

Early Childhood Briefing Paper Series

All Children Ready for School: Social-Emotional Development



—Lois Hutter-Pishgahi

Ready Child + Ready Family + Ready School = Successful School Readiness

This working paper focuses on the *social-emotional development* of ready children. It is part of a series identifying early education practices associated with successful school readiness for all children. Topics in this series focus on ready children (health and physical well-being, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social-emotional skills), ready families, and ready schools.

Omeed and his mother arrive at preschool hand-in-hand. The teacher greets them by name, and both Omeed and his mother look down and smile shyly. Omeed greets some of his peers enthusiastically, but then he hovers near them as an onlooker, not sure of how to join in their play. His teacher approaches him and asks if he would like to make something with the blocks. She gives him the words he needs to enter their play, and then she asks his mother how to say this in her native language. The children in the block corner have fun trying out these new and unusual words. However, Omeed's playmates have difficulty understanding his request to play, and his first response is to lash out at them in frustration. Luckily, the teacher is ready to intervene, and she helps Omeed to enter the group by modeling simple words and gestures for him to use. He is welcomed into the block corner. Mom leaves with a smile on her face knowing that her son is in good hands in this classroom.

Increasing numbers of children enter school without the skills or abilities necessary to succeed, and ongoing research confirms the need to think about children's readiness for school as multi-faceted. There is growing consensus among researchers and educators that we must consider social and emotional maturity as part of school readiness, rather than simply focusing on a limited set of academic skills. This brief focuses on the skills young children need in the area of social-emotional development, and how best practices that support these skills can be implemented in order to help all children and their families benefit, regardless of differences in their abilities or cultural, linguistic, or economic backgrounds.

What We Know: Important Skills

Numerous studies have found that a lack of social skills and emotional maturity contribute to the deficit in school readiness. In order to avoid difficulties at school entry, identifying and addressing these skills in young children is important while there is still time for improvement.

Key social-emotional skills include the following:

- The child is able to understand and talk about his/her own feelings.
- The child understands the perspective of others and realizes that their feelings may be different from his/her own feelings.
- The child is able to establish relationships with adults and maintains an ongoing friendship with at least one other child.
- The child is able to enter a group successfully.
- The child is able to engage in and stay with an activity for a reasonable amount of time with minimal adult support.

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- The child is cooperative with companions most of the time and understands the need for rules and fair play.

- The child is able to manage feelings of anger, frustration, and distress when faced with emotionally charged situations (e.g., another child tries to take a favorite toy away).

What We Know: Effective Practices

What are the evidence-based practices that research shows are effective in enhancing or supporting the social-emotional skills young children need for school readiness? Numerous studies view strategies to support social-emotional development as a pyramid of practices. Inherent to such models is the idea that basic strategies must be in place before more intensive strategies. Each model describes the levels of the pyramid as a hierarchy that begins with building positive relationships with children, families, and colleagues, and it continues with classroom preventive practices, social and emotional teaching strategies, and intensive individualized interventions. The strategies that make up the base of the pyramid must be in place in order to support the higher, more intensive levels.

Research also supports the idea that, on all but the top level of the pyramid, using either incidental or explicit teaching strategies supports social skills. Incidental strategies are those that are embedded within the routines of the day, and educators use them during unstructured activities for brief periods. This type of intervention is effective in encouraging both communication and social skill development, and it supports children who may require numerous opportunities to practice skills in order to ensure they develop competence. Early educators look for opportunities that may occur during a variety of activities, and then use this knowledge to embed an occasion for either an individual child or a group of children to practice social skills. In contrast, explicit strategies are those that have been planned ahead of time, and they can target either one child or the whole group. For example, anger and impulse control includes being able to calm down instead of acting out. Specific interventions are utilized incorporate these skills into activities that children understand, can remember when needed, and enjoy doing. Early educators provide specific times throughout the day for children to practice this self-calming response so that it becomes a natural part of their repertoire of behaviors.

The literature demonstrates that the following strategies are effective in supporting social-emotional skills in young children:

■ Adopting a specific social skills curriculum:

The early educator adopts and implements a specific social skills curriculum on a classroom-wide basis. The reinforcement of social skills becomes an explicit part of the curriculum, and specific activities that support social skills become a part of the routine (e.g., a daily or weekly circle time where children explore emotions). The presence of a specific social skills curriculum also provides opportunities for the incidental support of social skills because the early educator is tuned into embedding the practice of these skills within the routines of the day. The frequency and duration of children's social interactions increase as a result of friendship activities, along with generalization of the skills to free-play periods.

■ Manipulating the schedule, routines, materials, and activities:

The early educator manipulates these variables in order to support social skills. Everyday activities and routines, such as coming and going or meal and snack times, provide ideal incidental occasions to embed opportunities to practice social skills. Friendship skills, like sharing and taking a turn, can also be explicitly introduced and reinforced through activities that are adapted to promote social interactions, by purposefully embedding pro-social responses in common early childhood songs, games, and activities. Materials such as the sand table or games that require give and take among children are available to support and promote social/friendship skills.

■ Peer modeling, peer tutoring, and peer proximity:

Through these strategies, socially competent peers, rather than the teacher, serve as the direct intervention agents to teach social behaviors. Teachers provide instruction to peers on ways to initiate and prolong social interactions with children needing help with their social skills, and they prompt or reinforce peers' initiations. They naturally embed these strategies within the routine of the day, or plan the strategies as an intervention for a specific child. Increased rates of social interaction, increased use of language, and longer interactions between children have resulted from the use of such peer-mediated techniques. These strategies can be very effective because children tend to learn more from watching and imitating their peers than from adults.

■ Adult priming, modeling, prompting or reinforcing:

In these strategies, the early educator/adult serves as the direct intervention agent. The teacher may provide the initial structure for social interactions/activities and then pull back to allow the activity to develop naturally. For example, the teacher might help the children to set up a play situation such as playing store, assigning roles and helping the children get involved in the play, and then leave when the children become engaged and capable of continuing on their own. In other situations, the teacher models a behavior, prompts a child to imitate other children's appropriate behavior, or reinforces appropriate, effective social behavior that is being displayed by the target child. The implementation of these strategies may be either incidental or planned ahead of time.

■ Social integration activities:

The early educator designs or arranges individualized peer interaction interventions that require advance planning and some level of expertise. The early educator arranges for a child with limited peer interaction skills to have planned opportunities on a daily basis to interact with children who are socially competent and responsive to the other child.

Making These Practices Work for ALL Children: The Universal Design of Early Education

The strategies summarized above answer the question, “How can early childhood educators promote these positive approaches to learning that successfully prepare young children for school?” The next question to answer is, “What do early educators need to do to insure these strategies will work for all learners, regardless of differences in abilities, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and economic status?” The focus of this section is on the universal design of early education—designing our physical, social, and instructional environments to ensure that every child is able to participate, learn, and benefit (see Figure 1).

The principles of universal design are applicable to the field of early care and education because increasingly diverse groups of children are entering into early childhood programs. We know that a one-size-fits-all approach simply will not work. We know that some children may struggle in learning specific skills for reasons related to their abilities, cultural and linguistic background, or economic status. All children can learn and all bring specific gifts to the classroom, but some children may also face challenges related to their diverse backgrounds.

Research highlights the social-emotional challenges that specific groups of children may face. Several major factors appear to build or maintain individual social-emotional resiliency, including three that speak to the importance of universal design: access to culturally appropriate support, continuance of rituals, celebrations, and practices, and interaction with positive role models from one’s own cultural tradition. Another factor that may influence pro-social behaviors is the language used in the child’s home. Parents and teachers have reported that children whose home language is one other than English are less likely to engage in three important pro-social behaviors: joining others in play, making friends, and comforting or helping other children. Children who exhibit these pro-social skills may have an easier time adjusting to school because the ability to make friends and to be sensitive to others contributes to a more positive learning environment. In addition, children with developmental delays may have feelings of being different from peers and adults other than their parents, which can affect their school experiences. Finally, additional research points out that children from low-income households have increased risks for being socially rejected or withdrawn from peers and teachers. This increases their risk of later school failure.

Therefore, as we look at the strategies we use to support socio-emotional development in young children, we must implement these strategies in ways that are meaningful to all individual children. In a universally designed early childhood setting, this goal should guide the design of the curriculum, practices, and environment so that children’s individual needs and strengths are acknowledged and addressed by the early childhood educator.

Table 1 offers suggestions for universally designing the recommended practices presented earlier.

Figure 1

Application of Universal Design Principles to Early Education

1. The design of the **physical environment** enables all children to have access and equitable opportunities for full participation in all program activities. This includes structures, permanent and movable equipment and furnishings, storage, and materials.
2. The design of **health and safety program components** minimizes risks and hazards for all children. It ensures all children, regardless of health status or condition, have ongoing access to early care and education by minimizing interruptions to their learning due to illness and injury.
3. The design of the **social-emotional environment** offers all children equitable access and full membership to the social-emotional life of the group, and supports their social-emotional development.
4. The design of the **instructional environment** enables all children equitable access to learning opportunities and multiple means for engagement and learning. This includes the curriculum, instructional practices, materials, and activities.
5. The design of **individual assessment and program evaluation practices** provides multiple approaches to finding out what children know and can do in order to equitably assess individual learning, development, and educational progress.
6. The design of **family involvement practices** supports the equitable access and engagement of all families in the full range of experiences. This includes ongoing communication, learning opportunities, and program involvement activities.

Summary & Implications

Our current educational system places emphasis on academic goals for children. As we move forward and make efforts to improve the outcomes that children are achieving, we must keep in mind that emotional development and behavioral self-regulation are as important to early development as learning to read. We must pay attention to the whole child. As we consider the social-emotional development of young children in relationship to their school readiness, we are reminded of the key role it plays and the need to provide support in ways that acknowledge differences in abilities as well as in cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, in ways that reflect a philosophy of Universal Design. The principles, ideas, and strategies in this brief represent a starting point for giving early educators the tools to make this happen.

Table 1
Universal Design Applications

Evidence-Based Practices	Universal Design Considerations for the Early Educator
<p>1. The early educator adopts a specific social skills curriculum that is implemented on a classroom-wide basis so that the support of social skills becomes an explicit part of the curriculum, and specific activities that support social skills become a part of the routine. For example, the curriculum includes a circle time activity devoted to identifying emotions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use a variety of materials and/or methods to portray the different emotions. Children may respond to pictures, act out an emotion, describe it, or draw their own picture portraying the emotion. ■ Allow for different ways of responding and demonstrating understanding of the emotions. Children may make a choice by pointing, vocalizing, responding with words, or picking up the picture that represents their answer. ■ Understand that a child’s response to or comfort with different emotions may vary. Reassure children in order to increase their comfort level in the classroom. ■ Ask parents and families to share their cultural experiences and expressions of different emotions, so that children understand that there are differences in how people express emotions. Discuss and reinforce the classroom norms, so that parents have a better understanding of the expectations for social-emotional behavior within the classroom.
<p>2. The early educator manipulates the schedule, routines, materials, and activities in order to support social skills. Everyday activities and routines, such as coming and going or meal and snack times, provide ideal incidental opportunities to embed and practice social (friendship) skills like sharing and taking a turn. For example, a water table provides the activity for supporting children’s social interactions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Arrange the physical aspect of the circle time activity to ensure that all children are able to engage and participate as independently as possible (e.g., toys/ materials in the water, sand, or bean table allow for the fact that children have different abilities in physically manipulating materials). ■ Acknowledge that some children will not have had an opportunity to play in a water table. Add some familiar element to the activity in order to gain the child’s interest and comfort in participating in this activity. ■ Know that sensory-motor issues may prevent positive play for some children. Consider the best way to introduce children to this activity.
<p>3. The early educator utilizes peer modeling in which he or she provides instruction to the child’s peers on ways to initiate and prolong social interactions with children needing help with their social skills, and prompts or reinforces peers’ initiations. For example, the early educator prompts one child to help another with his puzzle while modeling appropriate social skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Consider the verbal repertoire of both children by giving the helper (child) the words to use in offering help so that the offer is understood and/or acknowledged. ■ Provide the receiving child with a nonverbal way of responding, if needed. ■ Be available initially to interpret communicative attempts (e.g., vocalizations, body language, facial expressions, etc.) for this strategy to be successful. ■ Provide a puzzle that portrays an image that is familiar to both children to support their interest and extended engagement in this social opportunity. ■ Provide a choice of puzzles that reflects the physical and cognitive needs of the target child and supports his involvement.
<p>4. The early educator includes social integration activities in his or her classroom by arranging for a child with limited peer interaction skills to have planned opportunities on a daily basis to interact with children who are socially competent and responsive to that child. For example, one child has the responsibility of greeting everyone entering the classroom in the morning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support each child’s individual way of communicating his or her greeting (e.g., verbally, through a communication device, with a written sign, by a gesture, etc.). ■ Accept that greetings may take many forms (e.g., eye contact, smiling, nodding the head, shaking hands, a small bow at the waist, a high five, etc.). ■ Provide for a variety of physical needs in this activity. Some children may physically tire before greeting everyone, and an alternative means of communicating a greeting may need to be substituted. ■ Be flexible and responsive to a broad range of emotional needs and abilities. Some children may not have the emotional regulation to stay with the activity long enough to greet the whole class, so a backup plan should be in place.