

National Center Brief

Element 5: Early Childhood Social and Emotional Learning Programs

May 2011

Element 5 is a key factor in the overall success of an SS/HS Initiative. This element focuses on the social and emotional development of children under age 8, with the aim of improving school readiness and preventing issues with violence and alcohol and other drug use from ever occurring.

This brief provides resources and ideas for strengthening early childhood programming and improving outcomes for young children and families. It stresses the importance of addressing social and emotional learning (SEL) at the early childhood level, presents ideas for assessing the quality of early childhood initiatives, and provides information on effective and evidence-based early childhood programs and practices.

Impact of Element 5

Experiences that occur in the first five years of life profoundly affect later development. Learning that occurs in these early years is rapid, spanning various domains—cognitive, linguistic, moral, social, emotional, and behavioral—all of which impact school readiness. Data show that children who attend early childhood or preschool SEL programs:

- Perform better in kindergarten and in the first and second grades
- Have higher scores on math and reading tests
- Are more likely to graduate
- Are less likely to drop out or become involved in the juvenile justice system
- Are less likely to require special education or remedial services

Children who develop a secure attachment to at least one adult are more likely to develop social and emotional skills that lay the foundation for future healthy interpersonal relationships, association with nonviolent peers, and improved academic achievement. SEL programs cultivate these relationships at an early age. Furthermore, evidence suggests that children who take part in early childhood SEL programs may have more success in life, as indicated by higher levels of graduation from 12th grade, less likelihood of being arrested, and higher early adult incomes.¹

According to the organization [Fight Crime: Invest in Kids](#), recent studies show that state-sponsored early childhood programs make a difference by setting children on a better path:

- By second grade, children who did not attend New Jersey’s two-year pre-kindergarten program were held back in school twice as often. By eighth grade, those not attending Michigan’s state program were held back 51 percent more often.
- Children who participated in Tennessee’s pre-kindergarten program had 82 percent greater early literacy and math skills gained an average of than those who were not in the program.
- In Pennsylvania, the percentage of pre-kindergarten kids with developmental delays dropped from 21 percent at the time of entry to 8 percent by the time the kids completed the program. The percentage of three-year-old children with conduct or self-control problems dropped from 22 percent to 4 percent.ⁱⁱ

Prevention efforts that promote safe and healthy schools should begin in early childhood. SEL programs foster safe environments in which children can flourish. These programs also identify and address challenging behaviors before they lead to more complicated problems that will eventually require treatment.

From a cost-benefit perspective, early childhood programs are also an investment in the future. Early childhood interventions can reduce the cost of future treatment by promoting participants’ positive development and mitigating future poor outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ By saving money, in the form of reductions in future treatment costs, these programs can more than pay for themselves.

Integration with the Other Elements

Implementation of early childhood SEL programs is vital to the success of the other elements, as these programs seek to develop social and emotional skills that are absent in a large percentage of children entering school. The National Academy of Sciences reported that 60 percent of children enter school with the cognitive skills needed to be successful, but only 40 percent have the social-emotional skills needed to succeed in kindergarten.^{iv} Children who do not develop these skills at an early age are at higher risk for developing issues with substance abuse, violence, suspension, and expulsion, and are more likely to have mental health and behavioral problems.

When factored into the prevention efforts of the other elements, early childhood SEL programs can have a great impact at all school levels. Programs that address SEL can help to identify those children at risk for all of these challenging behaviors. Early childhood mental health consultation can both address challenging behaviors and promote social and emotional health.

For example, preschool programs can be a good place to start with [substance abuse prevention](#). Identifying and intervening with young children who are at risk of future substance abuse, including those with poor social skills, aggressions, and academic difficulties, can address risk factors early.^v

In terms of [violence and bullying prevention](#), many children first observe or experience early forms of bullying behavior in child care settings. If this early bullying behavior is not addressed, patterns of violence and victimization may grow and persist, not only within child care settings but also into later childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood.^{vi} (To learn more about evidence-based anti-bullying programs that promote positive messages, visit the [Utterly Global](#) website. For general information about bullying prevention at the early childhood level, visit EDC’s [Eyes on Bullying](#) website.)

Addressing Element 5

In early childhood, the foundation for young people’s cognitive and emotional development is formed. Children’s first experiences play a key role in determining whether their brain architecture develops in ways that promote future learning, behavior, and health.^{vii} Research shows that effective early intervention strategies can improve a wide range of outcomes, from childhood through early adulthood.

Evidence-Based Practices for Early Childhood SEL Programs

The three levels of intervention—universal, selective and indicative—comprise a pyramid model that is promoted by the Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, in partnership with the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention. The interventions associated with these levels help to identify children in need of additional support, and create an environment in which all children can develop social, emotional, and behavioral skills.

When selecting evidence-based SEL programs at the early childhood level, make sure that your programming addresses the entire spectrum of prevention:

I. Universal Prevention—*programs that promote the social development of all children. For example:*

- *Actively supporting children’s engagement*
- *Embedding instruction within children’s routines*
- *Responding to children’s conversations*
- *Promoting the communicative attempts of children with language delays and disabilities*
- *Encouraging early childhood teachers to provide skill learning and development*
- *Providing high-quality, inclusive environments for learning, instruction, and support*
- *Encouraging the development of social skills and peer relationships by, for example:*
- *Implementing a curriculum that fosters all areas of child development → using developmentally and culturally appropriate and effective teaching approaches*
- *Designing safe physical environments that promote active learning and appropriate behavior → creating schedules and activities that maximize child engagement and learning*

II. Selective Prevention—programs that include targeted supports for children who are at risk of developing challenging behaviors. For example:

- *Providing systematic and focused instruction to teach children discrete social-emotional skills, such self-regulation, expressing and understanding emotions, social problem solving, and cooperative responding*
- *Hiring an early intervention provider to guide and coach families on how to promote children’s development of social and emotional skills*

III. Indicative Prevention—programs that address children with persistent challenges that are not responsive to interventions at the universal or selective levels. For example:

- *Implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports to aid in the development of individualized interventions in the home or classroom setting*
- *Convening a team to develop and implement a behavior support plan for each child*
- *Developing hypotheses about a child’s challenging behavior to be used in the development of a behavior support plan*
- *Conducting a functional assessment to identify the factors involved in a child’s challenging behavior*
- *Developing strategies to address the triggers of challenging behavior, and strategies to ensure that challenging behavior is not reinforced or maintained*
- *Identifying and encouraging alternatives to challenging behaviors*

Many evidence-based curricula incorporate these levels of intervention for early childhood. To select the most appropriate program, you must determine the needs of your intended population and make sure that any tool you choose is age-appropriate and culturally relevant. Also, be sure that each tool is implemented with fidelity; making significant changes and adaptations compromises the tool and decreases the likelihood of achieving the anticipated outcomes.

Strategies can also be embedded throughout the day to provide carry-over and generalization of the skills children learn from these programs. Young children learn through repetition and can practice social skills throughout a preschool day—in dramatic play, when playing with blocks, at the water/sand table, during outdoor time, snack, and circle time, etc.

Two good resources for finding and choosing evidence based practices and programs (EBPs) are as follows:

- The [National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices](#) (NREPP) is a searchable website developed by SAMHSA. NREPP identifies several EBPs that may be appropriate for early childhood.
- The [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) provides links to research reports and summaries of research on early childhood education, as well as guidelines to help professionals review and become well-informed consumers of research.^{viii}

Universal Prevention and Primary Care

Universal prevention in early childhood focuses on screenings for all children in order to identify those who may be at risk for school-readiness issues. One in every three young children under age 6 is eligible for Medicaid, and those children are eligible for free routine screens. Early Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment is required, and pediatricians and primary care physicians should periodically administer developmental screenings for all Medicaid-eligible children at any routine well-child checks: at 1–2 weeks, 1 month, 2 months, 4 month, 6 months, 9 months, 12 months, 15 months, 18 months, 2 years, and then every year until the eligible child’s 21st birthday.

Physicians must screen for delays or differences in functioning, physical and cognitive development, nutrition, hearing, vision, and behavioral health. Physicians are also required to screen all toddlers for autism, using the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers. Other screening and assessment tools include the following:

- Ages & Stages Questionnaire
- Brief Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment
- Parents Evaluation of Developmental Status

Assess the Quality of Early Childhood Programming

Once an appropriate early childhood EBP has been chosen and implemented, schools can assess the quality of programming using such measures as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale—Revised or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Each looks at physical space, materials, and teacher-child interactions, and CLASS goes on to measure instructional climate and effectiveness of behavior management.

The National Institute for Early Education Research lists the following core components of quality early childhood programs:

- Teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree
- Teachers are paid competitive wages
- Children have a rich, comprehensive curriculum that covers all domains of learning, including social-emotional development
- Class size is small (≤ 20) and staff/child ratios are small (1:10)

Many states have Quality Rating and Improvement Scales, and accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) can also improve quality. The [NAEYC website](#) also provides tools for self-assessment and lists upcoming training opportunities.

Partnering to Create Effective Early Childhood Learning Environments

The success of early childhood SEL programs depends on a wide web of support that stretches beyond the classroom. For a truly comprehensive approach to social and emotional development, the community, parents, and primary care providers must play key roles in your programming efforts.

The Core Management Team

The Core Management Team should include representatives from early childhood education and elementary school. The early childhood educator can be the liaison to early childhood providers across a number of settings (e.g., state pre-K programs, community child care and nursery schools, family child care) to collaborate, share resources, improve quality of care, improve school readiness, work with families, and strengthen the work force. The elementary school representatives can work with the early childhood educator to ensure a more smooth transition from pre-K to kindergarten.

Community Partners

The majority of school-age children attend public schools, and the majority of children from birth through age 5 attend community-based or family child care. If all children are to enter school ready to learn, it is imperative that you reach out to those providers and work together. For example, you can create an early childhood council, or join an existing council, that collaborates to improve access to quality care, provide professional development for staff, and share referrals between programs. As an incentive toward working with your initiative, you can offer to provide early childhood mental health consultation to children in community setting. This can simultaneously enhance the capacity of staff in dealing with young children with challenging behaviors, and improve the children's chances of success in their programs.

Parents

Parental engagement has been linked to school readiness skills, including young children's academic performance and achievement^{ix}, their prosocial behaviors^x, and positive approaches to learning^{xi}. But while parents play a critical role as their children's first teachers, they can't do it alone. Every parent can use some helpful guidance in parenting, learning to recognize their child's temperament and personality, and understanding the importance of attachment. Here are some ideas for extending your professional development efforts beyond the early childhood classroom and engaging parents in your early childhood initiative:

- Form parent support groups
- Host a parent café
- Implement a home visiting program

- Create a parenting library
- Hold regular parent-baby classes
- Offer programs targeted to your teen parents

([The Center for Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#) offers parent training modules, tips, and other support materials on its website.)

Sustainability

Sustainability factors—such as professional development, evaluating practices and outcomes, infrastructure development, school-wide integration of the SEL framework, nurturing partnerships with families and communities, and communication with stakeholders—should be incorporated throughout the process of planning and implementing early childhood SEL programs in order to provide a foundation for long-term success.

Developing preschool SEL standards that align with kindergarten and early elementary education can also be an effective sustainability strategy, and has implications for program financing. For the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top competition in 2009, states adopting rigorous, widely shared academic standards and assessments were one of six major selection criteria. As a result, most states have developed standards for SEL in preschool, and some states have further developed SEL standards for kindergarten and early elementary education that align with their preschool standards. (For more information about the inclusion of SEL standards in schools, see [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#).)

Professional development is a vital piece of the sustainability process. Three types of professional development should be offered to early childhood educators:

- Specialized training, such as manuals, tutorials, asynchronous and synchronous learning, behavioral rehearsal, and Web-based lectures or discussions
- Coaching and consultation that focuses on reinforcing evidence-based skill development and applying desired skills while working with children and families
- Communities of practice—groups of individuals who are interested in improving their professional practice in a particular area by sharing knowledge, skills, and observations^{xii}

The National Center for Children in Poverty suggests that early learning administrators provide supports, such as substitute teachers and subsidies or stipends, so that teachers can take advantage of professional development opportunities.^{xii} The [Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#) offers free materials for professional development on their tiered approach to early childhood mental health and social emotional development, from infancy through preschool, as well as materials for parents.

To ensure ongoing growth and development among practitioners, the responsibility for delivering effective services must be transferred from a formal trainer to individuals and groups of professionals within early childhood settings.

Resources

- [Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)
- [Center for Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#)
- [Child Care and Early Education Research Connections](#)
- [Early Childhood Research & Practice](#)
- [National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies](#)
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#)
- [National Center for Children in Poverty](#)
- [National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center](#)
- [National Institute for Early Education Research](#)
- [Project LAUNCH \(Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health\)](#)
- [Technical Assistance Center for Social Emotional Interventions for Young Children](#)
- [Zero to Three](#)

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