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Professional Development: Social Skills and Young Children

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Social Skills and Young Children

Working with teachers to develop social competence in the classroom

What do we mean when we talk about “social competence”? We’re actually referring to an array of abilities, behaviors, and responses directed toward other people that serve to build positive human relationships. There are many good reasons for emphasizing the development of social competence during the early childhood years:

- Preschool teachers identify disruptive behavior as the biggest challenge they face in managing their classrooms
- Social competence is a universal concern of parents and families. In an international survey of parents of young children from 15 different countries, the top three priorities for early learning were social skills with peers, language skills, and self-sufficiency skills.
- Preschool is prime-time for language development, and because language is a social instrument, gains in one area often are related to gains in the other.
- Young children in the United States are in the company of groups of peers earlier, for longer hours, and in a wider variety of social contexts than young children in previous times. Therefore, their daily environments demand higher levels of social competence.
- Acceptance by peers is not only correlated with positive attitudes toward school, but it is also a powerful predictor of social adjustment throughout life.

We often assume that social competence is limited to socio-emotional development. However, it’s important to note that this is not the case. Social competence also involves cognitive processes. If a child is engaged in sociodramatic play and encounters resistance from the other players (“No! We’re the cops. You can’t get away, we gotta arrest you.”), feelings are not enough to keep the play going. The players will have to “think on their feet,” negotiate, and arrive at a solution.

In addition, socially competent behavior has to consider individuals on both sides of the interaction. For example, when 4-year-old Ben fell and scraped his knee, his Head Start classmate Tina did what she had seen the teacher do. She wet a paper towel and placed it on Ben’s knee. The problem arose when Tina began to follow Ben around and press more firmly until he yelled, “Stop it, Tina! You’re hurting me.” Tina needed help in correctly interpreting her classmate’s reaction. Her teacher recognized this and, in future situations, drew Tina’s attention to classmates’ responses with comments such as, “Look at Katya’s face. Do you think she likes what you are doing?” With time and practice, Tina became more socially competent because she paid attention to body language and

facial expressions.

Tina's situation also illustrates how teachers can support children's social competence. The place to start is an emotionally safe early childhood setting in which a warm, caring teacher thoughtfully observes and interprets children's ideas and feelings. Young children's social competence grows and develops when adults support them in social reasoning, as they think about other human beings, try out different strategies, arrive at socially acceptable decisions, evaluate outcomes, and try again.

Assessing Social Competence

Basically, there are four sources for assessing social competence:

The teacher or clinician might use observations in a variety of environments (in various learning centers in the classroom, on the playground, during a field trip) or set up a situation that requires social interaction, such as a group project, a problem-solving task, or a small group discussion of vignettes that highlight social issues. Brief anecdotal notes about important incidents or milestones can also be helpful. The notes can be as simple as: "C. bit R. today. Talked with C., told him I cannot let you bite other children." Or "V. has been here 2 wks., and found a friend in T. this week. Sat together at snack. V. was upset when T. was absent."

The child can supply information in a self-reporting fashion, such as sorting pictures that depict sadness, helpfulness, or aggression into "a lot like me" or "a little like me." Simple surveys can be read aloud by the teacher or aide: "This is how I feel about playing at recess, or sharing a toy, or coming to school, etc.," while the children mark their responses.

The child's peers are another source of information, assuming that the children know one another well and the group is stable. Small photographs of each child in the class can be used to respond to questions such as, "This person helps me at school" or "This person is fun to play with at recess." Do not use negatively phrased items, as this can backfire into teasing or bullying. It is more than sufficient to know that one or more children did not receive any peer nominations. Teachers can use this confidential piece of information to plan appropriate interventions, such as assigning the child with no nominations to work on a task with a partner that he or she selects. Another technique is to ask children to complete a short checklist, such as "How we worked in our group today" and then read the options, such as "we shared materials" or "we finished our project," and work with them to circle either *yes* or *no*.

Parents or guardians can also be surveyed using a rating scale with a series of statements. Your rating scale might include, "My child: (1) follows directions, (2) shows affection, (3) is courteous, (4) likes school, (5) enjoys playing with other children, (6) asks for help when needed," and so forth. The rating scale for each item might consist of *Usually*, *Sometimes*, and *Rarely*.

Standardized instruments are another way of assessing social competence, although these often are rather time-consuming, expensive, or may need to be administered by a licensed psychologist.

Supporting Social Competence

Here are some suggestions for ways teachers can support children's social competence:

Encourage teachers to recognize differences in interaction styles and adapt the communication environment accordingly. For example, children who are shy, hyperactive, or have disabilities that interfere with communication need to find ways to interact effectively with peers. A shy child might warm to interacting with a puppet as an intermediary while the hyperactive child might persist with peer interaction longer during block play. Find opportunities to build on children's shared enthusiasms—a classroom pet, such as a guinea pig or rabbit, can represent a common ground for social interaction as the child who is shy is reinforced for calm, gentle ways; the child with hyperactivity practices self-regulation to avoid frightening the animal; and children with sensory impairments use words, gestures, or adaptive technology to share their enthusiasm for the experience.

Make a few truly significant school rules about social interactions. When Vivian Paley set a rule that became the title of her book, "You can't say you can't play," it altered the social structure of her kindergarten. Insisting that all children are respected members of the school community is a sound basis for developing social competence. Another non-negotiable rule is that no one is permitted to physically or verbally hurt anyone else. If every child feels warmly accepted, has a sense of belonging, and has his or her voice heard, this goes a long way in diminishing aggressive behavior and furthering social competence.

Know when to intervene. If a child is standing on the sidelines and shows all the signs of yearning to participate, teachers can model for children how to join in the play. Numerous studies have shown that subtly joining is the most effective strategy, and disrupting play is the least effective way of gaining access to groups. For instance, if the theme is a restaurant, the teacher could accompany the child who wants to join in with, "Looks like you have another customer here who wants to order some food." Teachers will want to use these prompts carefully, provide feedback, and then step aside so that the child grows in independence.

Act as a coach for social skills. Rather than creating a classroom theme on friendship, encourage teachers to design a theme that provides opportunities for them to model the social skills that will earn children acceptance from their peers. The single most common source of conflict in an early childhood classroom is a possession dispute. Teachers can simulate a situation where there is an argument over a toy, take a child aside and whisper instructions on how to act, and then discuss the feelings with a small group. Avoid typecasting and encourage children to "try on" less familiar roles, such as a quiet child asserting himself or a child susceptible to angry outbursts proposing a nonviolent solution. Children's books that deal candidly with powerful emotions, such as Rosemary

Wells' *Timothy Goes to School*, are another rich resource for discussions about social competence.

Learning to work and play well with others truly is a lifelong goal with a foundation in the early childhood years. Effective early childhood educators recognize that supporting children's social competence and teaching them academic skills are compatible rather than competing goals; each grows and benefits from advances in the other. Together, social competence and academic skills are the essence of learning in the early childhood years.

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