

Home Matters: *Setting the Stage for Social Competence*

By Kelly Twibell and Janet Thompson

The ECL staff spends a considerable amount of time teaching weekend early childhood education classes, presenting at professional development conferences, and writing materials about early childhood development. **A common topic of interest is that of working with children's challenging behavior.** A teacher's most intentionally planned curriculum can quickly be derailed when the behavior of one or several children demands continuous intervention. Likewise, a family's entire life can seem dominated by the demands of a child's behavior. Research reminds us of additional reasons that behavior is such a "hot topic." It is well documented that children's social, emotional, and motivational characteristics are directly and indirectly linked to their preparation for school and success in academic achievement. These qualities include children's social and emotional understanding of others, initiative as learners, self-regulation, self-concept, group participation, cooperation and sense of responsibility, and interactions with peers and teachers.

Parents and teachers want answers. *How do I stop a child from biting? Why don't the children respond to my limits? What can I do to help young siblings or friends work through their conflicts?* While it is important to have a set of skills to respond to such difficult situations, it is equally important to implement a preventive approach to challenging behavior. Rather than simply relying on our reactions to guide children's behavior, we should give children the skills they need to manage their impulses, make appropriate choices, and to be considerate of the needs of others.

As children grow they are faced with a number of situations which they may or may not be prepared to handle. *How can I have a turn with the train she is using? What do I do when he knocks over my blocks? How do I ask to play fairies, too?* Just as we learn to read and write or add and subtract, **developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social problem-solving skills takes time, guidance, and practice.** In this article we will explore principles and practices that



guide the work of skilled early childhood educators and outline some strategies for employing these at home. More specifically, we will suggest ways to provide environmental supports, plan balanced daily schedules and routines, and employ an intentional approach to coaching children during frustrating social interactions and challenging tasks.

The Environment

The classroom environments that teachers design for young children set the tone for play and interaction. **When educators are mindful of the aesthetics, organization, and function of each area in their classroom, challenging behavior is likely to decrease and prosocial behavior increase.** A program's vision for learning and philosophy of care dictates how the space is visualized and designed. For example, if the curriculum is based on the view that children are competent directors of their own learning, educators develop environments that reflect children's emerging interests and provide easy access to meaningful play materials. Adult-child interactions build and expand on children's questions and comments. This broader vision creates synchrony between the environment, routines, and teacher-child interactions. It is this vision of early learning that guides the ECL's program structure and planning.

Child-initiated, active learning experiences promote social-emotional development. Therefore, knowledgeable educators plan classroom and outdoor environments that present opportunities for such child-initiated learning. Other aspects of the environment also contribute to a child's emotional and social success. High-quality early learning environments:

- incorporate knowledge of aesthetics and organization of space in order to encourage a sense of respect, responsibility, and community,
- designate learning areas to prescribe the nature of play (e.g., Block Area, Book Area, etc.),

- use low shelving to allow children and adults visual access to play and learning materials,
- prepare public and private spaces to create an atmosphere of community, while simultaneously acknowledging the presence of individuals,
- incorporate materials that are challenging, yet developmentally appropriate.

The attractive space adults prepare for children publicizes expectations for its cooperative care: *we all play in and care for this beautiful place together.*

Clearly it is unnecessary to knock down a wall to create visual access or to remodel your home to include multiple designated learning areas! Still, there are several simple adaptations you can make to make any space work well for your young child. To begin, **designate a primary space for your child's play.** Play can happen anywhere, but sometimes focusing the activity in one area can help all members of a family carry out their tasks and responsibilities. This area need not be a large room. A corner in the living area or a designated shelf with a rug in a bedroom easily serves the same purpose. Create a sign with your child to name and label the space. This designates ownership and responsibility.

Families can then **consider aesthetics in decorating the play space.** The colors, textures, and scale of items in the physical environment can do much to intensify or modulate children's energy. Choosing soft, soothing hues for walls and furniture allows these items to fade into the background and, more importantly, bring children and their activity into focus. Although bright, primary colors are often marketed for children's rooms and toys, even an adult would find a room dominated by brightly colored furniture and sharp lines distracting after a short period of time. Maintaining an appropriate level of stimulation facilitates children's self-regulation so that they can more easily focus on one thing at a time. Acquiring at least a few child-sized furnishings (e.g., small table and chairs, low shelves) creates an appropriate scale within which children can explore. This enhances their sense of efficacy.

Children need to be appropriately challenged. They should be stimulated to think, but able to approach tasks with reasonable expectations of success. Parents who **choose open-ended play materials** achieve this goal. Open-ended materials are flexible enough to

accommodate a range of skill levels and grow with a child. Blocks, art supplies, scarves, empty food containers, and toy animals all may be manipulated in multiple ways. Because of their open format, such play materials allow children to express their unique creativity, experience feelings of competence, and develop divergent thinking skills. It is also appropriate to provide a variety of closed-ended activities such as puzzles and matching games. Closed-ended activities often lead to one right answer or outcome. To eliminate excessive frustration adults should be careful to select activities that match children's emerging skills. The positive support children receive from adults while completing such challenging tasks can do much to promote their persistence and sense of competence.

Effectively organizing toys influences children's behavior. Materials that are logically arranged and accurately labeled offer children a visual menu of potential opportunities for play. If space allows, low shelves with smaller containers that hold toys of different types are easier for young children to manage and keep organized than are large toy chests into which everything is dumped. They see their options and can thoughtfully make their own activity choices. This **intentional organization supports the child's developing autonomy and decision-making.** It also supports parents as children are better able to pick up and put away toys in the appropriate storage container, thus making it easier to find the next time they are ready to play.

Daily Routines

Just as the physical design of the classroom enables young children to meet the social, self-regulatory, attentional, and other social-emotional demands of the curriculum, so, too, does the design of the daily schedule. In many respects, young children are enabled to manage themselves and their relationships in the classroom through the skill with which daily routines and activities are predictable (and thus can be anticipated), transitions are signaled and supported, and there is a balance of relatively active with relatively quiet play and group with individual activities.

A consistent daily routine facilitates children's trust in their environment and offers them a foundation for self-reliance. When children can anticipate what comes now, next, and later they are able to regulate their expectations, energy and activity. Further they become active participants within each daily routine

because they are prepared to join in.

Family life is often busy and schedules can be irregular. Parents can support children’s social-emotional competence when they do their best to **maintain a regular routine**. A young child can then predict that the family will wake, eat, sleep, play, rest, and complete chores at similar times each day. It would be unrealistic to assume that a standard schedule would **always** be the norm. As children and families grow, other activities become integrated into each week. On the other hand, adults decrease a child’s ability to self-regulate when they frequently or unexpectedly change the structure of daily life. In these circumstances, adults may notice children responding to such varying routines with visible discomfort and disruptive behavior. To prevent such unnecessary negative reactions, adults should thoughtfully **prepare children for any inconsistencies in routine**. “Today we are going to the doctor’s office before we eat lunch. Usually we go to the park in the morning, but today we are doing something different.” Attentive adults plan ahead to help children anticipate what is coming next.

The intensity of activity throughout the daily routine — high energy versus low energy or active versus quiet — can also impact children’s behavior. If children continuously engage in active play, such as outdoor play or high-energy social games, they may become overtired and overstimulated. Families may see similar problems when children are required to sit or lie still and participate in consecutive low-energy activities (e.g. nap, quiet time, video watching). In each case they often become restless and unfocused, and can fail to benefit from learning opportunities. These negative outcomes can be eliminated by intentionally **alternating between active and quiet times**. The balance in such a daily schedule encourages self-regulation as children are guided through appropriately varied levels of stimulation. This leads to positive behavior and enhances a child’s ability to constructively socialize with peers and adults.

Adult Support

Children’s healthy psychological growth occurs in the

context of warm, supportive relationships with adults and peers. In the school environment teachers set the tone for learning — not only in the ways they knowledgeably design the physical environment, but also in the ways they create a social-emotional environment that motivates children to participate, establishes mutual trust and respect, and teaches, both directly and indirectly, the social and emotional skills children will need for school and life.

Parents, of course, as a child’s first teachers, have an even more important influence on children’s social and behavioral approaches and attitudes. Watching how significant adult caregivers behave is the way young children learn many of their social and emotional skills from the earliest ages. The fact that children are so open to behavioral modeling by watching adults is an advantage. Because young children closely observe and imitate the behavioral examples of adults they care about, parents and other caregivers can **intentionally model desired behavior** for them.

Modeling positive social interactions (e.g., sharing, helping) is the most obvious example of how adults use this practice. The modeling of constructive emotional coping strategies (e.g., anger management) can be equally influential. Modeling is easiest to do as situations arise naturally during the course of the day.



The simplest form is audible self-talk. An adult who stumbles and spills a basket of laundry can express her exasperation in a way that children can hear and understand (e.g. “Oh, no! I just sorted and folded the laundry, and now it looks like I’ll have to do it all over again! It’s so frustrating when that happens! Well, I guess I’ll

start with the shirts. It won’t take too long.”). The adult is describing the situation and expressing her feelings about it (or at least a socially appropriate version of them). She continues by modeling a constructive course of action to remedy the situation. This kind of adult self-talk works well for modeling self-regulation skills, and also for modeling self-confidence (e.g., expressing confidence in being able to complete a difficult task) and social and emotional understanding (“I used to be afraid when I climbed up high like this, but then I figured out that if I held onto the railing I

wouldn't fall. Now being up here doesn't scare me anymore.”).

Children are interested in other people's thoughts and feelings, as well as their own. They wonder about the reasons for people's beliefs and emotions, and frequently ask about them (e.g., “Why are you crying?”). As they gain experience and sophistication, they begin to understand the mental and psychological reasons that people behave the way they do. Adults can help supply language for emotion and thought — particularly the more sophisticated words -- by narrating what they observe children expressing. They can also go further and connect an emotion label with a probable cause, being careful to confirm with a preschool-age child whether their causal attributions are correct (e.g., “You seem pretty worried. Since I was a little late, I wonder if you thought I wasn't coming to pick you up”). This is common practice among infant/toddler program caregivers, and is referred to as “reflective listening.” When used to **describe a situation, action, or interaction and the feelings or attitudes of children engaged in it**, the technique can help preschoolers sort out mental states and “fine-tune” their understandings.

Adults adapt their behavior to the expectations and norms of various settings, often without giving this behavior much conscious thought. When walking through a library, for example, most people generally lower their voices or stop talking to companions. Young children have already learned a variety of general rules that apply to their home lives (e.g., we should remove our shoes upon entering the house, try to be quiet while the baby is sleeping, or ask permission before snacking on cookies). If asked why they perform these specific actions, they may be able to generalize to the principle behind the family rule. However, they are likely to see some of these regulations as simply rules made by adults that they are required to follow if they want to avoid “getting in trouble.”

During the preschool years, children are beginning to develop the capacity to apply general moral values to specific situations. Adults can help them strengthen this link by routinely moving beyond the statement of rules to **include the guiding principle behind each rule**. “Let's pick up these toys before dinner. In our home we all work together to keep things clean and tidy.” “Let's pick up these toys” informs children of the immediate

request. Adding, “In our home we all work together to keep things clean and tidy,” broadens that goal and states the general principle behind it. When children understand that rules and expectations are based on values and principles, they reach a new level of awareness about how their actions contribute to the welfare of themselves, others, and their surroundings.

How should adults respond when young children are not behaving effectively or are interfering with the behavior of others? Although an adult's natural impulse is to intervene directly to correct the child's behavior, adults who see their role as guides in helping children develop their social and emotional competencies will often use these occasions as learning opportunities. Their goals will include not merely stopping or redirecting the behavior in question, but also helping children learn other, more productive ways to solve a problem, resolve a conflict, or get the help or attention they need. These are what we call “teachable moments” in the classroom. Effective adults **work alongside children as a coach or guide** rather than directing the action from a position of control. For more information regarding developmentally appropriate guidance, please see *Developmentally Appropriate Guidance: When One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Twibell, 2007) and *Making Sense of Conflict: Seeking Solutions Together* (Gonzalez, Twibell, & Thompson, 2008). Both newsletter articles are available in West House Lobby.

Closing Thoughts

Building social and emotional competence requires the continuous engagement of parents, teachers, and children. Adults design environments and employ routine planning strategies that guide children toward making positive choices. Their responsive interaction styles and guidance techniques support children's ongoing reflection about themselves and about the social world. They challenge children's understandings and prompt them to stretch their social-emotional skills within a supportive learning community. Success in learning and in life will require children's continuously expanding self-awareness, competence in self-regulation, social and emotional understanding, and initiative. When all of children's early learning environments provide the elements that they need to become socially competent and emotionally mature, they will be setting the stage for children's success in every developmental domain.