Recommended Practices
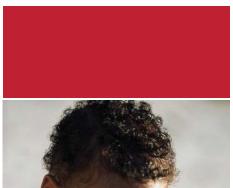
Identifying and Monitoring Outcomes Related to Children's Social-Emotional Development

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Research has identified a number of indicators that are associated with children's success in school including self-confidence, a willingness to try new things and persist at challenging tasks, an ability to develop and maintain relationships with peers and adults, an ability to cooperate and participate in group settings, and an ability to communicate emotions (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These same skills are considered pivotal to social-emotional development and a reduced likelihood that children will engage in problem behavior. Given that many young children engage in challenging behavior when they do not have the social or communicative skills to express their needs or feelings in appropriate ways, an important component of preventing and addressing problem behavior is to focus on teaching children social skills they can use in place of the problem behavior.

Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain (2003) describe a framework of effective practices that are designed to promote social skills and emotional development, to provide support for children's appropriate behavior, and to prevent challenging behaviors. A key component of this framework is the use of a systematic approach to teach social skills and promote emotional development. These skills include initiating and maintaining interactions with others, problem solving, developing friendships, communicating emotions in an appropriate way, and controlling anger. When teachers focus on promoting these skills, it serves a dual purpose in terms of preventing or reducing problem behavior. Children learn positive social skills and strategies they can use in place of challenging behavior, and teachers can concentrate on children's positive, prosocial behaviors rather than responding to problem behavior in a way that maintains the problem behavior.

Teachers should partner with families to identify outcomes and strategies for addressing children's social-emotional outcomes. Social behavior is learned through relationships between the child and his or her family within the context of larger social systems or communities (Barrera & Corso, 2003; Chen, Downing, & Peckham-Hardin, 2002). Young children are taught how to initiate interactions with others, communicate their needs, develop friendships, express their feelings, and respond to others in a way that matches the behavioral norms expected by their family members. These norms for behavior may be different for different families and are influenced by ethnicity, race, gender, social class, religion, and geography as well as other dimensions of cultural identity. Different perspectives may emerge about what behaviors are socially valued and encouraged. Family perspectives and values about child guidance and discipline might be very different from an educator's perspective of recommended practices in early education (Barrera & Corso, 2003).

IDEAs that Work

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The following section includes information on specific outcomes related to children's social-emotional development as well as some suggestions for how to monitor children's progress toward these outcomes. This is not an exhaustive list of outcomes or monitoring strategies but rather ideas to consider when planning assessment and interventions for specific children. References to additional resources are listed to the side.

Peer interaction. Understanding whom a child typically plays with, for how long, and around which activities can provide insight into a young child's peer interaction skills. Knowing that Sydney only plays with Riley most days gives a teacher information about expanding Sydney's network of play partners. Data can be collected by scanning the classroom every 5 minutes during center time and gathering data on which children are playing together.

Friendship skills. A critical foundation for children's success in school is building relationships with peers and adults. Observing children's friendship skills (e.g., sharing, turn taking, helping others, organizing play routines, entering into an on-going play situation) can provide a teacher with ideas for intervention. For example, realizing that Patrick struggles with turn taking cues Ms. Martin to organize games that Patrick enjoys and that require him to take turns. Outcome data might be gathered as frequency counts (e.g., number of times a child shares when requested to do so), duration (how long a child is able to maintain an interaction with a peer around a structured or unstructured activity) and type (the type of friendship skills children are observed using).

Recognizing and communicating emotions. It is important for children to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others and to communicate their emotions in appropriate ways. Children need a range of words to describe their emotions (emotional literacy) and they need to be able to communicate their feelings to others. For example, understanding the meaning of words like frustrated, proud, worried, and excited helps children more accurately interpret the behavior of others (especially in relation to cause and intent) and to more accurately read the affective cues of others. Monitoring children's progress toward increasing their emotional vocabulary might be done through using anecdotal notes of feeling words the child uses, describing scenarios and having children identify the potential feelings of others, or having children label photographs of children displaying a range of emotions.

Problem solving. Teaching children how to use a problem solving strategy (e.g., decide what the problem is, think of some solutions, consider what might happen, give the solution a try, evaluate the solution) helps them learn that their behavior has consequences and strengthens their ability to think of alternative solutions. Monitoring children's progress in problem solving might be accomplished by using anecdotal notes to record incidents of children engaging in problem solving, noting the level of assistance needed from an adult to arrive at manageable solutions, or noting the child's ability to try alternative solutions rather than engaging in inappropriate behavior.

Controlling anger and impulse. Young children who learn to cope with their emotions constructively have an easier time handling the disappointment and aggravation associated with the life of a preschooler. When children have these skills, they also relate better to their peers and adults across settings. The turtle technique (Webster-Stratton, 1990) is an example of a strategy that has been used to teach children anger management skills (recognize that you feel angry, stop, go into "shell"/ take some deep breaths/calm down/think of good solutions, emerge from "shell" with new solutions and a calmer feeling). Outcome data might be gathered on a child's number of outbursts, the number of times a child uses a specific anger management technique rather than an outburst, or the accurate use of each step by the child.

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