



Social-Emotional Development

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Overview

With increasing standards for literacy and math, educators have often overlooked the role of children's social-emotional skills. Recently, however, researchers have argued that children's emotional development (including how children display emotions

and regulate themselves) and their social skills are equally important to academic success as their cognitive skills (Denham, 2006; Raver, 2002). Early academic achievement is critically important because children who have difficulty in the early school years tend to continue to perform poorly throughout the elementary school years. Given such, it is imperative that children's programs to improve academic success also focus on children's social and emotional competence.

There are a number of important social-emotional skills involved in children's success in school. This paper will focus on three key social-emotional areas:

- Effortful Control/Regulation
- Emotion Understanding
- Emotional Expressivity

Each of these key skills has been shown to be directly related to how well children transition into formal schooling. Further, there is evidence that these skills have indirect effects through other areas of social-emotional development (Eisenberg, Sadovsky & Spinrad, 2005).

Effortful Control/Regulation

Effortful control is a term used to refer to the regulatory aspect of temperament. In their chapter from the *Vi ynkzzu'z oPr sm^~tl rzvqt*, Rothbart and Bates (2006) define effortful control as "the ability to inhibit a dominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors" (p. 129). Thus, effortful control is typically viewed as the ability to willfully deploy attention (attention focusing and shifting) and inhibit or activate behavior as required.

- good relationships with their teachers
- the ability to behave well and to get along with peers
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Emotional Expressivity: What Are the Implications for School Success?

Children differ in their proneness to positive and negative emotions. That is, some children seem to be quite delighted when exposed to new experiences and people, whereas other children tend to be easily frustrated, upset, or fearful in a variety of situations. Children's general tendencies to express positive and/or negative emotions reflect their emotional expressivity. Emotional expressivity is thought to impact children's engagement in learning tasks. In particular, positive emotions, such as excitement and happiness, are thought to contribute to learning because such emotions are thought to contribute to children's tendencies to engage with people and activities. Thus, children who express positive emotions may be more curious and have the desire to explore (Fredrickson, 2001). On the other hand, the expression of negative emotions may limit children's engagement, may be disruptive, and may undermine children's learning. That is, children who are easily upset or frustrated may avoid challenging activities in the classroom.

Researchers have shown that children's positive affect is important to children's school success. One recent study showed that children's positive emotions in class positively predicted teacher-reported academic skills (Hernandez et al., 2016a). The researchers hypothesized that perhaps positive emotion in the classroom reflected enjoyment or positive interactions with others during classroom activities. On the other hand, positive emotion expressed during lunch/recess negatively predicted later academic success, which may reflect children's over-exuberance or intense excitement. Children who are overly positive during recess may undermine their self-control in class. Thus, the context for positive emotion seems to matter for children's school adjustment. Negative emotionality in both the classroom and at lunch/recess was negatively related to academic achievement (Denham et al., 2012).

Further, children's tendency to express more positive and/or negative emotions is likely to impact their relationships with teachers and peers. Children who express more positive emotions tend to show more empathy toward others' emotions and demonstrate fewer problem behaviors (Hernandez et al., 2015) and have better relationships with peers (Hernandez et al., 2016a, 2016b) and teachers (Diaz et al., 2015). On the other hand, young children's negative emotions have been linked to higher levels of problem behaviors and difficulties with peers (Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2005). In particular, both frequency and intensity of anger have been associated with problem behaviors in school-aged children, such as externalizing symptoms (Eisenberg et al., 2010).

Can Social-Emotional Skills Be Taught?

Researchers are beginning to seek evidence as to whether teaching children social and emotional skills may improve their academic readiness. There have been relatively few instructional programs designed to teach children social-emotional skills, and most programs have targeted a variety of social-emotional skills rather than specific or individual skills.

There is some evidence that a variety of school-based instructional programs that have been designed to teach social skills are effective in improving children's effortful regulation, behavior problems, and later academic achievement (Bierman et al., 2008; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007; Li-Grining et al., 2011). However, complexities in the impact of these programs need to be considered. For example, children's age, initial levels of regulatory skills, and proneness to negative emotions may be important considerations when determining whether the programs are effective. More than likely the programs are effective for some children, but not others. One could imagine that a child who is more "at risk" (i.e., who is prone to getting frustrated easily, who is unregulated, and who acts up) might benefit from these programs more than a child who doesn't have as much "room for improvement." Researchers must conduct more research to consider these complex issues.

Conclusions

How well children do in school is not only due to their ability to recognize letters and have a sense of numbers. Social and emotional behaviors highly impact their readiness for school. A primary goal for preschool and early elementary education should be to promote children's effortful control and emotion understanding, and to understand how individual differences in children's proneness to positive and negative emotionality may be important for children's academic success.

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