

Not Just “Soft Skills”: How Young Children’s Learning & Health Benefit from Strong Social-Emotional Development

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TO FAIL**



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SUMMARY

Very young children rely on parents and caregivers to help them understand our world, and to provide them with the experiences and information that help their brains grow. This is true whether a child is learning how to read and write, or how to get along with others and manage their feelings. When parents and caregivers respond to their children's needs from birth with sensitivity and nurturing, they strengthen children's early learning and provide a strong foundation for better health and well-being throughout life.

One aspect of early learning that is less understood than other types of learning—but equally important—is social-emotional development. Children with strong social-emotional skills are more interested in all types of learning, form healthier relationships with others, persist longer at difficult tasks, and can better control their emotions. Social-emotional development is an aspect of typical brain development that depends both on genetics and children's early experiences, including support from parents and caregivers. The more nurturing and loving support a child receives from a parent or caregiver during activities like talking, reading, and singing, the better developed that child's social-emotional skills.

Following are highlights from the strong evidence base on social-emotional development, which are reviewed in this paper:

1. Social-emotional development plays several key roles in early childhood, from understanding feelings, to taking turns, to building healthy relationships with others. It is the foundation upon which much other learning takes place.
2. Children with strong social-emotional skills do better in school because they are more focused, can cooperate with and learn from others, and exhibit fewer behavioral problems.
3. Healthy social-emotional development in early childhood leads to better outcomes in adulthood, such as improved health, better jobs, and more stable relationships.
4. Positive parent-child (or caregiver-child) interactions not only lead to better social-emotional development in children, but offer benefits to parents and caregivers as well.
5. There is a gap in understanding about social-emotional development, but if we improve intervention programs that support parents and caregivers, and undertake broad-based awareness efforts, we can help all children grow into higher-functioning adults.

Healthy social-emotional development brings many benefits to children, adults and communities. While parents and caregivers are invested in their children's early learning and development, they need more information and resources to better support their children's social-emotional development early on.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dramatic advances in neuroscience and child development research in recent years have helped us understand how children’s earliest experiences shape their overall development and ability to learn. For example, we now know that nurturing and quality interactions with loved ones improve children’s early brain development, and contribute to their success in school and in life.

But while all aspects of early brain development are closely linked and vital to lifelong well-being, less is generally understood about the importance of social-emotional skills to academic, health, and life outcomes. This is a significant problem, since research shows that parents and caregivers can strengthen their children’s social-emotional skills and improve their outcomes simply through loving interactions, even in less-than-ideal circumstances.

Social-emotional and other skills are interwoven from birth and develop together in the context of a child’s early experiences. Self-esteem, motivation, persistence, and self-regulation are key indicators of healthy social-emotional development, and result from positive early relationships and stable environments. Healthy social-emotional

development also leads to improved academic performance and career prospects, as well as better adult health outcomes. By contrast, growing evidence suggests that poor social-emotional development may contribute to mental illness, obesity, drug dependence, and many other health challenges. It is not difficult to draw connections between how individuals with poor social-emotional skills are challenged personally, and the broader implications for their communities and our country.

Despite the central role that social-emotional skills play in children’s overall learning, as well as later health and life outcomes, increasing pressure to prepare young children for formal schooling has resulted in a narrowed goal of academic skill development. Our society is heavily focused on young children’s academic skills.¹

This paper synthesizes the research on social-emotional development in early childhood, and underscores the need for a new national dialogue on this topic. It also outlines how we might better support parents and caregivers so they can contribute to the healthy social-emotional development of their children.

II. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

A. Social-emotional development is determined by genetics, caregiving and environment.

Social-emotional skills include a wide set of components. Researchers and experts in child development have identified a range of attributes that constitute social-emotional development from zero to five years of age:

- **Emotional development** is the ability to recognize and understand our own feelings and actions, as well as those of other people; also, how our own thoughts, feelings, and actions affect ourselves and others.
- **Social interaction** focuses on the relationships we share with others and is greatly shaped by our emotional development. As children develop socially, they learn to take turns, empathize with and help their friends, play together, and cooperate with others.
- **Self-regulation** is the ability to express thoughts, feelings and behaviors in socially appropriate ways. Learning to calm down when angry and to use words instead of hitting is an example of self-regulation; other examples include keeping one's attention focused on a task, and working toward goals with persistence.
- **Co-regulation** is the interactive process in which two people, such as an infant and a parent, respond to and shape each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Like other aspects of development, children's social-emotional development is determined by genetics as well as their early experiences and environment. Parents and caregivers play a critical role in shaping the neural connections of their children's brains through their interactions and care.

Children's first social interactions occur with their primary caregivers at birth in the form of gazes, touch, and vocalizations. These early interactions are very important, helping children and caregivers develop an emotional bond, called attachment, which provides the foundation for children's later relationships.² When early interactions are consistent, responsive, and sensitive, children develop secure attachment with caregivers. Secure attachment helps children feel safe and protected, and makes them more likely to explore their surroundings and learn.³ As children grow and develop, supportive caregivers continue to teach and model important skills—like taking turns, cooperation, and empathy—that prepare them for future relationships.

But frequent interactions between an adult and child also establish a process of co-regulation with benefits to both individuals: it helps children and their caregivers better manage their responses to one another, and bolsters their emotional and social stability. For example, when babies smile, parents may reinforce it by smiling; when children become distressed, caregivers may become anxious, which may similarly reinforce the children's distress. Co-regulation helps both parents and children recognize and understand the other's reactions. Co-regulation also develops a crucial cycle of stimulation and rest that contributes to children's healthy social-emotional development.⁴

Other environmental influences outside of family life also play an important role in shaping children's developing brains and emerging social-emotional skills. Experiences in child care or preschool, neighborhoods, home environments, and even parents' work environments influence how children grow and develop.⁵

B. Early adversity impacts children’s social-emotional development and life outcomes, but a nurturing environment can protect them.

Research makes clear that early adversity or trauma in early childhood play a powerful role in disrupting the security of children’s attachment relationships with their caregivers, and can negatively impact healthy development. Childhood adversity (also referred to as “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs) is caused by a variety of factors, including neighborhood violence, divorce, witnessing or experiencing abuse, and others.⁶ When children experience severe or prolonged adversity it can lead to toxic stress, a physical response affecting the brain and body that comes from consistently high levels of cortisol in the brain. Toxic stress can have many damaging effects on a child’s health and well-being, including on the child’s ability to correctly interpret social interactions and focus on important tasks for learning.⁷

The emotional health of caregivers also impacts children’s social-emotional development, even if circumstances do not lead to early adversity or toxic stress. Parental depression and emotional instability can influence caregiving behaviors; parental depression has been linked to fewer behaviors that create bonds with young children, such as vocal interactions, repetition, reading, singing, and storytelling.⁸ Caregiver depression can also affect the security of the infant-caregiver attachment relationship, which can cause social-emotional difficulties later in life.⁹ Specifically, maternal depression that is ongoing or severe has been linked to an increased risk of cognitive and behavior problems in children.¹⁰

However, interventions that increase parental responsiveness have been shown to reduce maternal depression, and may prevent the emergence of maternal depressive symptoms when provided early on.¹¹ Similarly, healthy and stable parents and caregivers can positively affect children’s overall development through nurturing and quality interactions, even in challenging environments. When young children have positive, caring relationships with at least one adult, the negative effects of toxic stress can be prevented, reduced, or even reversed.¹²

C. Strong social-emotional skills are linked to academic success and long-term well-being.

Early social-emotional development is closely tied to—and helps boost—academic achievement and other kinds of learning. In 2015, researchers published the findings of a 20-year study that examined the relationship between children’s strong social-emotional skills at kindergarten entry, including how well kindergarteners cooperated with peers and understood feelings, and their later outcomes.¹³ The groundbreaking study revealed that children with better social-emotional skills in kindergarten were more likely to graduate high school on time, complete a college degree, and maintain full employment by age 25. Children with strong social-emotional skills were also less likely to be enrolled in special education services or repeat grades while in school, receive public assistance, be involved with the police, or binge drink as young adults.¹⁴

A strong example of the correlation between high social-emotional skills in kindergarten and better life outcomes can be seen in the federally funded Head Start program, which has been shown to boost children’s self-control and self-esteem, and increase children’s likelihood of completing high school and attending college.¹⁵ Along similar lines, a longitudinal study of Educare, a high-quality early childhood program that emphasizes social-emotional development, found improved language skills among toddlers in its programs and more effective parent-child interactions, which led to better behavior in children; the program also increased parents’ positive perceptions of their children’s behavior.¹⁶

One set of skills that governs children’s self-regulation and has proven critical to children’s success in school is called executive function—the ability to plan, focus, manage emotions, and persist at tasks. Strong executive functioning has been linked to a host of outcomes for children, including math proficiency, reading ability, and verbal and nonverbal reasoning.¹⁷ Studies of children from kindergarten through high school enrolled in high-quality social-emotional learning programs have shown that they score, on average, 11 percentage points higher on academic tests than children who do not receive such instruction.¹⁸

Information on how social-emotional development is linked and contributes to a child's overall development and success is important for parents and caregivers. But by also sharing it with early childhood providers and teachers, we may be able to further improve academic outcomes. A recent study from Johns Hopkins University found that kindergarteners who lacked strong social-emotional and executive functioning skills were more likely to be held back a grade, suspended, or expelled at least once between kindergarten and 3rd grade.¹⁹ By contrast, teachers who are prepared to deal positively with challenging behavior are less likely to suspend or expel students.²⁰ Research suggests that providing teachers with training on classroom management strategies and ways to integrate social-emotional learning into the curriculum could improve children's behavioral and academic outcomes.²¹

Beyond academic success, strong social-emotional development—including impulse control, judgment, insight and planning—is also linked to improved health, earnings, and other positive life outcomes. Children with these skills have lower rates of health concerns in adolescence, including smoking, drug dependence, and teen pregnancy. Children with strong social-emotional skills are also less likely to be single parents, get arrested in early adulthood, or qualify for public housing.²² Recent estimates suggest a high return on investment in programs that promote the development of social-emotional skills in school: for every \$1 invested in these programs, \$11 are returned to society.²³

Connections to Early Literacy

Social-emotional development and early language development are closely linked from birth as children and parents communicate with one another through eye contact, talking, singing, movement, cooing, babbling, facial expressions, and gestures. These interactions are the basis of both social-emotional and linguistic development. Caregivers' sensitivity, responsiveness, and emotional availability influence how children develop their understanding and mastery of language.²⁴

Strong social-emotional skills are also linked to increased reading achievement and learning in the classroom. Frequent, positive social interactions with caregivers, educators and other children help boost the pace of language learning and vocabulary growth.²⁵

Conversely, language difficulties may contribute to problems with social-emotional development. Children who experience challenges in communicating thoughts and feelings are more likely to act-out versus using words to express themselves. As many as half of school-aged children referred to mental health services or assigned to special education classes have language difficulties.²⁶ In addition, many children with behavior challenges show previously unidentified language difficulties.²⁷

III. THE NEED TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN INFANTS AND TODDLERS

A. Healthy social-emotional development is important for all children, but it's not accessible to all.

Positive social-emotional development has benefits for all children, but particularly for children in low-income families who tend to start school behind their peers.²⁸ Like other areas of early learning, income-based gaps in social-emotional development have been documented in preschool-aged children and younger. Toddlers from families with lower incomes are 44 percent less likely to have secure attachment to a primary caregiver, compared to toddlers from families with higher incomes.²⁹

Evidence suggests that young children of color may also be less likely to have secure attachment to parents and caregivers, and are more likely to face challenges that negatively impact social-emotional development and long-term outcomes.³⁰ For example, poor social-emotional development can result in increased disciplinary and exclusionary procedures at school for young children of color in particular³¹—a recent study found that black preschoolers were 3.6 times as likely to be suspended as white preschoolers.³²

B. Parents need clear information from a trusted source.

Parents' knowledge of child development is one key driver for improving outcomes for their children, yet more than half of parents wish they had more information about how to be a better parent.³³ And while parents' involvement in children's learning has increased over the past two decades, the belief in the importance of academic skills—such as counting and knowing letters—has been increasing at a faster rate than the belief in the importance of social-emotional skills.³⁴ Many parents lack awareness of and access to accurate information about social-emotional development.

For example, although babies experience emotions such as sadness and fear as early as three months of age, a nationally representative survey conducted by ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation found that a majority of parents (59 percent) think that children do not experience these emotions until the age of six months or older. About half of all parents surveyed underestimate how early their infants are able to pick up on the intentions and feelings of others: 47 percent believe that one-year-old children are not affected by parents' moods, despite evidence that this capacity emerges around three months of age.

The survey also demonstrates a large difference between children's actual developmental capabilities and what parents believe they can do. A child's ability to control his or her emotions develops between three and four years of age, but nearly one quarter of parents think that this occurs at one year old or younger. While the ability to share and take turns emerges between three and four years of age, 43 percent of parents think children have this capacity before age two.³⁵

Finally, beliefs about and approaches to discipline may be out of step with the research findings of child psychologists. For example, spanking is still frequently used as a method of discipline for young children: a recent nationally representative survey found that a majority of men (76 percent) and women (65 percent) agree that a child sometimes needs to be spanked.³⁶

However, positive discipline that is both respectful and consistent—including giving children choices and following through on consequences—encourages cooperation, problem-solving, and independence. This type of discipline, when used in place of physical discipline, helps foster positive outcomes for children, including greater social-emotional skills and self-esteem.³⁷

C. Existing interventions are effective, but hard to scale.

A growing body of evidence shows that caregiving practices improve when knowledge about child development improves. This includes more positive parent-child interactions, increased involvement with early learning, and better behavior management.³⁸ Helping parents and caregivers feel successful and capable in their roles—known as self-efficacy—improves not only parenting practices, but child outcomes as well. Caregivers' feelings of self-efficacy have been linked to an increase in parent responsiveness and sensitivity, as well as in children's self-regulation and social skills.³⁹

There is a wide range of available parent interventions, from in-home support through voluntary home visiting programs to public awareness initiatives. In general, these programs work with parents one-on-one, or reach a small number of parents at a time; as a result, many of these programs are costly. A recent study from the National Institute for Children's Health Quality reviewed 35 of the most prominent interventions aimed at improving the social-emotional development of young children in a variety of settings. Of those 35 surveyed, most only reach around 1,000 children a year due to financial constraints, inconsistency in training, and problems with raising the profile of programs.⁴⁰

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Social-emotional development is often unnamed or misunderstood by those who care for young children, and those who make broader decisions about their health and welfare. Clear evidence presented in this paper concludes the following: social-emotional development is important not just to children's academic success and well-being, but to their adult outcomes as well. Moreover, there is a gap in adult understanding of children's social-emotional growth that if filled, could lead to more resilient, curious, healthy children who grow into higher functioning adults.

Making use of this research and increasing the attention paid to social-emotional development is a heavy lift that will require action at all levels. Effective interventions with demonstrated long-term effects do exist, like home visiting programs. Such intensive programs provide support to parents with few resources, leading to improved communication between adults and children; these programs deserve more study and investment. But broader efforts are also needed to increase awareness of the social-emotional development of young children among a larger number of parents and caregivers in all income brackets.

Additionally, we must equip parents and caregivers with actionable tools they can use to strengthen their children's development, and offer support so they can be effective long-term. These efforts will require thoughtful attention to caregivers' needs and their own sense of self-efficacy. Armed with an increasingly robust understanding of how children learn and develop, we have a tremendous opportunity to reach parents and caregivers where they are with meaningful learning activities that not only empower them to promote their children's learning, but also boost the well-being, success, and equity of future generations.

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