

Look How Far We Have Come

Assessing children's social and emotional development throughout the school year
by Barbara Burrington with Amanda Terreri and Jenn Sliwowski

By the end of the school year, most early childhood classrooms showcase children's academic achievements, projects, written work, and art pieces. But teachers have to work extra hard to convey how their students have matured socially and emotionally.

As educators of young children, we know how important children's social and emotional development is, not only in terms of developing empathy, compassion, friendships, confidence and the like, but also as an essential component of cognitive growth. As children gain skills in the social/emotional domain, they build language and problem-solving skills, as well as creative-thinking, memory, and abstract-thinking skills. These skills are important components of cognitive development in areas like reading, writing, and math.

So, given that skill in the social/emotional domains is more difficult to see, and consequently more difficult to discuss with parents, how do we make progress in these areas visible for families, staff, and the children themselves? How can we refocus our social and emotional lenses and become accountable for communicating our students' development in empathy, friendship, social rules, knowledge, confidence, compassion, and a sense of fulfillment about learning throughout the school year? There are, in fact, many things that teachers can do to nurture these pro-social behaviors and make them visible.

Begin at the Beginning

As you think ahead to creating next year's program, there are many "beginning of the year" strategies you can plan for now to set the stage for assessing children's progress in social/emotional areas, and for how you can share that progress with parents.

In our preschool classroom, we begin the year with visits to each child's home so he may meet his new teachers in a familiar place. This also offers families the same safe context for sharing with us how they see their child, and what they hope for their child at school. We can discuss what happens at school and address particular questions. There we can informally interview parents as well, and gain new insights into how they view their child. Dialogue truly is at the heart of communicating with parents about children's social and emotional growth—both spoken and written dialogue. Making time to talk is essential, as is creating a written narrative to accompany these assessments.

Arrange an Open House

At the beginning of the year we also offer an open house the week before school begins. We began this practice years ago, since we are always at school during the days leading up to school, and we realized that children and families grew increasingly anxious at that time. Knowing where your lunchbox goes and where your cubby is can be tremendous confidence boosters to young children. Having a sense of familiarity helps children build a sense of belonging as well, and belonging is critical to young children's emotional well-being. These first, semi-formal encounters give us important information about each child that will serve as a beginning point for our ongoing observations of how they grow and change.

Host Family Meetings

Throughout the school year, we host monthly family meetings where parents and teachers can talk about social goals and their children's growth in these areas. These group discussions are really helpful for parents, as they begin to develop a context for thinking about their child in relationship to other people and in the context of school. We send the minutes home to all the families so everyone can read what was said. (Remember, an important aspect of effective dialogue is the ongoing nature of it.)

Communicate Clear Expectations

One way to support a positive social environment in the classroom is to offer children clear expectations and rules. When we measure how children are growing and developing in relationship to meaningful and fairly applied expectations, we have much clearer benchmarks for success. These rules can also serve as part of a checklist on written school evaluations, or as a framework for written evaluative narratives. They can be the lenses that we look through when we record anecdotes for children's portfolios, so we are sure to include more than just "work" samples.

All Around the Classroom

You can include documentation of children's social/emotional progress (as well as progress in other areas of development), in each area of the classroom. Be sure to point them out and share them with families each time they visit:

Classroom Entry Wall Board

Display photographs of each child. 8 x10 inch images arranged together make a bold statement to the children that they belong here—that this is their room. Begin the year with a questionnaire for parents asking them what they feel are the adjectives that best describe their child. Display those words in large printed text next to the photos, announcing to all who enter, "We are here and this is who we are!"

Saying Hello

If the door to the classroom is visible from all other areas of the classroom, teachers are able to greet each child individually when they enter. They are clearly modeling for children that everyone has the right to be greeted. This is the beginning of developing a sense of reciprocity in relationship to others.

Meeting Area

The area of the classroom where the entire class comes together for group time may be the most critical area of the classroom in terms of the social atmosphere. Since this is the area where teachers spend much time promoting social/emotional skills, it's very important that there be adequate space to comfortably accommodate all the children at once. This is the area where class rules are clearly posted, and daily schedules, morning messages, and job charts are displayed so children know what to expect and what is expected of them.

Literacy Area

Maintaining a kind of "history of learning" that has occurred throughout the classroom is an excellent way to convey how children have worked independently and cooperatively over the course of the year; be it with certain materials or in particular domains of learning. For example, in the literacy area, maintaining a notebook that is arranged chronologically and divided into sections for various types of writing can show how children's print and content has developed over time.

Art Area

Portfolios are a great way to store and save children's work throughout the school year. Use legal-size single pocket accordion folders, or three ring binders with plastic page sleeves to store each child's favorite pieces of artwork. Portfolios may also be used for storing writing samples, handmade books, and extra photographs of the child at school. Attach a picture of the child and his name on the front of the binder or folder, then store in a nearby place (in a basket or on a low shelf). Our children enjoy taking out their portfolios and looking through them. They love to share them with their friends and classmates, reviewing and enjoying their achievements. Be sure to include the social context in

the notes you include in each child's portfolio. Did they work collaboratively? In a small or large group? Did they cooperate with others? Share materials? Co-author a text? Solve conflicts with others to reach their goal?

Block Area

Hanging documentation (photos and writing) in the block area, as well as in each area of the room will serve as a reminder and an inspiration to the children. It will also provide parents and teachers with information about the children in that specific area. All the past documentation can be put on display at end of the year gatherings.

As the year progresses, teachers should increasingly solicit input from children in planning routines and schedules. They can all sign their name attesting to their participation and shared understanding. With children's input, rewrite them to reflect their emerging competence as writers as well. One example of a child-generated sign in our classroom reads, "If someone has hurt feelings, you could give them a hug or say 'I love you.'" Other important rules left from a previous group of children announce, "You need to take good care of people and be kind to all the other preschoolers" and "You need to be someone who is nice and never hurts people and if someone says, 'Can you help me?' then you say, 'Yes!'"

Displaying children's work (and images of the children at work) in the various learning areas of the classroom promotes an image of the competent child, and conveys to parents the growing independence that characterizes young children's membership in the classroom community. Documentation allows us to see how far children have come by reflecting on how engaged they are in the process of learning. Each learning center can indicate how children are progressing as individual and group learners. In addition, documentation reinforces learning as an ongoing growth process and not as an ultimate end.

box: Using Tech to Mark Growth

Technology can be used very effectively in the classroom to share and display children's growth and development. Here are some ideas:

Take and display photographs. Photos are a good accompaniment to written records of children's development. Take photographs of children's work, participation in group events, and attempts at problem solving. Print these photos and arrange them on classroom display boards, in classroom photo albums, and in children's individual portfolios. Include the date and a typed anecdote.

Experiment with digital images. Most digital cameras and digital video cameras provide programs that make organizing, editing, and presenting photos and movies easy. Slideshows and movies are great, and easy ways to communicate and exhibit children's work. Gather children together to reflect on their own learning, and then invite parents and community members to reflect on images of the year as a whole, or on the process of particular projects.

Create classroom web pages. These are convenient ways to share images, stories, and children's work with parents outside of school. Many email providers offer free Web page templates to subscribers.

Use email. Develop a list serve with all parents' email addresses on it. Send regular emails that offer updates on developmental and curriculum benchmarks.

Celebrate Children's Growth

In our experience, the most widely attended school events are celebratory. Families expect to come together for special events. They appreciate and look forward to opportunities to connect with the school community in ways that are positive and emphasize success. We plan a lot of celebrations at our school. From the beginning of the year to the end, joy filled gatherings are worth every ounce of effort they take. We encourage children to be the planners and hosts alongside the teacher. At these gatherings, children convey how significant their own growth and development is to their families. This self-expression is at the heart of all learning.

Here are some ways to involve families in celebrating children's social/emotional growth throughout the year:

Have an Art Opening. Display children's work and prepare a brief talk offering parents insight into the many ways that working with representational media like paint, clay, wood, etc., supports children working together with others.

Prepare a Graduation Party. We create a ceremony with reflections about each child and focus on who they have become.

Hold a "Moving On" Celebration. When our children are preparing to leave preschool to attend kindergarten, we invite back children who are now in kindergarten and have them share, from their point of view, what kindergarten is like. We plan an activity in advance that they have done at school that they can facilitate with the graduating preschoolers. (Parents especially like this! Often as teachers we are very attentive to children's anxiety about moving on and transitioning to new classrooms and schools, but parents need reassurance as well. It's often the changes that are occurring within their children that are the most mysterious and anxiety-producing for them.)

Invite parents to their child's birthday celebration. Plan it at lunchtime or the time of day they can be there. Have them share birth or adoption stories. This really makes children feel special, and helps everyone see how far children have come.

Plan a Family Reading Time. Have a plan in place where parents can sign up to come in and read a favorite book or two to the entire class. Times like this offer parents an opportunity to see their child function in the context of the classroom. It helps them learn more about their child's role as a member of the group.

Have a dance party! Over the years we have created different CD mixes based on who the children are. What songs do they like to move to? What are their best naptime songs? What songs do they listen to in the car with their parents? Make a CD for each family.

Have a Preschool or Kindergarten Leaders Celebration. As children near the end of the school year, we can begin to help them feel empowered as they move toward their transition to the next grade level. Publicly acknowledge how children have moved from preschooler to preschool leader (if they will continue on in a preschool program) or kindergarten leader. If children will be moving on to a new program or classroom, have them prepare and present something for the incoming children. This goes a long way toward building children's confidence about leaving.

The Home-School Connection

Here are some suggestions you can offer parents to help them recognize their child's growth and development, as well as help them prepare for the transition to a new classroom or program:

Create Independent Space. Create a space at home where your child can work independently. Collect a variety of materials to inspire your child as they become more capable of making representations of things. Some good things to have are ballpoint pens, pencils, thin markers, notepads, and found objects, such as bottle caps, stones, and recycled paper.

Foster Accountability. Give children time and space for personal responsibility. This might include letting them pick out their own clothes and dress themselves, or pack their own lunch from food options you provide.

Encourage Helping Roles. Even the youngest family members can contribute to the group. Have children help choose the dinner menu and prepare the table. You can share the responsibility of keeping house by creating a "shine time" where the whole family makes the house sparkle.

Showcase Artwork. Use an empty wall or clothesline to display children's art over time. Begin at one end and add pieces as the year progresses.

Make a Memory Book. Create a scrapbook or memory box with photos, drawings and your child's favorite memories. Ask your child questions about how he sees himself now, and what he thinks he will be like in the future (after kindergarten or first grade). Periodically include samples of your child's drawings and non-conventional print and writing samples.

Visit the New School. If your child will be leaving the program he is in now, visit your child's new school to play on the playground or walk through the halls. Helping your child become comfortable with his new space will ease the transition.

Tell Transition Stories. Tell stories about your own childhood experiences in school, or read books to your child about characters transitioning to kindergarten or first grade. (See resource box for suggestions.)

Talk About Keeping in Touch. Assure your child that a new school will be a chance to make new friends, but that he will also have opportunities to keep in touch with old friends. You can make playdates, send letters, and visit favorite former teachers.

Interview older children. Make time to get together with friends or neighbors who have children slightly older than your child, so they can talk about what kindergarten or first grade is like, and what happens there.

Share Family Rules. Involve your child in the making of family rules. Setting clear limits for children is how they learn to manage moments when they have no control, or simply don't know what is safe or healthy. Rules can be thought of as a social and emotional gift that supports mental health. Post family rules where the entire family can see them and refer to them when needed—either when you catch your child doing the right thing, or when you are reminding him of his personal responsibility.

Create a Calendar. Count down the days until the first day of school using a traditional calendar. Or create a system for marking time that best suits your child. Fill a jar with a stone for each day until the transition, then have your child remove one a day to mark the passing of time. Or do the opposite to measure the days until school ends (or until summer camp begins).

Resources

Books For Children

Its Hard To Be 5: Learning How To Work My Control Panel by Jamie Lee Curtis
(Joanna Cotler Books, 2004; \$13.59)

The Night Before Kindergarten by Natasha Wing (Penguin Group, 2001; \$3.99)

Look out Kindergarten, Here I Come! by Nancy L. Carlson (Puffin, 2001; \$6.99)

Will I Have a Friend? by Miriam Cohen (Aladdin, 1989; \$5.99)

I Am Absolutely Too Small for School by Lauren Child (Candlewick, 2004; \$16.99)

The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn (Child and Family Press, 1993; \$16.95)

David Goes to School by David Shannon (Blue Sky Press, 1995; \$15.95)

Websites

www.ecdgroup.com

www.naeyc.org

www.bornlearning.org

www.responsiveclassrooms.org

www.kidsource.com/education/back2school

http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/ect/successful_transitions.htm

Books for Teachers

Advisories by the children, teachers and parents of the "Diana" preschool in Reggio Emilia, Italy.
(Reggio Children, 2002; \$16.00)

Dozens of Effective Classroom Strategies and Activities to Teach Cooperation and Communication, Manners and Respect, Positive Behavior & More by Nancy Leber (Scholastic, 2002; price TK)

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