

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

*During student's 'early childhood' years, it is critical to teach them the appropriate social and emotional skills they will need to become successful students, learners, and adults in the future. Teaching these skills early provides students a structured base in which their other skills will be built upon. During these early years, children begin developing their social-emotional skills along with many other foundational skills. The social-emotional skills they develop will help their mental health and well-being in the future. Saltali and Deniz (2010), state, "Emotional skills are integral part of mental functions and inseparable part of daily life" (Introduction, paragraph 3). Research has shown a correlation between students who develop social skills and academic success as well as students who lack social skills tend to perform poorly academically. This paper discusses which basic social skills educators should teach, effective teaching strategies, importance of social skills, and the impact these skills will have on our students' now and in the future.*

**Keywords:** *social-emotional, skills, preschool*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL

Social-emotional skills are foundational skills that are critical aspects of early childhood development. In preschool, it is important for educators to focus on teaching their students the basic social skills in order to enhance their futures. According to Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015), "During the first five years of life, the brain grows at a rapid pace, reaching 90% of its adult size, and simultaneously 'prunes' unused neurons and neuronal connections" (Introduction, paragraph 4). The preschool aged child is in those critical years of development and this is the prime time for these basic skills to be taught. These social skills include, but are not limited to, greetings, rules, routines, sharing, taking turns, and much more to mention. Like Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015) state, "During early childhood, children experience gains in socioemotional (SE), biological and cognitive areas of development, creating the foundation for later development" (Introduction, paragraph 1). This paper will introduce basic preschool social skills to teach, how we can teach students these skills effectively, why social skill development is important, and how these social skills can impact students now and in their future.

### BASIC PRESCHOOL SOCIAL SKILLS

As a preschool teacher, understanding and valuing the importance of social skills is critical to student's overall development and success. According to

Cleveland, Cooper, Greenburg, Moore, and Powers (2014), "During early childhood, these skills fall into two primary domains-interpersonal skills, or the ability to develop and maintain relationships; and self-control, or the ability to regulate behavior and emotion in a way that facilitates effective social interaction" (p. 1249). Building and maintaining social relationships in our preschool years set the foundation for students' growth in the future. Dereli-iman (2014) states, "The age during which they are sensitive to social development, and is critical for gaining problem-solving skills, is between the ages of 5-6" (p. 263). We know that from birth to age six are critical years of development in which the foundation is set for life.

Lane, Ledford, Gast, and Shepley (2015) discuss the educational impact as well stating, "Given the emphasis on academics beginning in preschool, but recognizing the importance of social development, embedding social skills instruction during academic instruction may maximize opportunities for learning in preschool classrooms" (Introduction, paragraph 4). Knowing what skills need to be taught allows educators to embed some of these skills during other academic instructional times without direct teaching of the social skill. According to Hughes (2010), "Kindergarten teachers are much more likely to name these social and emotional skills as very important to early school success than they are to name academic skills such as letter recognition or numerical knowledge" (School Readiness, paragraph 1). Educators have come to realize the importance of social skills in addition to academic skills. According to Dereli-iman (2014) "These behaviours, attitudes, and ideas that children gain, form the basis of the children's value judgments. Although instruction related to values are learned through their lifetime, first instructions are gained during early childhood" (p. 263). From the moment we were born, we began learning and developing skills for our futures. Attending preschool is a beneficial step in the transition from home to school in preparation for the more formal education beginning in kindergarten.

There is an endless list of social skills to work on throughout our life, but some of the most important ones to focus on during our preschool years are developing appropriate greetings, understanding rules, following routines, self-regulation, taking turns, sharing (toys, ideas, and feelings), building and maintain friendships, using manners, and helping others. Cooper, Goodfellow, Muhlheim, and Paske (2002) discuss in the importance of social skills stating, "In the preschool years, the basic building blocks of peer interaction such as turn taking, sharing, problem-solving, empathy and forming friendships are developing" (Introduction, paragraph 5). Even though these are the main social skills we will focus on, we must remember that we teach new skills daily and should to take advantage of those teachable moments that occur throughout the day.

Here are some brief definitions and explanations of the social skills listed above. A greeting is a polite word or sign of welcome or recognition. Through greetings, we acknowledge others which are the beginning process of social interactions. By learning appropriate greetings, we become more socially accepted within our peers and thus make us more likely to engage in social interactions. A rule is defined as a set of explicit or understood regulations or principles governing conduct within a particular activity or sphere. Rules are important since they are our guiding set of expectations within our classrooms. Rules let the students know

what they can and cannot do. Without rules, classrooms would be hectic and ineffective environments. Buford and Stegelin (2003) state, "Children who are at-risk learners need more explicit and clearly-stated expectations in the classroom. Therefore, early childhood teachers can ensure that they address necessary social skills by listing, explaining, and demonstrating the expectations and routines of the class" (Task analysis strategies, paragraph 1). Routines are sets of actions that are regularly followed. Developing routines helps students understand what the day's events will look like and in turn helps students prepare for the day. Routines also help to provide consistency and structure to our classroom, which is very important in all years of education, but especially important in the early childhood years.

Self-regulation refers to one's ability to monitor and control our behavior, emotions, or thoughts, altering them in accordance with the demands of the situation. Like Joy (2016) states in her research, "Specifically, the emphasis on early development of self-regulation skills should remain at the forefront, and we, as educators, should be thoughtful when considering school readiness" (Implications, paragraph 4). Being able to regulate our feelings when we are sad, mad, scared is difficult at this age, even as adult. By teaching self-regulation early, students learn effective ways for them to self-regulate when they encounter incidences at school.

Taking turns is where two or more people are doing 'something' alternately or in succession. This is important not only for play but for communication purposes. We must learn to wait and respond to our peers without interrupting them during a conversation. The same is true for playing, students must learn to take turns while engaging in play with their peers. Sharing is having a portion of something with another or others. Sharing can include toys, ideas, and feelings. Typically, in preschool, we ask students to share toys often, but our goal is to teach students the skills to learn to share when others request, not just on teacher request. Lane et al. (2015) state, "An additional implication is that embedding opportunities for sharing items during academic instruction may lead to increases in sharing and learning social information about peers" (Implications, paragraph 3). Sharing ideas is important in cooperative play and interactions with others as well. Sharing feelings is imperative when asking students to recognize and understand their feelings and the feelings of others. Recognizing our feelings is beneficial when we are teaching students how to control their behaviors. Being able to identify how we feel and managing our feelings allows for more successful interactions.

Friendships are defined by the emotions or conduct of friends. Learning the social skills to interact with our peers and to interact effectively allows students to build friendships and in return work on maintaining those friendships. Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015) discuss that, "Children who experience peer rejection early in life have limited opportunities to engage with prosocial peers, and may only be accepted by other rejected children; associations with other rejected children may lead to a continued reinforcement of problematic behaviors" (SEL deficits, paragraph 4). Socialization is a large part of schools, with making friends and being well liked playing a role in the progress and growth of children. Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015) also state, "Children who feel a sense

of belonging or attachment to the classroom community participate more in classroom activities, show greater engagement in the academic process and overall higher levels of academic achievement" (Connecting SEL, paragraph 5). Being able to develop friendships and maintain them throughout our life is an irreplaceable feeling for most people.

Manners are ways of behaving toward people in ways that are socially correct and show respect for their comfort and their feelings. Children need to use their manners all throughout the day, for example, stating, 'please', 'may I' and 'thank you'. These are all valuable responses to use when interacting with others. Green et al. (2013) states, "Effective interactions require a range of specific skills, including watching peers and being curious, making appropriate comments, responding to other children, asking to play politely, sharing, taking turns, and listening to the ideas of peers" (Introduction, paragraph 7). In preschool, this is a large portion of our social skills instruction. Learning how to respectfully respond to others goes a long way.

The last skill to discuss is helping. The definition of helping is to make it easier for someone to do something by offering one's services or resources. When given the opportunity to help others, students learn early that helping others makes a significant impact on those they help as well as makes them feel good. In preschools, students should be given the opportunity to be "helpers" using various helper charts. Students love to be helpers and will offer their service in all areas as needed. By teaching students these basic skills in the classroom, playground, lunch room, and other areas they are able to transfer these same skills to different settings. Like Gulay, Akman, and Kargi (2011) state, "Children need to acquire, in preschool age, skills such as cooperation, sharing, helping and participating in peer groups as they develop" (Introduction, paragraph 2). The list could go on and on, but by focusing on these basic social skills we help set the stage for further development in other areas.

### **EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES**

To be an effective teacher, we have to take into consideration students' learning styles, students' areas of strengths and weaknesses and be familiar with effective teaching strategies. This means keeping up with research and changing our instructional style to meet the needs of our students. According to Martin and Potter (1998), "Students can learn almost any subject matter when they are taught with methods and approaches responsive to their learning style strengths; these same students fail when they are taught in an instructional style dissonant with their strengths" (Introduction, paragraph 10). This equates to teachers adapting their teaching style in order to meet their students' individualized needs. Martin and Potter (1998) write, "Each person learns in a unique way and there are similarities of course, but 'every person has a learning style –it is as individual as a fingerprint'" (Introduction, paragraph 2). Another important aspect of effective teaching is the time we spend working on specific skills. Ansari and Gershoff (2015) state in their research that, "...such that children exposed to more frequent instruction exhibit greater skill growth" (p. 700). This means teaching, reteaching,

and reviewing these skills each day throughout the year. Arda and Ocağ (2012) discuss in their study that, "The learning environment is shaped by teachers who are socially and emotionally competent, and has encouraging relationships with children, and so they affect classroom's social-emotional atmosphere and children's learning outcomes" (Discussion, paragraph 6). To provide this, teachers must be willing to differentiate their instruction based on students learning styles and needs. Feil et al. (2014) states,

"These approaches begin with "primary" or universal strategies to support a positive and predictable class-wide environment, "secondary" strategies to target children who begin to show evidence of at-risk behaviors, and "tertiary" strategies for children with diagnosable disorders who require more intensive interventions to prevent their disorder from getting worse" (Introduction, paragraph 4).

Remembering that all students learn at different paces and with differing learning styles, we must tailor our instruction and interventions based on student's needs.

Another effective teaching strategy is small group instruction. Lane et al. (2015) address this in their research stating, "Teachers and practitioners in early childhood settings should plan to increase the number of skills students can learn during a single session by teaching in a small group and using instructive feedback". Lane et al. (2015) also state, "Teachers are encouraged to utilize small group arrangements in early childhood settings. This arrangement increases the efficiency of instruction, offering opportunities for incidental and observational learning, and for programmed social exchanges between peers" (Introduction, paragraph 2). Small group arrangements allow teachers to group children in a variety of ways and teach specific skills to a few students at a time. According to Buford and Stegelin (2003), "To be effective, social skills instruction must practice skills in isolated 'practice' settings that can be easily translated into real-life situations and contexts" (Teaching social skills, paragraph 1). Targeting skills for small groups allows for more effective interactions, discussion, and instructions.

Visual and verbal supports are key to instruction in preschool. At these age students have limited social experience, so using pictures with verbal cues is a developmentally appropriate teaching strategy. Moody (2012) writes, "Visual supports can be effective for promoting social interactions, supporting communication, and transitioning children" as well as "Some effective forms of visuals include turn-taking cards, social stories, and conversation strips" (Visual supports, paragraph 1). Visual supports are part of every preschool program. From having your rules visually posted, to students' names on the tables, to where students line up labeled with tape. These simple visual supports assist students in acquiring early identification skills.

Educators are now teaching in an age of technology so why not utilize this as a teaching tool. Cooper et al. (2002) state that, "Today children are spending increased time watching television and videos, and playing computer and video games, leaving less time for social activities" (Discussion, paragraph 3). Knowing this, we can use video modeling as a great social learning tool. Weiner, Fritsch, and Rosen (2002) recognize this in their research stating, "Today's children are even

more heavily influenced by visual media in the forms of digital TV and computer based CDs. Why not consider using these influences to assist children in their learning both in the classroom and at home" (Introduction, paragraph 7). Children have over the years become more dependent on media entertainment rather than outdoor entertainment. Using and embracing technology allows teachers to provide instruction in ways children prefer. Green et. al (2013) states, "An exceptionally promising intervention for teaching social skills involves the use of video modeling" (Introduction, paragraph 3). Many researchers are focusing on educational technologies and the impact they can have on student's learning. McPake, Plowman, and Stephens (2013) focused their attention on children's interactions with a variety of digital tools in their home and the impact these digital tools had of these skills of children entering into preschool. McPake et al. (2013) found that,

"That digital technologies have the potential to expand young children's communicative and creative repertoires-have significant implications for early years education, where practitioners are asked to build on what children bring from home and need therefore to take into account the ways in which the home environment is changing as a result of the rapidly growing presence of digital technologies, and consequently also the nature of children's experiences and the practices they develop as a result" (p. 422).

Video modeling allows teachers to show students specific samples of social interactions including appropriate and inappropriate samples of interactions. Videos can show students what is expected and what types of behaviors or interactions are acceptable or not acceptable. Green et al. state, "Video modeling has a sound scientific evidence base for teaching individuals with developmental disabilities, including preschool children with ASD, and typically developing children" (Discussion, paragraph 3). Students today are more into technology and to assist in their learning, using media as a teaching tool peaks the students' interests.

In addition to video modeling, having students model these behaviors for other students is another beneficial strategy. Kauffman and Landrum (2013) write, "Overwhelming evidence shows that children learn a lot by watching the way other people behave" (p. 14). We say it and hear it all of the time, "They must have learned it from someone else". We have for a long time thought children learn from watching others. You can sit and watch children imitate their teachers. Gruss and Jackson (1999) state, "Pro-social skill development places an emphasis on opportunities for cooperative learning, and role modeling" (Prevention Strategies, paragraph 2). This gives the students the opportunity to learn directly from watching their peers model different behaviors. Block (1994) states, "In addition to formal peer mediation models, peers can provide a variety of natural supports to children with disabilities--supports that can seem overwhelming to a child care or kindergarten teacher who is responsible for 20 or more children" (Peer support, paragraph 6). In addition to peer models, teachers play a large role in modeling appropriate behaviors. According to Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015),

"One implication of SCT in the classroom is that teachers can frequently model the behaviors, knowledge, and skills that students are expected to learn. Modeling and practicing require time and repeated exposure, meaning

early childhood educators are in an excellent position to promote SEL, as they can spend up to 8 hours per day, 5 days per week with children" (Theoretical Foundations, paragraph 1).

Having peer and teacher models, helps students to observe interactions that may take place and helps teach them appropriate social responses.

Preschool is the optimal environment in which teachers can use play to introduce to new concepts and skills. According to Ansari and Gershoff (2015), "During these early years, teacher instruction tends to be socially engaging and activity based with an emphasis on interactive and cooperative play" (p. 701). By using play as an instructional technique, students are able to gain valuable skills and knowledge without sitting in chairs listening to adults, which is not developmentally appropriate instruction. Kane, Piek, and Wilson (2013) found in their research that, "When play involves physical activity, it provides children with the opportunity to develop and enhance their motor skills in unison with their social skills" (p. 151). Another benefit of play is that the skills are taught in natural settings without using direct instruction. Buford and Stegelin (2003) state, "An effective strategy for embedding social skills in the classroom setting is known as flooding. Flooding the environment with numerous yet natural opportunities to practice social skills helps the at-risk child to become fluent and proficient in performing the skill" (Teaching social skills, paragraph 3). We have to remember to use the resources around us in a manner that effectively meets our students' needs. According to Joy (2016) "Children should be in a setting where they are able to thrive because the setting and their personal strengths are aligned" (Implications, paragraph 4) To be an effective teacher we must use a variety of teaching strategies that are tailored to our students and their needs.

### **WHY SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING IS IMPORTANT**

The development or lack of development of social skills in students' early years can have long-lasting effects. Saltali and Deniz (2010) write,

"The development of emotional skills has various effects in the following years on children's adaptation to school, peer relationships, and academic success. The lack of emotional skills has an important role especially in the basic behavioral problems encountered during first and mid childhood period" (Introduction, paragraph 1).

As we have discussed learning these skills early is crucial to development. As we observe our students and assess their level of social skills, we must remember that social skills are learned behaviors. Do not assume they know them all. Like Joy (2016) states, "Additionally, educators should be looking for what they want to see in children (e.g., positive interaction skills, mastery motivation/drive toward goals, social problem-solving) rather than assuming children are socially competent because they don't demonstrate negative aspects of behavior" (Implications, paragraph 2) The lack of developing these social skills early in life can have negative effects on students' behaviors including externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Cooper et al (2002), states "Children who exhibit internalizing behaviour (shyness, low activity levels, withdrawn behaviour, passivity,

anxiousness) are often severely deficient in social skills" as well as "Children with externalizing behaviour (aggression, defiance, noncompliance, disobedience, tantrums) often misinterpret other children's actions, choose aggressive rather than prosocial solutions to social problems, and lack empathy" (Introduction, paragraph 4). Learning appropriate social skills fosters students' growth and has lasting impacts on their social skills development. As research shows, the lack of development of social skills can negatively affect students' futures. Cleveland, et al. (2014) state,

"The preschool and kindergarten years represent the period of development when the building blocks for young children's reading and social skills development are being laid and thus form the foundation for many early childhood education approaches and curricula" (p. 1259).

Kane et al. (2013) also discusses the importance of social skills stating, "The association between social skills deficits and internalizing symptoms have been well documented in children" (p. 152). Knowing how skill deficits can delay learning we must focus on teaching students the foundational skills in preschool. Arda and Ocak (2012) discuss in their research that, "In addition to this, results stated that the program with many activities focused on interaction between emotional and intellectual functions had an effect on reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviors" (Discussion, paragraph 6). By teaching students these social skills early, we are able to meet other academic goals. Bierman, Domitrovich, Gill, and Nix (2013) state in their paper that, "It appears that social-emotional development fosters both learning engagement and positive social behavior in the classroom as well as facilitate academic performance" (p. 1001). Social skills not only effect behavior but effect academic growth. Moody (2012) writes about importance of social skills stating, "The National Research Council (2001) called for an increased focus on developing effective, evidenced-based strategies to promote the development of children's socio-emotional skills" (Importance of socioemotional development, paragraph 1). There is a distinct correlation between social skills and behavioral skills and as we see these social skills directly impact academic performance. Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015) write in their research that, "Both research and theory support early childhood as an opportune time to promote SEL. And, given the important role that SE competencies play in other domains of functioning, learning SE skills early in life has proven benefits on later outcomes" (Conclusion, paragraph 1). They also state, "When children possess strong SE skills, they are more likely to use effective social problem solving skills and to experience positive peer group interactions, both of which relate to lower likelihood of behavior problems" (Social and Emotional Learning, paragraph 3). This shows us the relationship between social skills, academic skills, and behavior skills. Students with delayed social skills demonstrate lower academic skills and more often display unfavorable behaviors.

## **HOW SOCIAL SKILLS IMPACT STUDENTS' FUTURE**

Now knowing the importance of social skills, we will focus on the impacts they can have on students and their future. Arslan, Durmusoglu-Saltali, and Yilmaz



(2011) found that, "The preschool period is of great importance for determining behavioral problems and taking the necessary measures to deal with them. If these problems are not identified at early ages they might give rise to serious problems in the future" (Discussion, paragraph 1). An educators job is to teach their students the necessary skills and knowledge to become successful learners who result in becoming successful adults. Starting in preschool, we discuss the difference between children and adults, responsibilities, careers, and what happens when we get old. According to Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015), "Children with SEL deficits are at heightened risk for a number of negative outcomes, such as behavior problems (including conduct, oppositional defiant and attention-deficit disorders), academic difficulties and peer group problems" (Shuttlesworth & Shannon, 2015). The lack of social skills development has negative effects on children as a whole.

According to Ansari and Gershoff (2015), "It is also the case that children with stronger learning-related social skills demonstrate greater success. (p. 700). This means students growth in social skills relates to their academic success in the future. Ansari and Gershoff (2015) write, "These results highlight that learning-related social skills are important precursors to children's later academic achievement" (p. 710). The more social skills develop, the closer they are to academic achievement. Cleveland et al. (2014) write,

"For instance, studies show that children who display more socially competent behaviors, such as helping, sharing, and cooperating in kindergarten are more likely to do well on measures of third-grade literacy and academic achievement in eighth grade after prior academics are accounted for" (p. 1250).

Children that are unable to develop these social skills according to Dererli-iman (2014), "...will continue to exhibit negative behaviours and encounter problems...in their future lifetime" (p. 263). The lack of social skills can impair student's behavior which in turn effects their academic performance. King and Boardman (2006) found in their research that, "Deficiencies in social skills have been shown to be an effective predictor of poor academic performance (because learning is impeded by noncompliant and uncontrolled behaviours), as well as social maladjustment and peer rejection in adolescence and adulthood" (Introduction, paragraph 1). Students learning is affected by all of these factors. King and Boardman (2006), like Dererli-iman discuss social skills and students' futures by stating,

"We live in a society where our social systems are rapidly changing; and thus, it is essential for children to develop social competence skills with the potential to enable them to live fulfilling lives, to shape their personal futures, and to make wise life choices" (Introduction, paragraph 1).

According to Shuttlesworth and Shannon (2015), "SEL sets the foundation for the behaviors necessary for academic success, and there is increasing evidence linking SEL and academics" as well as "SEL further relates to academic performance through improving achievement, grade retention, school attendance and graduation rates, and reducing expulsions and suspensions from school" (Connecting SEL, paragraph 1). The impact of social skills is so critical to later development. As Weiner et al. (2002) states, "As greater numbers of

educators came to the conclusion that inappropriate or ineffective interpersonal skills were learned, it became clear that appropriate and effective interpersonal skills could and should be taught" (Introduction, paragraph 3). By focusing on teaching our students the basic social skills, with effective techniques, and knowing why developing these skills is important, we can have a direct impact on our students' future.

## CONCLUSION

Students' 'early childhood' years are during a critical window of development in which fundamental and foundational social skills must be taught. Research has proven the benefits of preschool programs and the social impact they have on students now and in the future. Research by Green et al. (2013) states, "If a child does not master these skills, then he or she is likely to miss out on valuable learning opportunities that could in turn negatively affect his or her overall development" (Introduction, paragraph 7). These preschool years set the foundation for growth. Gulay et al. (2011) state in their research, "Children who had received preschool education were more competent in 'starting and continuing a relationship, cooperating with the group, ensuring self-control' compared to those who had not" (Discussion, paragraph 1). We know in preschool students are just learning these important skills. We must use this to guide our instruction. Gulay et al. (2011) also state, "Social skills which begin to develop with mother and child interaction right after birth play an important role in the social development of children at preschool. Therefore, these skills may affect social development in the short and long term" (Introduction, paragraph 2). The importance of social skills cannot be denied. We must recognize their importance and use effective teaching strategies that meet the needs of our students. Social skills that are developed during preschool years serve as the foundation of learning. These skills help students to develop the necessary tools to build and maintain friendship, aid in academic skill development, and help foster students to become successful adults.

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