

Provide structure, repetition to build children's social-emotional competencies

The early childhood years are the most formative for brain development. As brain pathways form, children learn essential social-emotional tools and skills. By helping children build social and emotional competencies, you can ensure learners of all abilities have the interpersonal and behavioral skills they'll use for the rest of their lives.

"The time from birth to 5 is when you can have tremendous impact on a child's future learning and success in school," said Zina Rutkin, director of Competent Kids, Caring Communities at the Ackerman Institute for the Family in New York. "Early childhood teachers, more than any other group I've found, understand children's social and emotional needs."

Rutkin provided the following tips for helping young learners develop social and emotional competency:

❑ **Provide opportunities for repetition.** Young children tend to need repetition and practice to master social and emotional skills. "There's sometimes an assumption that by age 4 children should be able to perform certain tasks without grabbing or hitting peers," Rutkin said. While they shouldn't be hitting peers, Rutkin said the jump to punishment for children who haven't yet mastered the skills can be challenging for teachers.

"In my consulting work, I've seen a child exhibit problem behavior on the playground and the teacher asks the child to sit on the bench for the remainder of recess," Rutkin said. "I find myself wondering what the child is learning by sitting on the bench. Is it going to teach him to enter the play environment more appropriately?"

Keep in mind that some children need more practice to master those social and emotional skills. Avoid presuming competency in the early developmental stages. For instance, removing a child from a situation if he is pushing a peer may be needed. "But just doing that without teaching alternatives is a [potential] pitfall for teachers," Rutkin said. "Help the child learn how to approach peers to engage in play."

❑ **Use structured social-emotional programs.** "The beauty of having a program to fall back on is that you're assured of covering all bases," Rutkin said. "At the end of the sequence, the children will have been introduced to the competencies they need to move forward."

Rutkin recommended the social-emotional Common Core Standards for pre-K because they're organized according to five specific social-emotional competencies: adaptability, self-awareness, self-reg-

ulation, relationships with others, and accountability. For example, in self-regulation, the skills that children need are the ability to wait and delay gratification, Rutkin said.

"The add-ons that some teachers use are timers and digital clocks to help with self-regulation," she said.

Teachers can be creative in introducing those social-emotional skills but still follow a structured format, she added.

❑ **Create teachable moments.** Recognize that teachers can help students resolve conflicts with lessons. "Our program, Competent Kids, Caring Communities, provides a child-friendly conflict resolution plan that also includes a literacy component in that each of the four steps begins with the letter 'S' for the friendly 'Sir Snake' character that introduces it," Rutkin said. "The first thing to do is 'Stop and think.' Next, each person can 'Say how they feel.' The final two steps are 'Solve it' and 'Say sorry if you can.' Once you teach that, students can use it on their own."

❑ **Build emotional literacy.** Teachers should provide young children with an emotional vocabulary to help them communicate their feelings. "If you can name your feelings, you can control and manage them," Rutkin said. "By using differentiated words, you have better control over your emotions. That also allows children to get the support they need by describing their feelings to others."

❑ **Get parents on board.** Mention classroom activities and lessons in weekly newsletters to parents.

"We send every lesson home to parents in audio form so parents can access it on their cellphones or computers," Rutkin said. "At the end of every story that teaches a new skill, we have a discussion question."

It's important for teachers and parents to keep two-way communication on all subjects. That allows staff to be proactive with parents instead of contacting them solely about something negative, Rutkin said.

❑ **Determine benchmarks.** There are many informal checklists educators can use to establish benchmarks. For pre-K, there are kindergarten readiness checklists that include social-emotional components.

"I find that teachers prefer checklist assessments as skills are usually presented within a carefully articulated developmental framework," Rutkin said. "They can check off how the child is doing. For example, the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework has goals that are articulated in checklist form."

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