adult and



Adults can promote social/emotional learning by helping children to respect each other.

A quality early childhood classroom should be designed for both active and quiet activities.



Photos by Elisabeth Nichols

others to help them understand and express their emotions.

Caregivers focus on the language and skills of emotions by demonstrating to children the knowledge and the words behind the emotion. Emotions are complex and often require a strong vocabulary. Caregivers can help children express their feelings when they are not sure of the exact words. It is important as adults that we help children understand that they have feelings and that feelings are important. Young children use their emotions to facilitate learning.

Brain development, memory, and language are developmental fac-

tors contributing to a young child's inability to understand and control their emotions (Marion, 2011). As caregivers, we guide children in managing their emotions and feelings. Interactions with adults and peers provide children opportunities for brain development that affect self-regulation, analysis, and management of emotions.

Conclusion

Early childhood providers influence children's social and emotional development by providing a safe environment in which the children feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Early childhood environments with

a developmentally appropriate physical environment foster the development of a child's feelings by helping the children develop language. Social emotional learning occurs in classrooms where teachers provide ample opportunities for play and interactions. The quality of interactions with adults and peers in the early childhood classroom allows children to develop self-regulation, empathy, and friendship. Early childhood teachers should be encouraged to create safe and comfortable environments to increase social emotional learning.

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About the Author

Michelle DeMeulenaere is an Instruction Specialist with the Diocese of Baton Rouge Catholic Schools. She is currently working on her PhD in curriculum and instruction at Louisiana State University.