Promoting Social and Emotional Development in the Infant and Toddler Classroom

By Elyse Cepull, Technical Assistance Associate and Kristina Ketcham, Infant/Toddler Specialist, Region 15

The more positive the experiences children have in the classroom, the more likely they are to feel better about themselves. Fostering children's social and emotional development is the key to providing them with high-quality care. When working with infants and toddlers, social and emotional development needs to be highlighted for its important role in the growth process. Basic knowledge in child development and an understanding of each child's unique social and emotional needs can help caregivers offer positive social and emotional opportunities to young children and help them build healthy relationships. Caregivers can best support children by being accepting of each individual child and helping encouraging secure connections and trust between adult and child. When children have a strong sense of self, they are better equipped to work through challenging issues.

If children do not have stimulating environments, they could become bored and seek stimulation through attention-getting behavior. When the learning environment offers a rich variety of developmentally appropriate materials, children are more likely to become engaged and show fewer challenging behaviors. By providing positive interactions and offering activities based on the children's interests, caregivers help to provide the necessary tools and experiences to master social skills and encourage emotional development. This article explores strategies for incorporating healthy social and emotional activities throughout the child care environment. These strategies could help children develop important skills to better cope, manage problems and handle stress, all of which lead to happier, healthier children and caregivers.

The Physical Environment

Classroom arrangement is important in allowing children to feel safe and secure in their environment. Caregivers can best support children by providing classrooms that are stimulating, but not overwhelming, and that encourage exploration. For example, providing enough space for children to play and get away from the crowd is important for limiting the stress a child might feel while in a group setting throughout each day. Additionally, caregivers can curb children's frustration by making sure there are plenty of age-appropriate materials to limit competition for toys. Design the classroom to offer the right amount of interest and level of challenge to meet each child's individual needs. The following materials and arrangement ideas can provide children with a safe and familiar learning environment and promote healthy social and emotional development:

- Include a rocking chair or cozy area for one-on-one interactions with children to help them build relationships.
- Incorporate child-size furniture, such as chairs and toilets, to help children increase self-help skills by accomplishing tasks without much help.
- Offer developmentally appropriate toys and materials that could involve more than one child to encourage social interactions and cooperation.
- Help children engage in a variety of play experiences with their peers to support friendship development.
- Display photographs showing familiar faces and different emotions around the classroom at children's eye level to help them identify and understand their own and others' emotions.
- Provide phones, puppets, flannel board stories, dolls, small figurines and animals to help promote expressive language.
- Use communication boards and other assistive devices for children with special needs.

The Social-Emotional Environment

Appropriate materials and activities are not all a classroom needs to encourage social and emotional development. Positive interactions with caregivers are also important for children. Unlike preschoolers or adults, infants and toddlers cannot easily control their own emotions when they become frustrated or angry. Using different strategies like hugs or gentle touches are important ways to help children feel more secure and understood. Simply providing a calm place with an attentive caregiver can help an angry infant or toddler to feel heard and respected. When caregivers offer these wonderful opportunities for one-on-one personal time, they can help children label the emotions they are experiencing and provide an outlet for their feelings. Responsive, nurturing adults who guide children through difficult emotional states help children learn to do so for themselves in the future. Tips for promoting healthy social and emotional development with children might include the following:

- Consider each child individually when creating strategies to help them gain more social and emotional skills.
- Make sure expectations for children are realistic and achievable for the developmental age of the child.

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- Evaluate the environment for possible changes first, before evaluating the children.
- Allow children to select their own partners or groups during play; this helps to build confidence and skills necessary for social development.
- Establish familiar routines and transitions that children can expect each day.
- Give children choices and respect their decisions.
- Redirect children during conflicts with other children to guide them with their decision making.
- Give children a chance to solve problems or complete tasks on their own and provide assistance if they become frustrated.
- Know social and emotional milestones for young children and seek out new information on child development.
- Take care of yourself, as remaining positive with children, even in the face of challenging behavior, is easier when caregivers feel good about themselves.

Children's futures are in our hands. When the classroom environment encourages social and emotional development, children are able to blossom into well-rounded people. Meeting the individual needs of every child and surrounding them with positive influences and a secure environment will give them a healthy start to take on the world.

Resources

There are many resources we used for this article and that you can access in order to learn more about social and emotional health. One resource with helpful information for working with children birth to five years old is the Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL). CSEFEL researches and connects educators and parents to current topics that deal with healthy social and emotional development of children. CSEFEL provides web-based articles, handouts and other educational resources. Caregivers can use these resources to apply appropriate practices to improve environments, routines, activities and interactions with young children. Visit http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel and explore!

Another resource for caregivers and parents is Zero to Three, a national nonprofit organization that promotes the health and development of infants and toddlers. Their website, http://www.zerotothree.org, is a great resource for those who work with young children and want to keep up with emerging topics in early childhood development and current research.

The Department of Health and Human Services also offers “Infant-Toddler Foundations: Guidelines for Development and Learning.” This publication may be ordered or downloaded by chapter when you visit http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us and click on “Providers.” From this page, click “Provider Resources” on the far right, and then click “Infant-Toddler Foundations,” the last choice on the left-hand menu. You can also visit the publication by using its full address at http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/providers/pv_infant_toddler_foundations.asp.

Additionally, here are a few recommended children’s books on social and emotional development you can use in your work.
- Hands Are Not for Hitting, by Martine Agassi
- Baby Cakes, by Karma Wilson
- The Kissing Hand, by Audrey Penn
- Unlovable, by Don Yaccarino
- I Feel Sad, by Marcia Leonard Verdict
- All by Myself, by Aliki

Positive Meal Time Behavior

By Tracey Frank, CCSA’s Infant Toddler Director and Sarah Williams, Registered Dietitian

Meal time can be a pleasant part of the day when children learn about a variety of healthful foods and build social and motor skills. When meal time includes behavior problems, picky eating and spills, however, it can become challenging. A few simple steps can help you change those meal time moments and create a more enjoyable experience for everyone, even making meal time an integral part of the curriculum.

What makes a meal good? The first element is the food. We want to provide children with a variety of healthy foods. Not every child will like every food, especially not on the first few tries. In fact, it may take 10-15 times seeing and tasting a food before a child will accept it. To make each meal more appealing and acceptable to children, plan the menu so that new foods are served along with familiar foods.

The second element of a good meal is the environment. A relaxed and pleasant setting with good conversation leads to an enjoyable meal, while a rushed meal with lots of distractions can be upsetting. Set the stage for a positive meal by consistently providing enough time and direction to help children understand the change they are making from active play to meal time. Doing so helps children understand what to expect and learn how meal time is different from play. For example, you might let the children know that after play time, they will wash their hands and then eat. Part of the routine in this move from one activity to another also should be putting away toys and making the classroom neat to ensure fewer distractions during the meal.

Plan where both children and adults will sit at the table so that an adult is available to help the children who need the most assistance and attention. Adults should sit and eat with the children not only to facilitate conversation, but also to model appropriate table behaviors. Caregivers should initiate conversation, first about what types of food the group is eating, where each food comes from, and what color or texture can be identified with each food. After the conversation around food is started, let the children do most of the talking on whatever topics interest them.

Children like to be involved in the meal and to feel in control of what they eat. A good approach is one that childhood feeding expert Ellyn Satter calls the “division of responsibility.” Adults are responsible for planning meal times and providing healthy food, while children are responsible for what and how much they eat. This means that you
offer the food and encourage the children to try it, without pressur-
ing or forcing them to eat. Children should be allowed to feel independ-
ent when they eat, and caregivers benefit children by giving them the opportunity to do as much as they can on their own, such as drinking from cups, using utensils and feeding themselves during meal times. Allowing children meal time independence may be awkward and messy, but it encourages steps toward growth that will improve with time and practice. Letting children make decisions about what and how much they eat is also important because children are very good at eating when they are hungry and stopping when they are full. Being allowed to pay attention to the body’s cues about hunger and fullness is important for helping children maintain a healthy weight as they grow up.

Family-style meals are an excellent way to bring these developmentally appropriate practices to life. With family-style meals, adults and children sit and eat together at the table. Food is placed on the table in bowls, just as it might be when a family enjoys a meal together. Using child-size serving spoons the children serve themselves, with as little help as needed. Children can practice using serving utensils in play areas or pouring from a pitcher at the water table before using them at a meal. Providers are sometimes concerned about sanitation standards with family-style meals, but as long as providers are supervising the meal, the children are not sick, and food placed on the table is not served again later, family-style meals are not a sanitation risk.

If you use a different style of meal service at your center, you can still let the children participate in the meal by letting them feed themselves and make decisions about what they eat. Let children ask for a large or small serving, turn down a certain food, and ask for seconds. Younger children can be taught signs so that they can communicate their wants and needs such as “more” and “all done.” Offer food more than once, especially if some of the children have refused a food the first time. Children can be taught signs so that they can communicate their wants and needs such as “more” and “all done.”

During meal time, keep the children focused on the meal and involved in the conversation, even if they finish early. Remember that children don’t have a sense of time like adults and shouldn’t be rushed through a meal—rushing can impact their attitudes around meal time by making it feel unpleasant. Over time, children will become familiar with meal time patterns at child care. They will learn how to have a healthy and enjoyable meal with others, trust their feelings of hunger and fullness, and make choices for themselves—all valuable lessons for life.

References:
NC Department of Environmental & Natural Resources. 15A NCAC 18A .2808 Food Service. August 2, 2007.

Seeing and Using the Opportunity in Challenging Behavior
By Janet George, School-Age Specialist, Region 17

Working with children and youth brings many rewards as they learn new skills, begin to express themselves creatively, learn to take respon-
sibility for their own behavior, and develop socially. These experiences can also be the source of many frustrations, and what we think of as “misbehavior” can often feel like a primary source of that frustration. Understanding behavior, thinking about our automatic responses to misbehavior, and using effective strategies to change children’s behavior can make all the difference for caregivers and children.

Observing and Understanding Behavior
In her book, Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline (2000), Becky Bailey talks about addressing misbehavior with loving guidance. Teaching children how to behave not only helps to reduce misbehavior but also prevents the likelihood of misbehavior being repeated and becoming a habit. Conflict is part of life, and mistakes offer opportunities to learn. Through misbehavior, children learn what is safe and not safe as well as how to communicate to get their needs met. They also learn responsi-
bility, self-awareness and self-discipline.

There are many factors that influence behavior. While we have limited opportunity to influence most of these factors, we can help children learn protective skills and learn a different set of expectations.

- **Family Factors:** These may include depression, substance abuse, aggression, marital conflict, ineffective parenting skills, poverty and other stressors. Children who live in unstable conditions may not trust adults to meet their basic needs, so caregivers can best help children by intentionally developing positive, trusting relationships with the children in their care.

- **Cultural Differences:** Children with a cultural background different from many of their classmates may have difficulty understanding expectations or routines. English may be their second language.

- **Early Experiences:** Some young children have already experienced trauma, poor health, neglect, delays in development, loss of a care-
giver, or other challenging life events.

- **Biological Challenges:** A child may experience an illness, have poor communication or social skills, experience sensory issues, be hungry, or struggle with other similar challenges.

In addition, you might consider what expectations the adult care providers in your program have for the children in their care. Consider whether the expectations are developmentally appropriate, the adult is oriented to controlling or to teaching, and whether adults are able to redirect behavior in a positive manner.

Behavior is an attempt to communicate. If challenging behavior has become a habit for a child, then it is meeting a need for the child. Your challenge is to determine what need the misbehavior satisfies in order to help the child meet this need in a more appropriate way. Ask some questions:

- **Does the child have an unmet need?** For example, is the child hungry, cold or scared? Basic needs such as these have to be met in

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Does the child lack the skill? Could a child be “acting up” to get out of a game because of poor gross motor skills? In an attempt to interact with peers, might a child be hitting others because they don’t know other ways to interact socially? Help the child develop their skills and/or make adaptations to expectations or the environment in order to help them be and feel successful.

Is there a lack of fit? Does the child have difficulty following the routines or schedule of your program? Consider that the child may need additional support, alternate activities or breaks to be more successful.

Using Effective Strategies

Asking yourself questions like these will help you develop your observation skills so you can begin to identify specific behaviors and potentially discover the meaning behind a behavior. In addition to learning to be a careful observer, working on positive redirection is also helpful. Think about negative statements you may use on a regular basis, such as “no,” “get off of the fence,” “no running,” “stop bouncing that ball inside,” or “no hitting.” While these statements may momentarily stop a particular behavior, they do not help the child understand what you would like them to do. Try replacing these kinds of statements with positive, respectful ones that tell the child exactly what you want, such as “feet on the ground,” “you may climb on the climbing structure,” “walk inside, please,” or “please keep your hands to yourself.”

Another strategy to increase positive behavior is to offer choices to children even when, to an adult, there may seem to be no choices. For example, you might offer to a child, “you can do it yourself, or I will help you,” “show me a different way to use the LEGO®s,” or “you may choose another activity.” This helps the child learn what is expected and that they have some control over their activities based on their behavior.

Finally, be careful not to personalize behavior. Children are not acting this way just to get to you. They need help, and you are in a position to provide that help. Take a deep breath, learn to appreciate who the child is, separate the behavior from the child, and teach each child to be the person he or she has the potential to be!

A Learning Example

Four-year-old Kyle was identified as challenging. During one observation, Kyle was reprimanded and sent to “time out” for climbing an eight-foot fence on the playground. Because she had not talked with him, the teacher did not recognize that Kyle was trying to get a cocoon to surprise his teacher. Once she had a discussion with him, she was able to tell him that climbing the fence is not safe and that he should ask for help to get a closer look. They then did a role-play pretending Kyle had just spotted the cocoon and practiced getting the teacher’s attention.

Through continued observations, work in the classroom, and meetings with Kyle’s parents, it became apparent that the basis of Kyle’s misbehavior stemmed from his curiosity paired with impulsivity and high activity. Kyle is strongly encouraged to explore his environment at home, with few restrictions. He had not yet been taught boundaries at school. To address these challenges, the teacher began connecting with Kyle better. He learned to respond to eye contact to assist him in monitoring his own behavior, and he loved receiving “thumbs up” when he was doing what was expected. Kyle also needed some specific directions to guide his behavior, “Kyle, feet on the floor” was repeated frequently! Kyle’s teacher also redirected him to the climbing structures on the playground reminding him that they are the only places to climb at school.

Self-Care for Providers

By Nikeya Cole and Swanda Warren-Hooks, Technical Assistance Associates

In this issue of FOCUS, Elyse Cepull and Kristina Ketcham suggest in “Promoting Social and Emotional Development in the Infant and Toddler Classroom” that one strategy to enrich the social-emotional environment for children is for providers to take good care of themselves. As child care providers, you spend a great deal of time caring for children’s emotional and physical needs, which can be taxing, no matter how much you may enjoy your work. Consider whether you are taking care of yourself in the same manner. Are you getting the proper amount of rest, eating nutritious meals, engaging in physical activity outside of work and attending to your emotional needs?

While finding extra time in our fast-paced lives may be a challenge, self-care is absolutely necessary for both your personal and professional development. Finding time to nourish your emotional and physical well-being includes a daily routine that allows for adequate rest, healthy food, body care and physical movement. In order to balance your work life with time spent on your own well-being, consider what will make you happy. Is it time spent with family and friends, daily meditation or contemplation, a personal hobby, or some other activity that brings you into balance?

The following list of ideas may help you create that work-life balance:

• **Engage in physical movement:** Take a walk with a pet or a friend, ride a bike, dance, exercise at a gym or at home, stretch

• **Treat yourself to relaxing activities:** Soak in a hot bath, listen to music you like, write in a journal, read a book or magazine, take a nap

• **Consider yourself and your future:** Make a list of short- and long-term goals, affirm yourself daily, acknowledge accomplishments of which you are proud
Professional Development to Promote Behavior Management

Are you interested in improving your behavior management strategies? Check out the classes and workshops listed below.

Community College Coursework:
EDU 144 and 145, Child Development I and II, offer a solid foundation for first understanding what to expect from children at each stage of their development. Following these courses, EDU 146, Child Guidance, helps professionals learn "how to prevent problem behaviors, teach appropriate and acceptable behaviors, negotiate, set limits and recognize at-risk behaviors."

Additionally, EDU 154, Social/Emotional/Behavioral Development, supports professionals seeking a deeper understanding of behavior. By semester's end, students should be able to "identify factors influencing emotional/social development, utilizing screening measures, and designing positive behavioral supports."

The course descriptions above were taken from the Durham Technical Community College web site. Durham Tech [http://durhamtech.edu/] offers these courses in various formats, and Wake Technical Community College [http://www.waketech.edu/] offers most of them. All of these courses are available online through Stanly Community College [http://www.stanly.edu/], as well. Please see each college's course listings, registration information, prerequisites and policies for specific details on how to sign up.

Training Calendar:
Always available at [http://www.childcareservices.org] you will find a link to the Regional Training Calendar and workshop registration information. The Regional Training Calendar offers low-cost training opportunities for early education and school-age professionals in Alamance, Caswell, Durham, Franklin, Granville, Orange, Person, Vance and Wake counties. Credits for these workshops are approved by the Division of Child Development and can be applied toward state training requirements. This calendar is updated quarterly and many workshops repeat from quarter to quarter. Recent workshops in the Durham, Orange and Wake County areas that target behavior management included the following:

**Behavioral Intervention Strategies: You want me to try what?**
This workshop focuses on helping participants develop new responses to challenging behaviors using six key intervention strategies.

**Partnering with Families to Address Challenging Behaviors: We are all in this together!**
This session focuses on developing strategies and skills to make these conversations more productive for everyone—especially the child! Participants will learn how to set the stage for and successfully conduct these difficult conversations with parents.

**Developmentally Appropriate Behavior: But, I’m supposed to act like this!**
This session focuses on understanding when children can be expected to acquire certain social-emotional skills and guides participants toward understanding, respecting and responding to developmentally appropriate behaviors.

Resources for Military Families

If you work with the children of deployed military parents, these resources may help you see their behavior through their own unique experience. Resources designated for parents may be helpful to have on hand for you or your military families.

**Sesame Workshop:** [www.sesameworkshop.org]
From the main page of this site, click "Initiatives." The third link in the "Emotional Well-Being" section of this page is all for military families and offers information on weathering the transitions of deployment, homecoming and other family life changes resulting from military service.

**Zero to Three:** [www.zerotothree.org]
In addition to offering information about every aspect of children's development and needs during the infant and toddler years, this site also presents specific assistance for military families. From the main page, click on "Professionals," then choose "Military Families" from the menu on the left. You will find fact sheets, children's activities and numerous other items of use to caregivers of children with family members serving in the armed forces.
**Book Review: Beyond Behavior Management: The Six Life Skills Children Need to Thrive in Today's World, by Jenna Bilmes**

By Sarah Edgecombe, Social Work Intern

Jenna Bilmes, in her book “Beyond Behavior Management,” brings up a striking question: If we, as teachers, were teaching a child how to read and she wasn’t getting it, would we put her in timeout until she figured it out? If not, then why does this kind of response become our strategy when children do not understand social skills?

Bilmes reminds us that it is our responsibility as early childhood educators to thoughtfully and intentionally teach children social and emotional skills. This book is a guide from one with experience—Bilmes has taught toddlers and preschoolers, directed a nonprofit child care center and served as a mental health specialist for child care programs and schools. She acknowledges that the book is not comprehensive, but it is a place to start for those who work with young children and want to improve the ways we communicate with children.

Bilmes writes that children need to be taught how to be in relationship with each other (attachment and affiliation), manage their feelings and behaviors (self-regulation), stick with a task until it is completed (initiative), find solutions to problems by themselves or with other children (problem-solving and conflict resolution), and see their own gifts and those of others (respect). When children have these social skills, the classroom runs smoothly and children are excited about learning.

With all the information this book offers, readers can choose to read the whole book or select a specific chapter to focus on without losing the larger context of the information. Within each chapter, the author gives tips on how to set up the classroom rituals, routines and environment to support growth in these social and emotional areas. She also includes scripts to guide adults in appropriate responses to a number of realistic challenges. The author uses familiar situations, and I think teachers will recognize children from the book as very similar to those in their own classrooms.

Beyond Behavior Management is currently available from its publisher, Red Leaf Press, for $24.95. Visit http://www.redleafpress.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=676 to read a sample chapter, learn more about the author’s experience working with children, order the book or explore the publisher’s other resources for early childhood professionals.

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**The 2010-11 T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Corps is ready to get things done for Triangle area child care…**

Are you looking for additional support to provide release time for your teachers? Could you use assistance developing literacy and nutrition resources for your center?

**Benefits of hosting an AmeriCorps T.E.A.C.H.* member:**

* Additional person on site full-time at least 32 hrs/week for 10 months
* Enhanced teacher to child ratios
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**Eligibility:**

To have a T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Corps member on-site, a child care center must be a non profit, 3-, 4-, or 5-star program that has teachers on T.E.A.C.H. scholarship and will have teachers enrolled in courses in the upcoming Fall semester.

Applications will be available in April! For more information and/or an application please contact: Kelly Eppley or Allie Davis at Child Care Services Association, at 919-403-6950 or americorps@childcareservices.org.

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**www.childcareservices.org**