

Chapter 5

Supporting Preschoolers Developing Social Emotional Competence in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Preschool-age children are entering schools with increasingly deficient social-emotional regulation skills, particularly post-COVID-19 pandemic. There are expectations for preschoolers to learn how to navigate social norms, trust new settings, learn emotion regulation, and begin academic skills. These skills vary among children as many social and environmental factors impact their development. These may include mental, emotional, and behavioral problems leading to challenges for children later in their development. These challenges impact not only the family but their school experience. Children with social-emotional and behavioral disorders are more likely to struggle socially and academically. Social-emotional well-being is critical to successful social and academic functioning among children. School Social Workers are vital for assessing and supporting children within schools. This chapter illustrates how Social Workers provide interventions to increase social-emotional capacity in preschool children, which positively impacts their learning and overall positive climate within the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Pre-school-age children are a population that requires attention as their foundational years will have long-term effects. Social-emotional skills are essential for appropriately engaging with peers, teachers and regulating emotions. This chapter will describe the importance of social-emotional learning, how it can impact school performance, and how Social Workers can support increased capacity in preschoolers. In addition, this chapter will discuss the cultural and family considerations that should be assessed and included in the interventions when working with preschool children. Finally, this chapter will share social-emotional resources as a starting point for implementing a social-emotional curriculum.

BACKGROUND

Although schools are primarily charged with providing instruction to facilitate the academic achievement of students, there is growing recognition among those involved in education that student social and emotional well-being is instrumental to academic success (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Demands for academic skills and pro-social behaviors begin as early as preschool age. Research with young children underscores the importance of early experience both for social and emotional development as well as cognitive functioning (Perry, 2000). Recent studies have described the importance of early childhood social and emotional skills (SE) and executive functioning (EF) to longitudinal outcomes of child development, including social adjustment and academic performance in kindergarten and elementary school, and even longer-term school attainment and adult functioning (Reynolds & Temple, 2008). Preschool-age children are expected to navigate social norms, trust new settings, learn emotion regulation and basic academic skills when entering school, and solidify them by elementary school. Developmentally this may look very different among children as many factors, such as poverty and parental mental health issues, can impact their development. Sektnan et al. points out that risk factors such as poverty and maternal depression in early childhood prevent practice with behavioral regulation. Self-regulation can be defined as an individual's ability to control their emotions, inhibit impulses for inappropriate actions, adjust their level of activity, engage appropriately with others, and generally adopt behavior that is appropriate for the context (Bronson, 2001; Kuypers, 2013; Pandey et al., 2018). Blair and Raver (2015) indicate early childhood risk factors create the potential for an abnormal stress-response physiology that in turn, impacts the self-regulatory skills, such as focus and goal-oriented behavior, necessary for social and academic performance. Living in poverty exposes families to chronic stressors that can increase

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