



Supporting Young Children's Friendships

by Sue Gainsley

In the fall of 2012, the HighScope Preschool Curriculum was identified as a model program by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in its 2013 *CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (see the related sidebar on p. 7). CASEL selected programs that successfully promote students' self-control, relationship building, and problem solving, among other social and emotional skills. The relevance of this to general school success cannot be overlooked. Research shows that children's social and emotional skills impact their overall academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Social success predisposes children to assume they will experience academic success as well.

A great deal of "academic" learning takes place through social interactions, so being able to communicate easily and effectively with others is a primary channel for acquiring knowledge and skills. This not only applies to what children learn from adults, but also to what they learn from peers. Further, children who are confident about their interpersonal relationships also have the emotional security to take on the risks and challenges of learning other subject matter. Put another way, social success predisposes them to assume they will experience academic success as well. And in its report, *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*, the

National Research Council (2012) connects social and emotional skills to a better educated and prepared workforce. Early childhood teachers recognize the tremendous opportunities for children's social and emotional growth during the preschool years.

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, higher-quality child care is generally linked to a greater ability in children to develop more competent peer relationships (Belsky, 2002; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2006). The adults in early childhood programs have the important role of structuring the learning environment and daily routine, and modeling interaction strategies that promote positive interactions among children.

Structuring the Learning Environment

Setting up the learning environment to support developing relationships is a concrete strategy that is relatively easy to implement. Room arrangement has

an impact on the social opportunities for children (see the sidebar on p. 19). Along with room arrangement, the type and number/amount of materials available to children also has an impact on social connections. Stock each toy bin on the shelf with enough materials for multiple users, and have multiple sets of individual toys (e.g., large wooden trucks, puzzles, computer keyboards). Research shows that children who have access to plentiful materials that they can find and put away themselves have more productive play and fewer social conflicts (Epstein, 2012). Include equipment and materials that lend themselves to collaboration, for example, heavy boards that require two or more children to carry, or large wheeled toys that invite children to play different roles such as driver and passenger(s).

In response to gender biases, evaluate your materials to make sure that they do not perpetuate social stereotypes. Media-influenced toys and materials are typically associated with stereotyped play and hinder opportunities for interactions and relationships between boys and girls. Choose books that depict men and women in nontraditional roles (e.g., a woman construction worker, a man doing housework), and encourage children to play in all areas of the classroom

When stocking your classroom with multiple sets of materials, be sure to include the tools that children use in the outdoor learning environment as well, such as pails and shovels for the sandbox.



(e.g., boys in the house area, girls in the woodworking area). A well-planned play space and an abundance of stimulating materials set the stage for children's collaborative play.

Make sure your classroom's books, toys, and materials don't perpetuate social stereotypes.

Scheduling the Daily Routine

The program schedule can also help to facilitate interactions and friendships among children. Children often play together at work (free play/choice) time, but some children typically play alone. By including small- and large-group time every day, these children have the opportunity to safely play alongside or with their peers. Sitting side by side at small-group time, they may share materials or exchange ideas. At large-group time, they may have the pleasure of seeing others imitate their ideas, and this may embolden them to attempt sharing their ideas during self-initiated play times.

Also, look for emerging friendships, and support them by putting children who enjoy playing together in the same small group for planning and recall, and for snack or meals. Comment when children make plans to play together (e.g., "So, you and Rachel are going to collect all the big blocks and build a tower?") or when they describe (recall



Labeling children's emotions — being happy to see a friend — helps children develop emotional awareness.

what they did (e.g., "The three of you made a long track and raced your cars. Later, Jonah came over and raced his truck down the ramp").

Facilitating Social and Emotional Awareness

Play is used by many animals as a way to learn and practice social interactions in a nonthreatening way. As they play, children, too, practice the social conventions necessary to communicate interest and approachability to others. During play, children practice communicating their needs and intentions (e.g., needing help, wanting to play) in appro-

priate ways as well as interpreting the social cues and intentions of others. Research suggests that children's ability to regulate their emotions and control aggressive behavior is linked to peer acceptance (Manz & McWayne, 2004). Adults play an important role in helping children obtain the social skills necessary for successful peer interactions. Adults become the initial interpreters of children's feelings and intentions during play, and as such must dedicate themselves to playing *with* children.

There are several strategies adults can use in interpreting emotional and social cues that will support the development of children's friendships. To help children develop emotional awareness, adults can label children's own emotions as well as the emotions of other children and adults. Along with identifying feelings, adults can interpret social and emotional cues in both the individual child's and others' body language and facial expressions (e.g., looking down, pursing lips, moving over to make room at the table). Adults can also draw children's attention to positive or negative emotions (e.g., saying "You're so excited that grandma is picking you up today!" or "You feel frustrated when you have trouble with the scissors"). Adults should be quite explicit as they interpret gestures for children. For example, to help a child recognize a friendly overture, describe exactly what you see (e.g., "When you sat down next to Toby, he pushed the cars toward you so you could get some too. He's showing you he wants you to play too"). Adults can also help children acquire emotional knowledge as they read stories together. Look for opportunities to talk about the characters' behaviors and possible emotions. Ask children what a character might be thinking, wanting, or feeling. Then ask children how they know.

Cooperative play skills (e.g., sharing, turn taking, collaborating in pretend play, and solving social conflicts) and language and communication skills (e.g., talking to peers, asking questions and responding to requests, and inviting others to play) have also been asso-

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Strategies for Structuring the Learning Environment

- Include areas for large-group gatherings as well as smaller nooks for more personal connections.
- Place blankets over tables, large cardboard boxes and in corners; add pillows, and create cozy spaces for children.
- Be mindful of the size of classroom areas (e.g., house area, toy area). When areas are too small, children are often crowded and limited in their choices. This sets up an environment of competition for space and materials rather than one of collaboration.
- Move furniture to increase space in a popular classroom area, if not permanently, at least for work time.

Teachers can look for emerging friendships and support them by putting children who enjoy playing together in the same groups for planning and recall times.

ciated with peer acceptance (Manz & McWayne, 2004). Again, adults play an active role in helping children learn these skills by facilitating interactions, modeling social language and actions, coaching children as they practice the interactions themselves, and supporting the relationships children build with one another. Actively pointing out when children are playing together or helping one another also strengthens children's awareness of their positive interactions with others (e.g., "You saw that George needed help carrying the milk, so you took one of the pitchers for him" and "You asked Marta for a turn, and she said she was almost finished. Now she knows you are waiting"). Be careful not to "praise" children for getting along, and don't put the emphasis on your pleasure (e.g., don't say "It makes me happy to see you playing together so nicely"). Rather, acknowledge the children's social awareness and the satisfaction they receive from helping and collaborating with one another.

By modeling social language and actions, adults help children learn and develop their own cooperative play skills.

Facilitating Children's Interactions

Along with their role as interpreter, adults can also be facilitators of children's interactions. For example, adults can draw children's attention to what other children are doing with materials, or play simultaneously with two children and slowly help them integrate their play into one scenario or collaboration (e.g., an adult might encourage two children who are making food with play dough to try each other's dish).

Modeling social language and action is another way adults can facilitate children's social interactions. Adults can model prosocial behaviors by explicitly describing how their own words and behavior exemplify a skill. For example, an adult might comment, "It looks like you would like to play with the blocks. I will give you some of mine so we both can play" or "I'm going to ask Justin if he is finished with the red marker before I take it."

Coaching children through social interactions is a strategy that adults can use when children need additional support and practice initiating social interactions with others. When adults coach children, they help children assess the social scene (e.g., Benji and Olivia are building with the big blocks), identify the need or goal (e.g., using the big blocks, playing trains with Olivia), and

continued on page 22



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continued from page 19

decide how to approach the situation. For example, if the goal is to play trains with Olivia, the child might first have to decide how to get Olivia's attention (e.g., tap Olivia, say her name), then figure out what to say to Olivia (e.g., "I want to play trains with you" or "Do you want to play trains?"). Coaching children through social situations also includes helping them anticipate other children's responses and decide follow-up actions based on those responses (e.g., what the child will do if Olivia says "no").

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Early childhood professionals recognize the tremendous growth in social and emotional development during the preschool years. The social skills children learn in childhood impact their future social and academic success. Knowing how young children develop relationships and friendships can inform adults about how to best support this social growth. Recognizing individual children's emotional strengths and challenges helps adults choose interaction strategies that will best support each child. ■

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The social skills children learn as preschoolers impact their future success in the school years and beyond.

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