Bringing Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Teaching Practices to Pre-K and Kindergarten Classrooms:
Implementing the Pyramid Model

Early education programs offered in preschool and kindergarten classrooms have a lasting effect on students' learning and behavioral development. Research in education, child development, and neuroscience has shown that young children's educational and developmental experiences provide a foundation of skill development that profoundly influences a student's academic achievements and behavioral outcomes. Research shows that behavior problems during preschool years often persist and that adolescents with emotional disturbance have a history of problem behavior that began during preschool (Brennan et al., 2015; Denham & Brown, 2010; Feder et al., 2009). Social-emotional competence in preschool is associated with achievement, job retention, and relationship success later in life (Jones et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007).

It is critically important that preschool and kindergarten teachers are intentional about teaching social and emotional skills and intervening when there is challenging behavior. Early educators have identified addressing challenging behavior as one of their greatest needs for professional development. National data suggest that teachers are struggling with addressing young students' behavioral concerns with alarming rates of children being suspended and expelled from preschool classrooms. When students are suspended or expelled, they not only miss the opportunity to learn critical social-emotional skills (Fox et al., 2021; Hemmeter & Conroy, 2018), but they are removed from high-quality instruction focused on academic skills. Further, these exclusionary discipline practices may have negative long-term effects, such as disengagement from school, diminished educational opportunities, and expulsion in later school grades (Adamu & Hogan, 2015; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Raffaele Mendez, 2003).

Promoting Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Skills Early Has a Lifelong Impact

Young children with strong social, emotional, and behavioral skills → Have better early academic outcomes → Are more likely to graduate from high school, graduate from college, and be employed.

Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Young Children–What's the Evidence?

The Pyramid Model is a multi-tiered framework of promotion, prevention, and intervention practices for promoting young children's positive social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. The National Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) describes the Pyramid Model as providing early childhood PBIS. The Pyramid Model has been evaluated and found effective in improving student outcomes in two randomized trials with the following outcomes (Hemmeter et al., 2016, 2021):
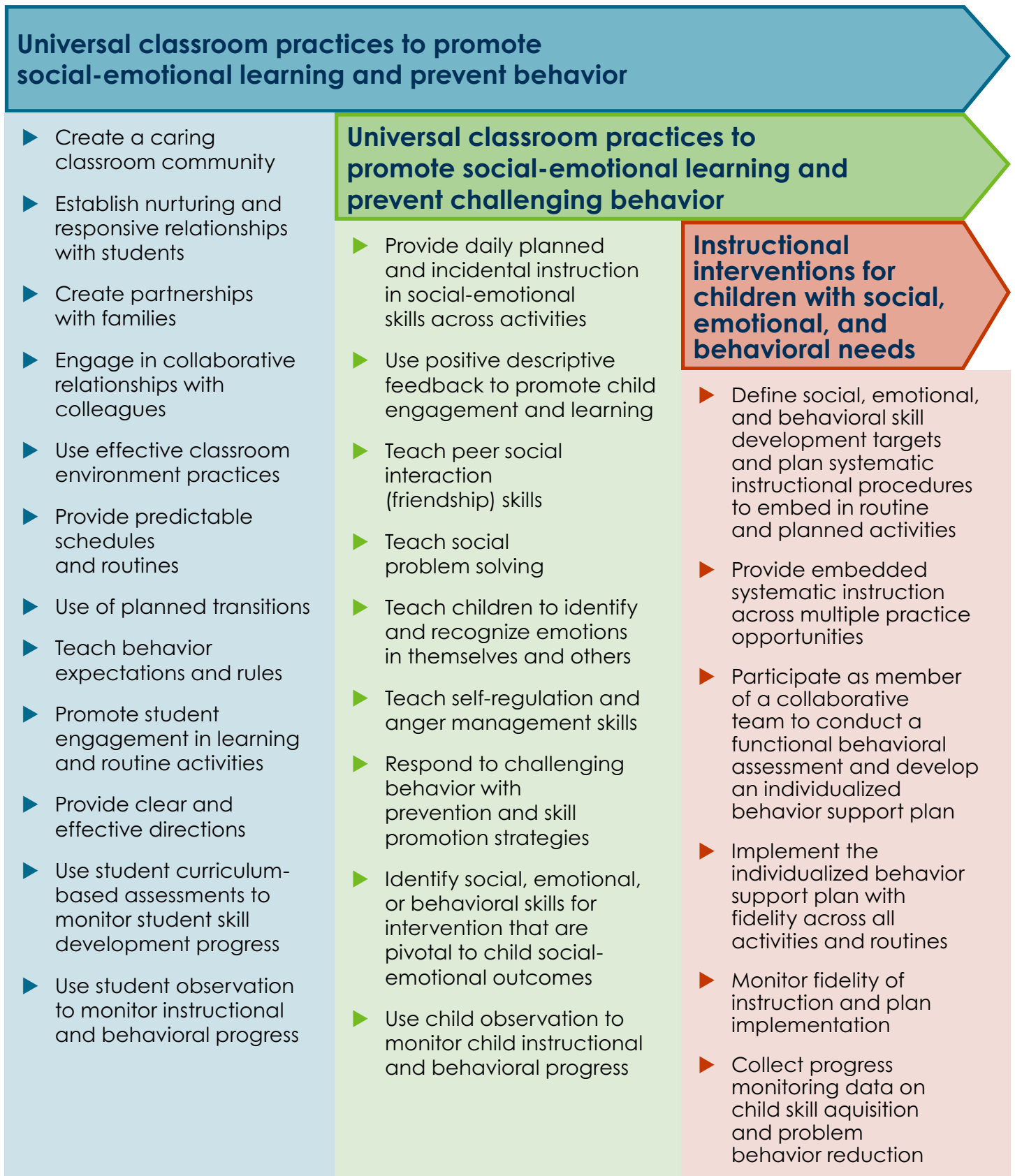
▶ Preschool students identified with challenging behavior were rated by teachers as having greater improvement in their behavior than students in the control classrooms.

▶ Preschool students identified with challenging behavior were rated by teachers as having greater improvement in their social skills than students in the control classrooms.

▶ Preschool students identified with challenging behavior were observed to have greater growth in their positive social interactions than students in the control classrooms.

▶ All students in the Pyramid Model classroom were rated by teachers as having greater growth in their social skills than students in the control classroom.

▶ Teachers who received training and coaching in the Pyramid Model improved their implementation of the Pyramid Model practices and continued to use the practices a year after coaching ended.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for the Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes of Young Children: The Pyramid Model

Figure 1 lists the evidence-based Pyramid Model practices for preschool and kindergarten classrooms used within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). The figure identifies three categories of practices: 1) universal classroom practices that are essential for promoting social-emotional learning and preventing challenging behavior; 2) universal instructional practices that are necessary to foster social, emotional, and behavioral skill development; and 3) the practices that are effective in the development and delivery of individualized instructional interventions to improve social and behavioral outcomes. Teachers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms should be proficient in all these practices.

The Pyramid Model does not replace the school-wide implementation of SEL Foundations, Restorative Practices, or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Instead, it provides classroom practices aligned with those approaches and operationalized for implementation in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Teachers implementing the Pyramid Model implement universal practices for teaching rules and expectations, building relationships and classroom community, using practices to promote the engagement of each and every student, acknowledging students for following expectations and rules, and the intentional and integrated teaching of social and emotional skills. The Pyramid Model practices also include tier two practices for providing systematic instruction on targeted social, emotional, and behavioral skills to students who need targeted intervention. Finally, teachers are prepared for their role as collaborative team members in the development of tier three interventions and the implementation and progress monitoring of those interventions.

Figure 1. The Pyramid Model as a Multi-Tiered System of Support

Universal classroom practices to promote social-emotional learning and prevent behavior

▶ Create a caring classroom community

▶ Establish nurturing and responsive relationships with students

▶ Create partnerships with families

▶ Engage in collaborative relationships with colleagues

▶ Use effective classroom environment practices

▶ Provide predictable schedules and routines

▶ Use of planned transitions

▶ Teach behavior expectations and rules

▶ Promote student engagement in learning and routine activities

▶ Provide clear and effective directions

▶ Use student curriculum-based assessments to monitor student skill development progress

▶ Use student observation to monitor instructional and behavioral progress

Universal classroom practices to promote social-emotional learning and prevent challenging behavior

▶ Provide daily planned and incidental instruction in social-emotional skills across activities

▶ Use positive descriptive feedback to promote child engagement and learning

▶ Teach peer social interaction (friendship) skills

▶ Teach social problem solving

▶ Teach children to identify and recognize emotions in themselves and others

▶ Teach self-regulation and anger management skills

▶ Respond to challenging behavior with prevention and skill promotion strategies

▶ Identify social, emotional, or behavioral skills for intervention that are pivotal to child social-emotional outcomes

▶ Use child observation to monitor child instructional and behavioral progress

Instructional interventions for children with social, emotional, and behavioral needs

▶ Define social, emotional, and behavioral skill development targets and plan systematic instructional procedures to embed in routine and planned activities

▶ Provide embedded systematic instruction across multiple practice opportunities

▶ Participate as member of a collaborative team to conduct a functional behavioral assessment and develop an individualized behavior support plan

▶ Implement the individualized behavior support plan with fidelity across all activities and routines

▶ Monitor fidelity of instruction and plan implementation

▶ Collect progress monitoring data on child skill aquisition and problem behavior reduction

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