

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN

By Megan Waltz, Ready 4 K, Public Policy Assistant

Healthy social-emotional development in young children correlates with healthy cognitive development and therefore creates a strong foundation for future school achievement. With the current focus on child outcomes and accountability in K-12 education, all aspects of school readiness, including social-emotional health and development should be examined during early care and education policy discussions.

"The foundations of social competence that are developed in the first five years are linked to emotional well-being and affect a child's later ability to functionally adapt in school and to form successful relationships throughout life."

-National Scientific Council on the Developing Child

What is Social-Emotional Development?

Social-emotional development is a combination of social development and emotional development. The two tend to be joined together due to emotional development occurring within social constructs.

Social-emotional development refers to a child's capacity for self-confidence, trust, and empathy as well as the capacity to develop competencies in language usage and cognitive curiosity.¹ Strong social-emotional development is a predictor of later academic, social, and emotional success.

According to the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), social-emotional development is influenced by three main factors including biology, relationships, and environment. Biology involves the temperament of a young child and other genetic influences. Relationships formed with primary caregivers, family members, and others are the vehicle that drives social-emotional development.^{2,3} Environmental toxins, abuse, poverty, and community violence are all environmental factors that effect social-emotional development. Simply put, a child's social-emotional health is affected by a range of different factors.

The Whole Child

Cognitive growth does not happen on its own. It comes through curiosity and interaction. The ability to interact with others including teachers and peers is a direct result of early relationships.

Positive social-emotional growth builds the communication skills necessary for learning throughout a child's life. Some social-emotional skills that support school readiness are:⁴

- *Confidence* – A child will be able to participate in child-directed play
- *Curiosity* – A child will take interest in the world outside of themselves
- *Intentionality* – A child will be able to take the initiative in activities
- *Self-Control* – A child will be able to sit calmly and listen to a story
- *Relatedness* – A child will show concern for a hurt or upset friend
- *Capacity to Communicate* – A child will be able to work through conflict with peers
- *Cooperativeness* – A child will be able to fully participate in a group activity

Young children who are socially and emotionally healthy have a greater chance of achieving success in school and in life. Research shows that of those children who are not ready to succeed in school, many have emotional difficulties that prevent them from achieving school success.⁵

How Do We Measure Social-Emotional Development?

Research makes clear the importance of healthy social-emotional development as an indicator of school readiness, high quality early care and education, and as an essential ingredient for children's competence in other academic and cognitive domains.^{6,7} Parents, educators, researchers, and policy makers want the most accurate information available when making decisions regarding our youngest Minnesotans. A challenge to measuring social-emotional development is that competence in this area may vary by situation, day, or time depending on the individual child. Social-emotional development is

a qualitative indicator. This means that a child must be observed in a normal setting, over time in order to gather pertinent and accurate information. In any measurement system reliability, validity, efficiency and subjectivity must be balanced against each other to find an equilibrium that satisfies the informational needs of parents, educators, researchers, and policy makers.

One example of a screening tool recognized by national organizations as well as the Minnesota Departments of Health, Education, and Human Services as being both highly valid and reliable is the *Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-emotional*® (ASQ: SE).^{8,9} The ASQ: SE® is administered by a parent – who has the closest relationship with the child and has therefore been able to make observations in normal settings, over time. After a parent administers the screen, a professional scores it and then reviews the results with the parent. The parent and professional then decide together if further referral and assessment is necessary.¹⁰

Bridging the Gap

Many of our early care and education policies focus on language and literacy as well as other cognitive functions. Often forgotten is the foundation on which cognitive growth is built – an emotionally and socially stable young child.¹¹

Less than 50% of Minnesota's youngest citizens arrive in kindergarten fully prepared to learn. Policy makers have the ability to help bridge this gap by developing early care and education policies that include social-emotional development in our most vulnerable population.

Although a plethora of scientific research supports the concept of social-emotional health and development as an indicator of school readiness and high quality early care and education, there is a small but vocal group in Minnesota who decry the role of policy makers in supporting the importance of healthy social-emotional development as such. However, a broad national consensus exists that supports and promotes the inclusion of such development as an indicator of school readiness and high quality early care and education.

Some groups that support healthy social-emotional development as an indicator of school readiness and high quality early care and education are:

- The National Governor's Association
- The National Conference of State Legislatures
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children
- Zero To Three

- The National Head Start Association
- The Business Roundtable¹²
- The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis
- 37 States (including MN)¹³

Policy makers must promote early care and education policies and programs that include social-emotional health as a domain or indicator of school readiness and high quality early care and education. These policies and programs will help build Minnesota's capacity for helping young children achieve success in school and in life.

Endnotes

¹NCSL (2005). *Helping young children succeed – Strategies to promote early childhood social and emotional development*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyfl/childhoodreport0905.htm>

²NCSL (2005)

³National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains*. Retrieved from: <http://www.developingchild.net/reports.shtml>

⁴Zero to Three (2006). *Heart start: The emotional foundations of school readiness*. Retrieved from <http://www.zerotothree.org>

⁵NCSL (2005)

⁶National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: the science of early child development*. Washington DC: National Academy Press

⁷National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004)

⁸Minnesota Department of Health (2006). *Developmental screening in young children*. Retrieved from: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fin/meh/devscrm/grid.html>

⁹Administration for Children and Families (2006). *Child development instruments*. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/perf_measures/reports/resources_measuring/res_meas_cdi.html

¹⁰Brookes Publishing (2006). *Screening and Assessment*. Retrieved from: <http://www.brookespublishing.com/tools/asqse/index.html>

¹¹National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000)

¹²Education and the Workforce (2003). *Early childhood education: A call to action from the business community*. Retrieved from: <http://www.businessroundtable.org>

¹³NCCIC (2006). *Selected State early learning guidelines*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nccic.org/pubs/goodstart/eigwebsites.html>

