SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD



Laura Daly
Woodland Community College

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Publisher Information

Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Dr. Laurie A. Daly

An Open Educational Resources Publication by

Woodland Community College (2026)

Authored and compiled by Laurie Daly, Ed.D.

Editor: Noel Bruening, Woodland Community College Professor of English

Images generated by AI through ChatGPT

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ISBN: 9798192427644

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to three extraordinary mentors who shaped my journey as an educator, author, and leader.

Dr. Linda Perez, whose compassion and insight taught me to see every child as capable and full of promise.

Dr. Pete Mesa, whose wisdom and encouragement gave me the confidence to write and challenged me to lead with heart and integrity.

Dr. Diane Ketelle, whose gentle guidance helped me find my scholarly voice and supported me as I wrote my first book. Her continued inspiration has strengthened my work as an author and reminded me that our stories are the bridges between theory and humanity.

Their influence lives in every page of this textbook and in every reflection on relationships, leadership, and care. Together, they helped shape my belief that by preparing educators, we have the opportunity to positively influence not just one child or one family, but countless children and families across generations.

It is my hope that this work continues the spirit of their teaching. May it remind educators that positive social and emotional development begins not only in children's experiences, but in the empathy, curiosity, and courage of the adults who guide them.

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Introduction to Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood



Social-emotional development begins in relationships. From the earliest exchanges between infants and caregivers, children learn whether the world is safe, whether their needs will be noticed, and whether other people can be trusted. As children grow, these early relational experiences provide the foundation for emotional regulation, empathy, friendship, cooperation, moral development, conflict resolution, and a developing sense of self.

Young children do not develop social and emotional competence independently. They rely on responsive adults who recognize their cues, respond to their emotions, establish predictable environments, and guide them through increasingly complex social experiences. Every comforting interaction, shared conversation, classroom routine, peer conflict, and moment of reconnection provides an opportunity for growth. For this reason, supporting social-emotional development is not a separate part of the early childhood curriculum. It is woven into every relationship, routine, environment, and learning experience.

Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood examines the developmental foundations of children's relationships, emotions, behavior, and social competence. The text begins by introducing social-emotional learning and exploring attachment, temperament, self-regulation, stress, trauma, and resilience. Later chapters examine emotional development, empathy, moral development, play, peer relationships, friendship, conflict resolution, children's behavior, positive guidance, emotionally supportive environments, family partnerships, the educator's role, and educator well-being.

Although the chapters address these subjects individually, the developmental processes are deeply interconnected. Attachment influences emotional security. Temperament affects how children experience and respond to relationships. Emotional regulation supports friendship and cooperation. Empathy and perspective taking contribute to moral development and conflict resolution. Trauma may influence behavior, relationships, learning, and health. Educators must therefore consider the whole child rather than viewing any behavior, skill, or developmental concern in isolation.

Throughout the text, children's behavior is approached as meaningful communication rather than simply as something adults must control. Behavior may reflect a child's developmental stage, temperament, environment, emerging skills, emotional needs, relationships, or experiences. Understanding what a child may be communicating allows educators to respond with curiosity, empathy, appropriate guidance, and developmentally responsive support.

This textbook also recognizes that development occurs within families, cultures, communities, and broader social systems. Families are children's first and most important teachers, and they bring essential knowledge about their children's experiences, strengths, routines, languages, and cultural identities. Effective early childhood practice therefore requires respectful family partnerships, culturally responsive teaching, anti-bias practices, and a commitment to creating environments in which every child and family experiences a genuine sense of belonging.

The role of the educator extends beyond teaching individual social skills. Educators create the emotional climate of the classroom. Through their words, tone of voice, expectations, relationships, and responses to challenging situations, they model how people care for one another, communicate respectfully, establish boundaries, solve problems, and repair relationships. Their own self-awareness, emotional regulation, reflective practice, and well-being directly influence their capacity to provide responsive care.

This text is designed for students preparing to work with young children as well as educators seeking to deepen their understanding of social-emotional development. Developmental theory is connected to practical classroom strategies, examples, reflective questions, and authentic situations educators may encounter in early childhood settings. These applications are intended to help readers move beyond knowing about social-emotional development to intentionally supporting it in everyday practice.

Ultimately, social-emotional development is about more than teaching children to follow directions, manage emotions, or get

along with others. It is about helping children develop the security, confidence, empathy, resilience, and relationship skills needed to understand themselves, care about others, participate meaningfully in their communities, and thrive throughout their lives. Responsive relationships remain at the heart of this work. When children experience consistent care, emotional safety, respectful guidance, and a genuine sense of belonging, they gain a strong foundation for learning, relationships, and lifelong well-being.

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1.1: Chapter Introduction

1



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 1.1:** Define social and emotional learning and explain its importance during early childhood.
- **SLO 1.2:** Summarize the three Social and Emotional Development strands and the Early and Later developmental levels described in the PTKLF.
- **SLO 1.3:** Explain how responsive relationships and experiences influence brain development and the interconnected domains of development.
- **SLO 1.4:** Identify the dimensions and observable behaviors of social competence and describe how educators can intentionally support their development.

Chapter 1 Short Overview

This chapter introduces social and emotional learning and explains its importance to children's development, school readiness, relationships, and lifelong well-being. It connects the California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations with brain development, responsive relationships, and the interconnected domains of development. The chapter also examines the dimensions and observable behaviors of social competence and the educator's role in creating inclusive, emotionally supportive learning environments.

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1.2: California's Infant–Toddler and Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process through which children learn to understand and manage emotions, form healthy relationships, make responsible decisions, and develop empathy and self-awareness. In early childhood, SEL is not a separate subject, but is woven into every interaction, routine, and play experience. Through responsive relationships, children practice sharing, taking turns, calming themselves, and expressing feelings with words.

Research consistently indicates that early social-emotional competence predicts later success in school and life (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Children who can recognize emotions, cooperate with others, and manage frustration are better prepared for academic learning. They are also more resilient when facing challenges. Social-emotional learning supports not only cognitive growth, but also the foundation for lifelong mental health, healthy relationships, and overall well-being.

California provides complementary learning and development foundations for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and children in transitional kindergarten. The *California Infant–Toddler Learning and Development Foundations* (ITLDF), second edition, describe the learning and development of children from birth to age three. The ITLDF address five interconnected domains: Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Language Development, Cognitive Development, and Perceptual and Motor Development (California Department of Social Services, 2025).

The *California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations* (PTKLF) describe the knowledge and skills that most children ages three to five and a half can develop when they experience the relationships, instruction, and environments associated with high-quality early education programs. Educators can use the PTKLF to guide observations, establish learning goals, and plan developmentally appropriate, equitable, and inclusive learning experiences (California Department of Education, 2024).

Together, the ITLDF and PTKLF provide a developmental continuum while recognizing that young children develop at different rates and within the contexts of their families, cultures, languages, communities, experiences, and individual abilities.

Within the PTKLF, the Social and Emotional Development domain is organized into three interconnected strands:

Self:

This strand includes self-identity, confidence in abilities, emotional knowledge, regulation of emotions and behavior, management of routines and transitions, social awareness, and empathy and caring.

Interactions and Relationships with Adults:

This strand addresses reciprocal interactions with adults, seeking security and support, coping with departures, and maintaining positive relationships with attachment figures and other familiar adults.

Interactions and Relationships with Peers:

This strand includes interacting and cooperating with peers, resolving conflicts, treating others with fairness and respect, and developing friendships.

The PTKLF present each foundation at two overlapping developmental levels. The Early level generally describes development from ages three to four and a half, while the Later level generally describes development from ages four to five and a half. Across many foundations, children demonstrate increasing complexity, independence, reciprocity, and ability to use skills with less adult support.

These levels describe developmental progressions rather than rigid age expectations. Children develop competencies at different times and in different ways within the contexts of their families, cultures, languages, communities, experiences, and individual abilities. Educators should therefore use the foundations to understand and support development while continuing to consider the whole child (California Department of Education, 2024).

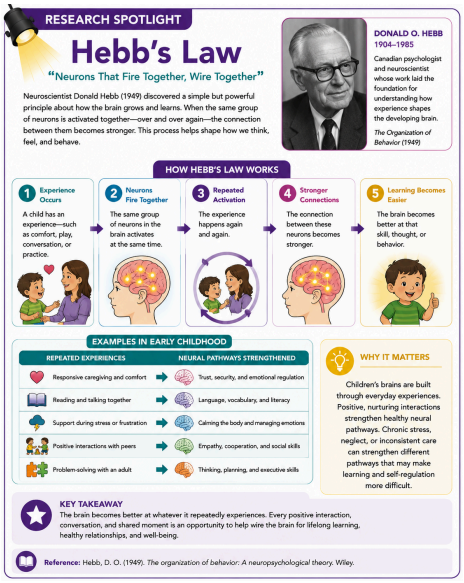
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1.3: Connections to Brain Development and Relationships

During the first five years of life, the brain forms more than a million new neural connections every second (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). These connections are shaped by relationships and experiences. When caregivers respond consistently and lovingly, children's brains strengthen pathways associated with trust, attention, emotional regulation, and learning.

One principle that helps explain this process is Hebb's Law (1949), often summarized as "*neurons that fire together, wire together.*" Repeated experiences strengthen neural pathways, making certain patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving more likely to occur in the future. When children repeatedly experience responsive caregiving, emotional support, and positive social interactions, the neural networks associated with security, self-regulation, and social competence become stronger.

The prefrontal cortex, responsible for planning, impulse control, decision-making, and emotional regulation, develops gradually throughout childhood. Young children depend on supportive adults to help regulate emotions and behavior until these skills become internalized. Positive, predictable environments help children's brains organize and thrive, while chronic stress and inconsistent care can disrupt healthy development.



The Interconnected Nature of Development

Although child development is often discussed in separate domains, development does not occur in isolated categories. Cognitive, language, physical, social, and emotional development continuously influence one another. Growth in one area often supports growth in another, while challenges in one domain may affect development across multiple areas. For example, when a toddler learns to walk, physical development expands opportunities for exploration, which supports cognitive development, encourages language as caregivers talk about new experiences, and creates new opportunities for social interaction. For this reason, early childhood educators view children holistically, recognizing that every interaction, routine, and learning experience contributes to multiple aspects of development simultaneously.

This interconnected view of development helps explain why social and emotional learning is so important. As children develop self-regulation, they are better able to focus attention, solve problems, and participate in learning activities. As children's language skills grow, they become better able to express their emotions, communicate their needs, and resolve conflicts with others. Likewise, positive relationships support brain development, while healthy cognitive and language development strengthen children's ability to understand social situations and build meaningful relationships. Recognizing these interrelationships reminds educators that every interaction, routine, and learning experience has the potential to support multiple areas of development at the same time.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive development refers to how children think, learn, remember, reason, and solve problems. Social and emotional experiences play an important role in cognitive growth. Children who feel emotionally secure are better able to focus attention, explore their environment, and engage in learning. Likewise, cognitive skills such as memory and problem-solving help children understand emotions, navigate social situations, and make thoughtful decisions. On the other hand, chronic stress and emotional distress can interfere with attention, memory, and learning, highlighting the importance of supportive relationships and environments during early childhood. These connections of stress, trauma, and resilience will be explored further in Chapter 5.

Language Development

Language development allows children to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs. As children's vocabulary grows, so does their ability to identify and express emotions. Language helps children negotiate conflicts, seek support, build relationships, and understand the perspectives of others. In turn, positive social interactions provide opportunities to practice and expand language skills.

Physical Development

Physical development includes growth in both gross (large) motor and fine (small) motor skills, as well as the development of the brain and nervous system. Young children learn through movement and sensory experiences. Physical activity supports exploration, confidence, and social interaction. Healthy brain development also provides the neurological foundation for attention, emotional regulation, and learning.

Social Development

Social development involves learning how to interact with others, build relationships, cooperate, and participate in a community. Through interactions with family members, educators, and peers, children learn social rules, communication skills, empathy, and problem-solving strategies. Social experiences provide opportunities to practice emotional regulation and develop a sense of belonging.

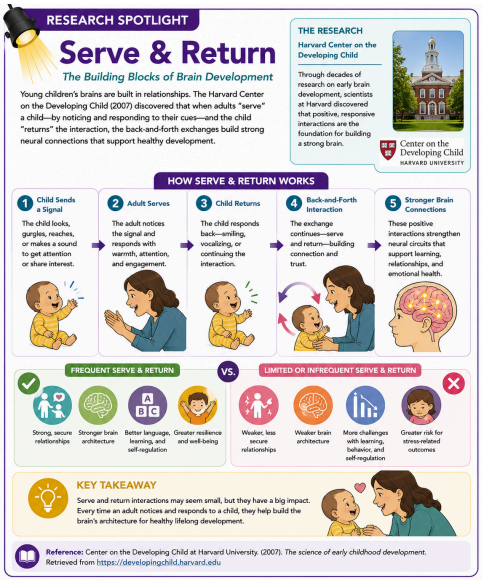
Emotional Development

Emotional development refers to children's growing ability to recognize, express, understand, and regulate emotions. Emotional well-being influences every aspect of development. Children who feel safe, valued, and supported are more likely to engage in learning, form positive relationships, and approach new experiences with confidence.

Seeing the Whole Child

Because these domains are interconnected, educators must avoid viewing development through a narrow lens. A child who is struggling to communicate may become frustrated emotionally. A child experiencing emotional stress may have difficulty concentrating on learning tasks. Similarly, positive relationships can support language growth, cognitive development, and emotional well-being simultaneously.

Effective early childhood educators recognize that every interaction, routine, and learning experience supports multiple domains of development at once. By seeing the whole child, educators can create environments and experiences that nurture growth across all areas of development.



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1.4: The Goal of Social and Emotional Learning

As children's brains organize through responsive relationships and experiences, they begin to develop what is called social competence. Social competence is the ability to interact effectively with others, express emotions appropriately, cooperate, solve problems, and build positive relationships (Denham, 2006).

By intentionally fostering social competence, early educators are not only teaching skills like empathy and self-control; they are literally building the architecture of the developing brain through every caring interaction.

Social competence reflects the integration of emotional understanding, self-regulation, and social awareness, allowing children to navigate social situations with empathy, confidence, and respect for others. As stated earlier, it is one of the strongest predictors of later academic success, mental health, and overall lifelong well-being (Jones et al., 2015).

Observable Behaviors of Socially Competent Children

Socially competent children demonstrate the ability to manage emotions, build positive relationships, and navigate social situations effectively. These skills develop through consistent, caring relationships and intentional guidance from early educators (Denham, 2006; Hyson, 2004).

Common observable behaviors include the ability to cooperate and share with peers, express emotions appropriately, show empathy, resolve conflicts constructively, communicate needs effectively, and build positive relationships. For instance, a socially competent child might invite a peer to join a game, take turns without prompting, comfort a friend who is upset, or express frustration using words rather than aggression. Such behaviors reflect an understanding of fairness, kindness, emotional awareness, and social responsibility. Children who are developing these skills can communicate their needs, regulate frustration, and form meaningful connections with others. The following positive examples are commonly associated with the development of social competence in young children:

1. Cooperates and Shares with Peers

The child willingly takes turns, shares materials, and works collaboratively during play or group activities, demonstrating awareness of others' needs and perspectives.

2. Expresses Emotions Appropriately

The child identifies and communicates feelings with words rather than through aggression or withdrawal and can use coping strategies (such as asking for help or taking a break) when frustrated.

3. Shows Empathy and Caring

The child notices and responds to the feelings of others, for example, offering comfort when a peer is upset or showing excitement when a friend succeeds.

4. Builds Positive Relationships

The child develops friendships, enjoys interacting with peers and adults, and seeks out opportunities to participate in play, conversation, and group activities.

5. Communicates Needs and Ideas Effectively

The child expresses wants, needs, preferences, and opinions respectfully while also listening to and considering the perspectives of others.

6. Resolves Conflicts Constructively

The child uses emerging problem-solving skills to negotiate disagreements, seek adult support when needed, compromise with others, and restore relationships after conflict.

7. Demonstrates Social Confidence and Resilience

The child approaches new situations with curiosity, recovers from minor disappointments, copes with rejection or setbacks, and continues to engage positively with peers and activities.

Supporting the Development of Social Competence

While these behaviors reflect growing social competence, many children are still learning these skills. Social competence develops through repeated opportunities to practice cooperation, communication, and problem-solving with supportive adults and peers. When teachers intentionally model calm communication, label emotions, and guide conflict resolution, children gradually internalize these patterns and begin to self-regulate. Social competence grows through repeated, supportive interactions and relationships, not punishment or isolation (Bierman, Domitrovich, Nix, Gest, Welsh, Greenberg, Blair, Nelson, & Gill, 2008)

Observable Behaviors of Children Still Developing Social Competence

In contrast, children who are still developing social competence may display challenging behaviors such as grabbing toys, crying or withdrawing when frustrated, or relying on adults to solve every conflict. With intentional modeling and guidance, educators can help these children replace impulsive or avoidant behaviors with cooperative, empathetic, and problem-solving responses (Bierman et al., 2008).

These behaviors often reflect unmet social-emotional needs or limited experience with self-regulation. Rather than viewing them as signs of angry defiance, educators can view them as opportunities for guidance, learning, and growth.

Common Challenging Behaviors May Include:

- Grabbing toys, interrupting peers, or struggling to take turns and share.
- Crying, yelling, withdrawing, or becoming overwhelmed when frustrated or disappointed.
- Relying on adults to solve every peer conflict or social misunderstanding.
- Showing difficulty identifying, expressing, or talking about emotions.
- Having difficulty entering play, making friends, or maintaining positive peer relationships.
- Struggling to communicate needs, wants, or feelings effectively.
- Giving up easily after setbacks, becoming discouraged by rejection, or avoiding new social situations.
- Demonstrating impulsive behaviors that interfere with cooperation or group participation.

With Intentional Guidance, Educators Can Help Children:

- Replace impulsive reactions with cooperative and empathetic responses.
- Learn to use words, gestures, or strategies to communicate needs calmly and effectively.
- Develop friendship skills such as sharing, turn-taking, and joining play appropriately.
- Practice problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies with adult support.
- Build confidence in social situations through positive interactions and encouragement.
- Internalize patterns of self-regulation through consistent, caring adult support.

The Benefits of Social Competence

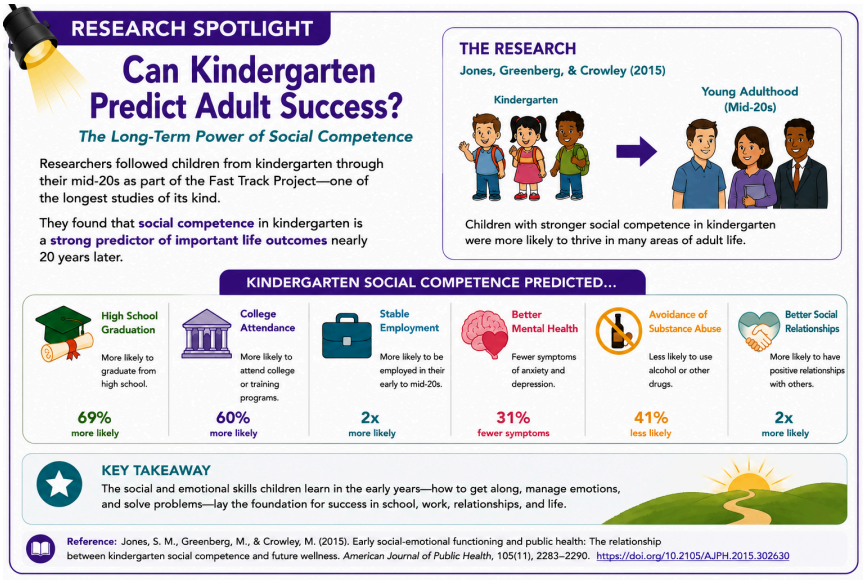
Social competence in early childhood provides the foundation for success across nearly every area of development. Children who can understand emotions, communicate effectively, and cooperate with others are more likely to form positive relationships with peers and adults, adjust well to school environments, and experience greater academic achievement (Denham, 2006; Bierman et

al., 2008).

Socially competent children tend to show higher levels of self-esteem and resilience, because they experience belonging and acceptance within their peer groups. They are better able to manage frustration and recover from setbacks, which supports mental health and persistence in learning tasks.

These children also demonstrate stronger language and cognitive development, as cooperative play and peer interaction naturally encourage communication, problem-solving, and flexible thinking (Hyson, 2004). Over time, social competence predicts positive outcomes such as reduced behavioral challenges, stronger empathy, and healthier long-term relationships (Denham, 2006).

By helping children develop these essential skills, early educators support the emotional intelligence, resilience, and interpersonal abilities that contribute to success in school, relationships, and life.



Long-Term Implications of Social Competence

The benefits of social competence extend far beyond early childhood. Research has shown that the social and emotional skills learned in the first five years of life serve as strong predictors of later outcomes in education, employment, and mental health (Jones et al., 2015). Children who enter school with the ability to regulate emotions, cooperate with others, and persist through challenges are more likely to experience academic success and positive peer relationships throughout their schooling.

In adolescence and adulthood, individuals who were socially competent as children tend to demonstrate greater emotional intelligence, stronger interpersonal skills, and healthier coping mechanisms when faced with stress or conflict. These same skills, empathy, cooperation, communication, and self-regulation, are highly valued in today's workforce, where teamwork and adaptability are essential to success.

Moreover, longitudinal research suggests that children with higher levels of social competence are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, experience depression, or face social isolation in later years (Jones et al., 2015). Thus, fostering social competence in early childhood is not simply about school readiness, it is about preparing children for a successful life.

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1.5: The Dimensions of Social Competence

Social competence is a broad concept that encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors children use to navigate relationships and participate successfully in their communities. While social competence is often associated with getting along with others, it actually involves multiple interconnected areas of development that work together to support children's overall well-being.

McClellan and Katz (2001) identified several observable characteristics of social competence, which was later expanded and discussed by Kostelnik, Soderman, Phipps Whiren, Rupiper, & Murphy Gregory (2015). These dimensions help explain why social-emotional development is so important in early childhood and why it influences success both inside and outside the classroom.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, express, and manage emotions in healthy ways. Emotionally intelligent children begin to identify their own feelings, recognize emotions in others, and respond with empathy and compassion. These skills help children communicate effectively, manage frustration, and build positive relationships.

Examples include:

- Recognizing emotions in oneself and others
- Demonstrating empathy
- Expressing feelings appropriately
- Managing frustration and disappointment
- Seeking and providing emotional support

Positive Self-Identity

Positive self-identity refers to how children view themselves and their abilities. Children who develop a positive sense of self are more likely to approach challenges with confidence, persist when tasks become difficult, and believe they can make meaningful contributions to their communities.

Examples include:

- Self-awareness
- Sense of competence
- Personal agency
- Sense of purpose

Positive Expectations for the Future

Self-identity includes more than confidence in what a child can do. It also encompasses the child's developing understanding of who they are as an individual and as a member of social and cultural groups. Young children notice and communicate characteristics of their appearance, preferences, interests, family experiences, and identities related to such factors as gender, race, ethnicity, culture, language, and ability. As children grow, they become increasingly able to describe these identities and express pride in the people, traditions, and experiences that are important to them (California Department of Education, 2024).

Educators support positive personal and group identity when they pronounce children's names correctly, welcome and use children's home languages, represent diverse families and communities authentically, invite children to share family practices, and challenge stereotypes or exclusion. Children also need meaningful choices and opportunities to demonstrate their strengths. These experiences communicate that every child's identity is valued and that differences are a natural and important part of the classroom community.

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills enable children to form and maintain healthy relationships. These skills allow children to communicate their needs, cooperate with others, resolve conflicts, and work effectively as members of a group.

Examples include:

- Building friendships
- Cooperating with peers
- Communicating ideas and needs
- Resolving conflicts peacefully
- Respecting the rights of others

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage emotions, behaviors, and impulses. Children who develop self-regulation are better able to wait, take turns, follow directions, and respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

Examples include:

- Controlling impulses
- Delaying gratification
- Managing strong emotions
- Monitoring behavior
- Demonstrating prosocial behavior

Planning and Decision-Making

Children gradually learn to think about choices, solve problems, and consider consequences. These skills support independence, responsibility, and critical thinking.

Examples include:

- Making choices
- Solving problems
- Developing plans
- Thinking ahead
- Working toward goals

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence involves understanding, respecting, and appreciating diversity. Children begin developing cultural competence through exposure to diverse people, experiences, languages, and perspectives.

Examples include:

- Respecting differences
- Interacting positively with people from diverse backgrounds
- Recognizing unfair treatment
- Demonstrating inclusion
- Developing a sense of social justice

Social Values

Social competence is also grounded in values that guide behavior and relationships. Through interactions with caring adults and peers, children begin to develop an understanding of fairness, responsibility, honesty, and kindness.

Examples include:

- Caring
- Helpfulness
- Honesty
- Responsibility
- Fairness
- Flexibility
- Respect for others

Pulling the Pieces Together

Although these dimensions are presented separately, they are deeply interconnected. A child who can regulate emotions is more likely to build positive relationships. A child who feels competent and valued is more likely to cooperate with others. Likewise, empathy, decision-making, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence work together to support healthy development.

For this reason, social competence is not a single skill but a collection of abilities that develop through relationships, experiences, and intentional guidance from caring adults. Throughout this textbook, we will explore each of these dimensions in greater depth and examine how educators can intentionally support children's social and emotional growth.

The Role of Educators in Supporting Social Emotional Learning

Early childhood educators play a central role in nurturing children's social and emotional development. Through daily interactions, teachers model empathy, patience, respect, and emotional regulation, creating safe and predictable relationships that support learning and growth (Denham, 2006; Hyson, 2004). Because young children learn through observation, imitation, and repetition, the educator's words, consistent actions, and emotional responses become powerful teaching tools.

High-quality early childhood programs recognize that social-emotional learning is not separate from the curriculum; it is embedded within every routine, interaction, and learning experience. Too often, social-emotional learning is viewed as an interruption to academic instruction. In reality, it is an essential part of the curriculum and provides the foundation upon which all other learning is built.

Throughout this textbook, we will explore the many ways educators support social and emotional development through relationships, classroom environments, intentional teaching practices, assessment, family partnerships, and reflective practice.

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1.6: The Importance of Emotionally Supportive Environments

Children develop social and emotional skills within the environments they experience each day. Just as relationships influence development, the physical and emotional climate of a classroom can either support or hinder children's ability to learn, connect, and regulate their emotions. Environments that promote safety, belonging, predictability, and respect help children feel secure enough to explore, take risks, and engage with others.

An emotionally supportive environment communicates to children that they are valued, accepted, and capable. These settings provide opportunities for children to build relationships, practice social skills, express emotions appropriately, and develop self-regulation. When children feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to participate in learning, solve problems collaboratively, and develop positive relationships with peers and adults. This idea is consistent with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory that children's basic needs for safety, belonging, and emotional security must be met before they can fully engage in learning and reach their potential. Maslow will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Creating emotionally supportive environments is a shared responsibility that involves thoughtful classroom design, consistent routines, responsive interactions, and a strong sense of community. Throughout this textbook, we will explore how educators intentionally create environments that support children's social-emotional development and overall well-being.

Social-emotional development is a complex process influenced by relationships, temperament, culture, life experiences, and the environments in which children grow. The chapters that follow explore these influences in greater depth. Topics include attachment, temperament, self-regulation, stress and resilience, emotional development, empathy, social competence, culturally responsive practice, family partnerships, assessment, and the role of educators in supporting children's growth.

Together, these chapters provide a framework for understanding how children develop the social and emotional skills needed to thrive in school, relationships, and life.

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1.7: Chapter Vocabulary

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): The process through which children learn to understand and manage emotions, develop healthy identities, form positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions.

Social Competence: The ability to interact effectively with others, express emotions appropriately, cooperate, solve social problems, and build positive relationships.

Emotional Intelligence: The ability to recognize, understand, express, and manage emotions in oneself and respond appropriately to the emotions of others.

Self-Regulation: The developing ability to manage emotions, attention, behavior, and impulses in ways that support relationships, learning, and goal-directed activity.

Cultural Competence: The developing ability to understand, respect, and interact positively with people from different cultural, linguistic, family, and ability backgrounds.

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1.8: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations: Social and Emotional Development:** The complete California foundations for children ages three to five and a half, including the Early and Later developmental progressions.
- **Fundamentals of Social and Emotional Learning:** Introduces CASEL's definition of SEL, five core competencies, and the settings in which social and emotional learning develops.
- **Serve and Return: Back-and-Forth Exchanges:** Explains how responsive interactions between children and caring adults shape brain architecture and support language, relationships, and learning.

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2: ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS

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2.1: Chapter Introduction

2



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 2.1:** Explain the central principles of attachment theory and the contributions of major attachment researchers.
- **SLO 2.2:** Differentiate among secure, avoidant, ambivalent/resistant, and disorganized attachment patterns.
- **SLO 2.3**: Analyze how caregiver availability, consistency, sensitivity, culture, and responsiveness influence children's attachment relationships and internal working models.
- **SLO 2.4:** Apply responsive and culturally affirming caregiving practices that support co-regulation, reciprocal relationships, emotional security, and children's confidence in exploring their environments.

Chapter 2 Short Overview

This chapter examines attachment as a reciprocal emotional bond that provides children with security, comfort, and a foundation for exploration and learning. It introduces the contributions of Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, Harlow, and Belsky, along with the major attachment patterns and the influence of early relationships on development across the lifespan. The chapter also explores how responsive, culturally sensitive educators can become secure bases and build positive relationships with children and families.

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2.2: The Foundations of Attachment Theory - John Bowlby



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Attachment refers to the deep and enduring emotional bond that develops between a child and a caregiver. These early relationships provide children with a sense of safety, security, and belonging, forming the foundation for social, emotional, and cognitive development throughout life. When caregivers respond consistently and sensitively to a child's needs, children develop trust in both themselves and others. Over time, children learn that their needs will be recognized and met, creating a sense of security that supports exploration, learning, and healthy relationships. Conversely, when caregiving is inconsistent, unpredictable, or unresponsive, children may develop insecurity and uncertainty about whether their needs will be met. These early experiences shape children's expectations of relationships and influence how they interact with others throughout life.

Attachment theory has profoundly influenced our understanding of child development, relationships, and learning. The work of John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Main, and other researchers has demonstrated that secure relationships are not simply comforting, but they are essential for healthy development. In this chapter, we will explore the origins of attachment theory, the major attachment styles, and the implications of attachment for early childhood education and lifelong well-being.

Connection is at the heart of all development. In early childhood education, the foundation of growth and learning begins with relationships. Through consistent, responsive interactions, children develop a sense of safety, trust, and belonging that supports exploration, learning, and emotional well-being. Attachment theory helps us understand how these early relationships influence development and why secure connections are so important during the first years of life.

When there is a positive and consistent connection between an infant, toddler, or young child and a special adult, an attachment exists between them (Thompson, 2006). A mother who provides dependable, responsive care is often the first person to whom a child becomes attached. However, attachment may also form with a father, grandparent, sibling, aunt, uncle, neighbor, teacher, or any other adult who has regular and nurturing contact with the child.

Adults who are available, attentive, and responsive to a baby's cues become that baby's preferred caregivers. While children may develop multiple attachment figures, it is most essential that each child has at least one secure attachment relationship. Sensitive caregivers observe and respond to the many ways infants and toddlers communicate their interests, feelings, and needs. These adult actions evoke reciprocal attachment behaviors, such as smiling, reaching, following, and seeking comfort from a trusted adult. Adults often find these interactions deeply rewarding, creating a mutual emotional bond that strengthens over time. In this way, attachment is not a one-sided dependency, but a two-way process. It is a relationship that nourishes both the child and the adult (Kostelnik, Soderman, Phipps Whiren, Rupiper, & Gregory, 2015).

John Bowlby (1907–1990) is widely regarded as the father of attachment theory. Trained in both medicine and psychoanalysis, he became deeply interested in how early relationships shape emotional and social development throughout life. Bowlby believed that early emotional bonds are biologically essential for survival. Drawing from psychoanalysis, ethology, and evolutionary biology, he held the notion that infants are not passive recipients of care, but they are active participants in forming relationships that ensure protection and security. Bowlby rejected the Freudian idea that the mother–child bond was based solely on feeding. Instead, he proposed that attachment evolved as a survival mechanism, keeping infants close to caregivers who could provide safety.

In his landmark study of forty-four boys referred for stealing, Bowlby found that twelve of the fourteen children were identified as "affectionless" (unable to form close relationships, showing indifference, superficial charm, or aggression) and had experienced prolonged separation from their mothers before the age of five. This suggested a strong link between early maternal deprivation and later emotional detachment (Bowlby, 1944). He theorized that these patterns resulted from disrupted caregiving, which

prevented the formation of secure early attachments.

At the time in the 1950s, Bowlby's ideas were considered controversial. His emphasis on attachment as a biologically based behavioral system differed from dominant psychoanalytic theories, which focused more heavily on unconscious motivations, internal representations, and instinctual drives. Bowlby argued that children's actual experiences with caregivers played a central role in development. His perspective viewed attachment as an adaptive system that increases a child's chance of survival. Bowlby (1988) wrote, "The propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals is a basic component of human nature" (p. 3).

Infants are biologically programmed to seek closeness to a caregiver when threatened or distressed, and caregivers are likewise predisposed to respond. Through this reciprocal system, children develop internal expectations about whether their needs will be met, forming what Bowlby called "internal working models" of relationships. These models influence how children interpret relationships, regulate emotions, and view themselves and others throughout life.

The Secure Base and Safe Haven

In addition, Bowlby (1969) defined attachment as "a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (p. 194). He explained that infants are biologically driven to seek closeness to a familiar caregiver, especially in times of stress or fear. This closeness provides protection and the foundation for emotional regulation.

Bowlby identified four essential features of attachment:

1. **Proximity Maintenance**: The desire to remain close to the caregiver.
2. **Safe Haven**: Turning to the caregiver for comfort and reassurance when distressed.
3. **Secure Base**: Using the caregiver as a foundation from which to explore the world.
4. **Separation Distress**: Experiencing anxiety when the caregiver is absent.

A child's sense of security depends on the caregiver's availability, consistency, and responsiveness. When children feel safe, they are free to explore and learn; when they feel threatened, they seek closeness and protection. Consistent and responsive caregiving allows infants to develop trust, aligning with Erik Erikson's first psychosocial stage: Trust vs. Mistrust. When caregivers are dependable and emotionally available, infants learn that the world is safe and that their needs will be met. This sense of security becomes the foundation for future learning, exploration, and healthy relationships.

Attachment and Survival

From Bowlby's evolutionary standpoint, attachment functions as a survival system. Young mammals that stay close to caregivers are more likely to survive threats. Bowlby's ideas paralleled Konrad Lorenz's (1935) research on imprinting in birds, where goslings instinctively follow the first moving figure they see after hatching. Similarly, human infants are biologically wired to seek proximity to caregivers, thus forming an emotional tether that ensures safety and nurturance.

Emotional Impressions That Endure

Bowlby emphasized that early experiences leave lasting psychological imprints on the developing brain. Secure, consistent caregiving leads children to internalize the belief that "I am lovable, and others can be trusted." Inconsistent or rejecting care can lead to the belief that "I must take care of myself, because others may not." Again, this connects to Erikson's first psychosocial stage: Trust vs. Mistrust.

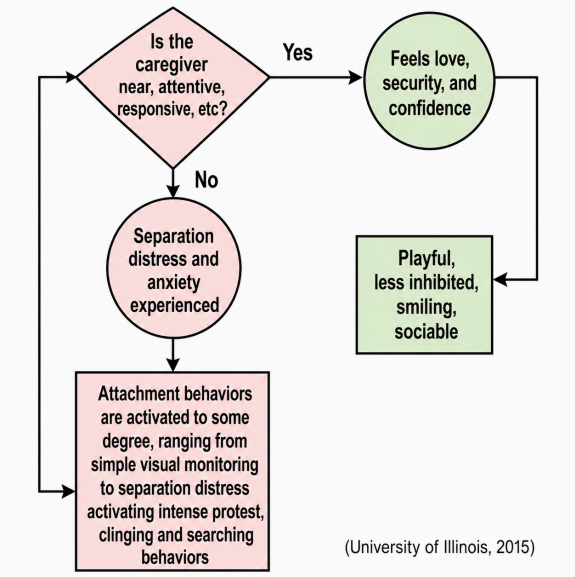
These internal working models become the templates for future relationships, shaping how individuals connect, trust, and love throughout life. Bowlby (1988) expressed this idea beautifully when he wrote, "We are molded and remolded by those who have loved us. Though the love may pass, the impression remains upon us forever."

The Attachment System in Action

Figure 2.1 illustrates how the attachment behavioral system operates (University of Illinois, [2015], adapted from Fraley & Shaver, 2000). When a caregiver is near, attentive, and responsive, the infant feels secure, loved, confident, playful, and free to explore

and/or socially engage. When the caregiver is absent, unavailable, or unresponsive, the child experiences **separation distress** activating attachment behaviors such as crying, clinging, or searching to restore contact. These behaviors are not signs of "spoiling" or dependence; rather, they are biologically adaptive behaviors designed to maintain connection and safety.

Attachment Behavioral System: Figure 2.1



(University of Illinois (2015) Adapted from Fraley & Shaver, 2000, p. 134).

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2.3: Mary Ainsworth and the Strange Situation

While John Bowlby laid the theoretical foundation for attachment, Mary Ainsworth (1913–1999), a Canadian-born developmental psychologist who worked closely with Bowlby and was strongly influenced by his ideas, provided much of the empirical evidence supporting attachment theory. Her research brought Bowlby's concepts to life by observing how infants actually behaved when separated from and reunited with their caregivers. While Bowlby conceptualized attachment as an evolutionary system that promotes survival, Ainsworth sought to understand how attachment is expressed in daily interactions between infants and caregivers.

Building on Bowlby's theoretical work, Ainsworth designed a now-famous observational study known as the *Strange Situation* (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Conducted during her research at Johns Hopkins University, it remains one of the most influential studies in developmental psychology. This structured laboratory procedure was developed to assess the quality of attachment relationships in infants aged 12 to 18 months. The child and caregiver were placed in an unfamiliar playroom equipped with toys. Over a series of eight three-minute episodes, the infant experienced separations and reunions involving the caregiver and a friendly stranger.

Researchers observed how the infant reacted when the caregiver left and, most importantly, how the child responded when the caregiver returned. Ainsworth identified three distinct patterns of attachment based on these interactions:

1. **Secure Attachment (Type B):** Securely attached infants used their caregiver as a secure base and explored the room when their caregiver was present, showing curiosity and confidence. When the caregiver left, they typically showed distress but were easily comforted upon reunion and quickly returned to play. They used their caregiver as a secure base for exploration and a safe haven for reassurance and trusted that their caregiver would be available and responsive when needed.
2. **Insecure-Ambivalent (Resistant) Attachment (Type C):** Ambivalently attached infants were clingy and anxious or preoccupied with their caregiver even before separation occurs. When the caregiver left, these infants typically showed intense distress when separated and were not easily comforted upon reunion. They often sought contact but also resisted comfort by pushing away, hitting, arching their back, or displaying clinginess, anger, passivity, and/or frustration. Their behavior suggests uncertainty about whether the caregiver will be consistently available and responsive.
3. **Insecure-Avoidant Attachment (Type A):** These infants appeared largely indifferent to the caregiver's departure and seemed unusually independent and often ignored or avoided the caregiver's return and showed little preference between the caregiver and the stranger. They did not seek comfort or show visible distress. Although these infants may appear calm, later research using physiological measures found elevated levels of stress, suggesting that their distress is being suppressed rather than openly expressed.

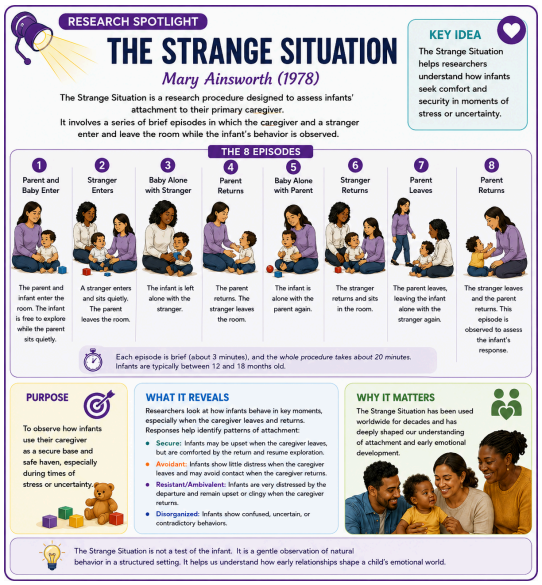
Ainsworth's research demonstrated that attachment security is not an inborn trait but rather a reflection of the caregiver's responsiveness and sensitivity to the child's needs. Secure attachments emerged most often when caregivers were consistently available, attuned, and emotionally responsive. In contrast, inconsistent or rejecting caregiving was associated with ambivalent or avoidant attachment patterns.

The quality of attachment, whether secure or insecure, has profound implications for social and emotional development. Securely attached children generally display greater curiosity, empathy, and resilience, while insecurely attached children may struggle with anxiety, avoidance, or dependency. Ainsworth's work validated Bowlby's theory through systematic observation and measurement, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Her research also established the idea of the secure base, the emotional foundation from which children explore the world and return for comfort when needed. This concept remains central to early childhood education today, emphasizing the importance of consistent, nurturing relationships in promoting exploration, confidence, and learning.

Ainsworth's findings demonstrated that attachment security depends not on how much time a caregiver spends with a child, but on how sensitively and consistently the caregiver responds to the child's needs.

A sensitive caregiver is one who perceives the infant's signals accurately, interprets them correctly, and responds to them promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth et al., 1978).



Adding the Fourth Category: Disorganized Attachment

Building on Ainsworth's work, Mary Main (1943–2023) and her colleague Judith Solomon (1942–) identified a fourth pattern called the disorganized/disoriented attachment style (Main & Solomon, 1986). Children in this group displayed contradictory or confused behaviors, such as approaching the caregiver while averting their gaze, freezing in place, showing apprehension, or displaying odd and inconsistent responses during reunions. Unlike the other attachment patterns, these children appeared to lack a coherent strategy for seeking comfort and security.

Disorganized attachment has been associated with caregiving environments in which the caregiver may also be a source of fear, confusion, or unpredictability for the child. Such patterns are more common among children who have experienced trauma, neglect, frightening caregiving behaviors, or significant disruptions in caregiving relationships.

Main's contribution bridged attachment theory and cognitive psychology by emphasizing that children's behaviors reflected internal working models, the mental representations children develop about themselves, their caregivers, and relationships. In this way, attachment is not only reflected in behavior but also in how children come to understand and expect relationships to function throughout life.

Cross-Cultural Research on the Strange Situation

Subsequent studies have found that attachment classifications appear across cultures, though their expressions differ. In Japan, for example, high rates of ambivalent attachment reflect cultural norms of close physical proximity between mothers and infants. In Germany, higher rates of avoidant attachment may reflect cultural emphasis on independence (van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). These differences remind us that attachment security is universal in function but culturally specific in form.

Implications for Early Care and Education

For early childhood educators, Ainsworth's work underscores the importance of consistent, attuned caregiving. When caregivers respond predictably and with warmth, they become secondary secure bases for children in care. This sense of emotional safety allows children to explore, learn, and build positive peer relationships. Attachment security in early education settings is not about replacing the parent, it is about extending the child's network of trusted relationships.

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2.4: Mary Main and the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)

While Bowlby provided the theory and Ainsworth demonstrated attachment patterns in infancy, Mary Main, extended the field of attachment research beyond infancy, by exploring how these early attachment experiences shape our relationships in adulthood.

While Ainsworth focused on how infants behave when distressed, Main sought to understand how adults think and talk about attachments, and how these mental representations influence their own caregiving relationships. Her work revealed that attachment is not simply a childhood phenomenon but a lifelong internal framework influencing how we think, feel, and respond to others throughout life.

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) is a semi-structured interview designed to assess an adult's internal working model of attachment. Rather than simply asking about childhood experiences, the AAI examines how individuals organize and reflect on those experiences, their coherence, emotional regulation, and ability to integrate both positive and negative memories. Through the way they talked about their experiences and how they described relationships and memories, Main identified several distinct adult attachment classifications:

1. **Autonomous/Secure (F):**
   Individuals show balanced, thoughtful reflections about their past with openness, and perspective, acknowledging positive and negative experiences, strengths and challenges, and demonstrated emotional openness. Their narratives are coherent and integrated. These adults are comfortable with intimacy and autonomy, reflecting the secure base dynamic in adult form.
2. **Dismissing (Ds):**
   Individuals who minimize or idealize early experiences, often describing them as "normal" or "fine," while showing limited emotional recall or insight. They tend to downplay the importance of attachment experiences. They may idealize caregivers without supporting evidence or have limited recall of early emotional experiences. Their avoidance of emotional detail mirrors the avoidant attachment style seen in infancy.
3. **Preoccupied (E):**
   These individuals are entangled in past experiences, often speaking with anger, confusion, or emotional overinvolvement that disrupts coherence. Their narratives lack focus and reflect lingering emotional conflict, parallel to the ambivalent/resistant attachment style.
4. **Unresolved/Disorganized (U):**
   Individuals show lapses in logic or affect when discussing loss, trauma, or abuse. They show signs of disorganization when discussing trauma, loss, or abuse. Speech may become disjointed or confused during these moments, often pausing or changing tone abruptly, reflecting unresolved emotional integration. This corresponds to the disorganized attachment classification in infancy.

These categories paralleled the infant attachment styles identified by Ainsworth (secure, avoidant, ambivalent) while adding a new understanding of disorganized attachment, a pattern first identified by Main and Solomon (1986). Disorganized infants displayed contradictory behaviors, such as approaching but averting their gaze, freezing, or collapsing upon reunion; thus, suggesting fear toward the very caregiver who should provide comfort.

Main theorized that disorganization can arise when a caregiver is simultaneously a source of comfort and fear, for example, when a parent is abusive, neglectful, or traumatized themselves. In adulthood, this unresolved trauma may appear as fragmented or disoriented narratives, revealing how early attachment disruptions can echo across generations.

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) transformed attachment theory by revealing how early experiences shape later relationships. It showed that what matters most is not simply what happened in childhood, but how adults remember and make sense of those experiences. This insight bridged developmental psychology and family systems theory, emphasizing that attachment is both learned through relationships and transmitted through meaning-making. Main's research demonstrated that adults' states of mind about attachment reliably predict their children's attachment patterns, a process known as the intergenerational transmission of attachment (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

Attachment Across the Lifespan

Main's work emphasizes that attachment is dynamic and not fixed; it is an evolving process rooted in both behavior and cognition,

and can change through reflection, therapy, or supportive relationships. Adults who develop self-awareness and emotional insight can "earn" secure attachment, even after difficult childhood experiences. This concept of "earned security" offers profound hope, especially for educators, caregivers, and parents working to break cycles of trauma or inconsistency. Main (1995) suggested that the capacity to reflect on our own attachment histories, and to make sense of them, is one of the strongest predictors of our ability to provide secure care to others.

Daniel Stern and the Developing Sense of Self

Daniel Stern (1934–2012) expanded our understanding of attachment by emphasizing that infants are active participants in relationships from birth. Rather than viewing babies as passive recipients of caregiving, Stern proposed that infants continually organize their experiences into an emerging sense of self. Through thousands of everyday interactions such as eye contact, shared smiles, soothing voices, and responsive caregiving, infants gradually learn who they are in relation to other people (Stern, 1985).

Stern believed that these repeated interactions shape children's expectations about relationships and provide the foundation for emotional development, communication, and social understanding. He referred to many of these meaningful exchanges as moments of meeting, brief but powerful interactions during which caregiver and infant are emotionally connected. These experiences help children develop trust, emotional security, and a growing sense that their thoughts and feelings are understood.

Stern's work complements attachment theory by explaining how secure attachment develops through countless everyday interactions that gradually shape children's emotional and social development. Although Stern described how these interactions shape children's emerging sense of self, modern neuroscience now demonstrates that they also influence the developing brain and nervous system.

The Neurobiology of Secure Attachment

Recent advances in neuroscience have deepened our understanding of why secure attachment is so important during early childhood. Researchers now recognize that warm, responsive relationships do more than provide emotional comfort. They also help regulate the developing nervous system. When caregivers consistently respond with warmth, eye contact, soothing voices, affectionate touch, and sensitive caregiving, children experience repeated physiological signals of safety. Over time, the child's autonomic nervous system begins to associate these relationships with safety, stability, and calm, supporting emotional regulation, stress recovery, learning, and healthy social relationships (Porges, 2011; Schore, 2001).

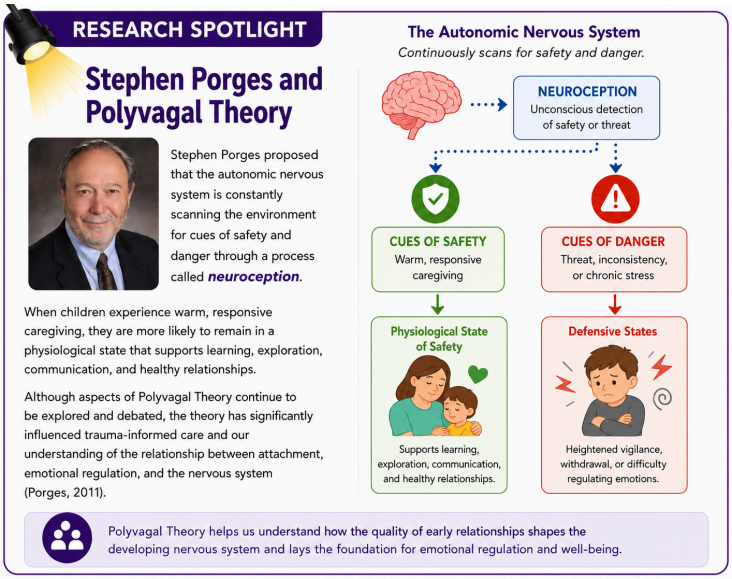
Conversely, inconsistent, frightening, or emotionally unavailable caregiving may contribute to heightened physiological arousal, leaving the nervous system more vigilant or dysregulated. Children experiencing chronic stress often have greater difficulty regulating emotions, managing stress, and engaging confidently with others (Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2012).

Young children are not born with fully developed self-regulation (Self-regulation is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4). Instead, they depend on caring adults to help regulate their emotions and physiological responses, a process known as co-regulation. Repeated experiences of co-regulation help children develop a secure attachment by creating a consistent internal expectation that trusted adults provide safety, comfort, and support during times of stress. Through thousands of everyday interactions, caregivers help children return to a calm, regulated state following moments of stress, frustration, fear, or disappointment. Over time, these repeated experiences gradually become the foundation for children's developing self-regulation (Siegel, 2012; Thompson, 2006).

Some clinicians and educators informally describe these social and emotional cues as a person's "frequency" or "emotional frequency." Although these terms are not used in the scientific literature, they provide a helpful way to think about how people often experience one another. A calm, warm, and emotionally regulated adult tends to create a sense of safety, while an angry, anxious, or unpredictable adult may create a sense of unease. Neuroscience suggests that these reactions occur because our nervous systems are continuously evaluating cues of safety and danger through a process that Stephen Porges (2011) calls neuroception. Porges' Polyvagal Theory offers one explanation for how relationships influence emotional regulation. According to the theory, the autonomic nervous system continuously evaluates whether situations feel safe or threatening through a largely unconscious process.

When children experience consistent, responsive caregiving, their nervous systems are more likely to remain in a physiological state that supports social engagement, exploration, communication, and learning. In contrast, when children experience chronic stress or inconsistent caregiving, their nervous systems may shift toward defensive states characterized by heightened vigilance,

withdrawal, or difficulty regulating emotions. Although researchers continue to investigate aspects of Polyvagal Theory, it has contributed significantly to our understanding of how supportive relationships promote emotional regulation and healthy development (Porges, 2011).



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2.5: Freud and the Origins of Attachment Thinking

Long before Bowlby developed attachment theory, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) recognized the importance of early relationships. Freud believed infants became attached to their mothers because mothers satisfied biological drives such as hunger. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the emotional bond between mother and child developed through the gratification of instinctual needs.

Bowlby agreed that early relationships were important, but he disagreed with Freud's explanation. He argued that attachment was not simply a byproduct of feeding. Instead, attachment was a biologically based behavioral system designed to keep children close to protective caregivers.

This difference would become one of the most important debates in developmental psychology and eventually inspired researchers such as Harry Harlow to investigate whether comfort and affection might be as important as food in forming attachments.

Repetition Compulsion and Attachment Patterns

Freud (1920) proposed the concept of repetition compulsion, the tendency to unconsciously repeat familiar patterns, relationships, or experiences from the past. Although Freud originally viewed repetition compulsion through a psychoanalytic lens, modern attachment researchers have noted similarities between this concept and Bowlby's idea of internal working models.

Children develop expectations about relationships based on their earliest attachment experiences. These expectations often influence the types of relationships they seek, tolerate, or recreate throughout life. For example, a child who experiences consistent, responsive caregiving may grow into an adult who expects relationships to be trustworthy and supportive. Conversely, a child who experiences inconsistency, rejection, or emotional unavailability may unconsciously gravitate toward familiar relationship patterns, even when those patterns are unhealthy.

From an attachment perspective, repetition is not necessarily a conscious choice. Individuals often recreate familiar relational dynamics because those experiences feel predictable and known. What is familiar can feel safer than what is unfamiliar, even when it causes distress. In this way, early attachment experiences can echo throughout the lifespan, influencing friendships, romantic relationships, parenting practices, and professional interactions.

Fortunately, attachment patterns are not destiny. Through supportive relationships, self-reflection, therapy, and corrective emotional experiences, individuals can develop new internal working models and break cycles of insecurity. This process reflects what attachment researchers describe as earned security, the ability to develop secure relationships despite earlier adversity.

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2.6: Jay Belsky and the Evolutionary Perspective on Attachment

As attachment theory matured through the work of Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, and others, developmental psychologist Jay Belsky (1952–) brought a new dimension to the conversation, one that integrated attachment with evolutionary biology and life history theory**.** His work proposed that attachment patterns are not simply "good" or "bad," but rather adaptive strategies shaped by environmental conditions and caregiving experiences.

Evolutionary Roots of Attachment

Building on Bowlby's original ethological framework, Belsky (1999) suggested that attachment behaviors evolved to maximize survival and reproductive success**.** From this perspective, secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized attachment styles are viewed as adaptive responses to the caregiving environment in which a child develops.

In stable, supportive environments, **s**ecure attachment promotes trust, cooperation, and long-term relationship building, which are traits that help individuals thrive in cohesive social groups.
In unpredictable or harsh environments, however, insecure attachment may lead to hypervigilance, self-reliance, or early independence. These are all strategies that are emotionally costly, but they can promote survival when consistent caregiving cannot be relied upon.

Rather than labeling insecurity as pathology, Belsky reframed it as context-dependent adaptation. In his words, the goal of attachment is not to produce one universal outcome, but to optimize the child's development for the environment they inhabit.

The Differential Susceptibility Hypothesis

One of Belsky's most influential contributions is the Differential Susceptibility Hypothesis (Belsky & Pluess, 2009). This theory proposes that some children are more biologically sensitive to environmental influences, whether for better or for worse.

Children with certain temperamental or genetic traits (such as high reactivity) may struggle in stressful or neglectful environments but flourish in supportive, responsive ones. These children are like "orchids," delicate but capable of extraordinary growth when nurtured. Others, more resilient or less reactive, "dandelions," can survive under a broader range of conditions but may not respond as dramatically to positive change.

This framework shifted the field's focus away from viewing vulnerability as purely negative and toward an appreciation of plasticity, which is the remarkable human capacity to adapt and recover.

Children differ in their susceptibility to both negative and positive environmental influences. Those most affected by adversity are also the ones who benefit most from support (Belsky & Pluess, 2009).

Modern Applications for Early Childhood Education

Belsky's work offers a compassionate, science-based perspective for educators and caregivers. It reminds us that behavior is communication, and that challenging behaviors often reflect adaptations to stress rather than defiance or pathology.

In classrooms and childcare settings, this means:

- Building predictable routines that foster safety and trust.
- Creating emotionally responsive environments where children's cues are read and respected.
- Recognizing that each child's temperament shapes how they experience and express attachment needs.
- Understanding that sensitive, consistent caregiving can recalibrate insecure patterns and support long-term resilience.

Ultimately, Belsky's evolutionary view deepens our empathy: secure attachment is ideal, but all attachment patterns tell a story

about adaptation, survival, and hope.

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2.7: Harry Harlow and the Science of Comfort and Contact

While Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, and Belsky developed attachment theory through observation, interviews, and developmental research, Harry Harlow (1905–1981) approached the question from a very different direction. His controversial experiments with rhesus monkeys provided powerful, though ethically troubling, evidence for the importance of comfort, connection, and emotional security.

Bowlby and Ainsworth were establishing the psychological foundations of attachment, but Harry Harlow was conducting groundbreaking, and deeply controversial, experiments that provided biological evidence for the power of love and emotional connection. His studies with rhesus monkeys at the University of Wisconsin–Madison helped prove what caregivers and teachers have long intuited: nurturing touch and emotional security are as vital as food and shelter for healthy development.

From Behaviorism to Belonging

In the early 1950s, the dominant belief among psychologists was that infants formed attachments because caregivers provided food. This concept is rooted in behaviorism. According to this view, love was merely a secondary drive, learned through association with basic needs such as feeding. Harlow challenged this idea directly.

He hypothesized that the need for affection, comfort, and emotional security was primary. It was a built-in drive as essential to survival as nourishment. To test this, Harlow created an experiment that would forever change our understanding of human bonding.

The Wire Mother vs. the Cloth Mother

In his famous 1958 study, Harlow separated infant rhesus monkeys from their biological mothers and raised them with two surrogate "mothers." One was made of bare wire and provided milk through a bottle; the other was covered in soft terrycloth but offered no food.

To the surprise of many in the scientific community, the infant monkeys overwhelmingly preferred the cloth mother. They spent most of their time clinging to her, seeking comfort and security, and only approached the wire mother briefly for nourishment. When frightened, they ran to the soft cloth surrogate, not the one that fed them.

This simple but powerful finding demonstrated that emotional comfort, warmth, and tactile affection, not feeding, form the core of attachment. As Harlow summarized, "The infant's need for love is as basic as its need for milk."

The Tragic Cost of Isolation

Harlow's later studies turned darker. In exploring the effects of maternal deprivation, he placed young monkeys in isolation chambers with no social contact for months at a time. These monkeys emerged severely disturbed, rocking, self-harming, and incapable of forming normal social bonds. Many became violent or withdrawn, even rejecting their own offspring.

While these studies provided profound insights into the devastating effects of social and emotional neglect, they also crossed major ethical lines. Even Harlow's colleagues grew increasingly uncomfortable. Researcher William Mason (2002), who worked closely with Harlow, was quoted in Deborah Blum's (2002) *Love at Goon Park*:

Harlow kept this going to the point where it was clear to many people that the work was really violating ordinary sensibilities, that anybody with respect for life or people would find this offensive. It's as if he sat down and said, 'I'm only going to be around another ten years. What I'd like to do, then, is leave a great big mess behind.' If that was his aim, he did a perfect job. (p. 301)

Legacy and Controversy

Despite their ethical problems, Harlow's studies were pivotal in shifting psychology away from purely behavioral models toward a recognition of the emotional and relational needs of infants. His work provided laboratory evidence supporting Bowlby's

and Ainsworth's attachment theories, especially the idea that love and security are biological imperatives that shape brain development, stress regulation, and social behavior.

Harlow also collaborated briefly with Abraham Maslow, whose hierarchy of needs similarly placed love and belonging at the heart of human motivation and is discussed in chapter 6. Together, their work highlighted that affection, security, and social connection are not luxuries. They are prerequisites for healthy psychological growth.

Harlow's Legacy in Context

Today, Harlow's experiments would not meet modern ethical standards for research with animals. Yet they left an indelible mark on child development theory, emphasizing that emotional neglect can cause lasting harm, a message still relevant in early childhood education. His findings continue to reinforce the need for sensitive, responsive caregiving and emotionally supportive learning environments for children.

Harlow was a bold and innovative researcher who dared to test ideas no one else would, but he also pushed far beyond ethical and emotional boundaries that most of his peers found deeply troubling. By the end of his career, he was increasingly cynical, struggling personally, and seemed almost determined to shock the academic world. Still, his work remains a stark reminder of both the power and responsibility that come with scientific inquiry into human emotion.

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

For early childhood professionals, understanding Mary Main's findings means recognizing that our own attachment experiences shape how we teach, comfort, and connect with children. Educators who are reflective about their own relational patterns are better able to stay attuned, regulate their emotions, and respond with sensitivity, even when children display challenging behaviors rooted in insecurity or stress.

When teachers become secure bases for children, calm, responsive, and dependable, they not only support development but also help children rebuild trust in relationships. When educators are emotionally attuned to children's needs for both independence and connection, secure attachment is strengthened. When children feel confident exploring the world and safe returning for comfort, they develop a deep sense of trust. This balanced responsiveness transforms theory into daily practice, demonstrating how nurturing early relationships fosters lifelong resilience, empathy, and emotional well-being.

Reciprocal Relationships with Familiar Adults

Attachment relationships provide security and support, but children also develop important relationships with other familiar adults. In early childhood settings, familiar adults may include teachers, assistants, administrators, regular substitutes, family members of classmates, and other adults children encounter consistently. Not every familiar adult becomes an attachment figure. Nevertheless, children's ability to interact comfortably and competently with familiar adults contributes to their social competence and helps them obtain information, assistance, and support when needed.

Reciprocal interactions are two-way exchanges where both the child and the adult initiate, respond, and contribute. Children are active participants rather than passive recipients of adult attention. They may greet a teacher, answer a question, share an experience, invite an adult into play, suggest a shared activity, ask for help, or continue a conversation by responding to the adult's comments. Adults contribute by noticing children's cues, responding with genuine interest, allowing time for children to answer, and following children's ideas.

The California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations describe a developmental progression in these interactions. Children at the Early level, generally ages three to four and a half, engage in positive interactions with familiar adults, especially in familiar settings, and demonstrate an emerging ability to initiate social contact. Children at the Later level, generally ages four to five and a half, take greater initiative and participate in more reciprocal interactions, such as beginning conversations, proposing shared activities, and seeking assistance (California Department of Education, 2024).

Educators support this development by establishing predictable and respectful interactions, joining children's play without taking control, asking open-ended questions, listening attentively, and making themselves available when children seek help or connection. Expectations should remain sensitive to temperament, culture, language, developmental differences, and disability. A child who observes quietly, communicates in a home language, uses gestures or an augmentative communication system, or

needs additional time to respond may still be participating meaningfully in a reciprocal relationship.

Warm, responsive relationships with familiar adults help children develop confidence in communicating with people beyond their immediate families. These experiences also prepare children to navigate the broader network of adults they will encounter in school and community settings.

Conclusion

Secure attachment in early childhood lays the groundwork for social competence and the ability to form healthy relationships, communicate effectively, and navigate social challenges. Children who experience consistent, responsive caregiving develop internal models of trust and empathy that guide later interactions with peers and adults. Research shows that securely attached children tend to be more cooperative, emotionally regulated, and capable of resolving conflicts constructively (Denham et al., 2003; Thompson, 2006). In contrast, insecure attachment can lead to difficulties with emotional control, withdrawal, or aggression in social settings. The early attachment relationship thus serves as the template for future friendships, teamwork, and community belonging.

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2.8: Chapter Vocabulary

Attachment: A deep and enduring emotional bond between a child and a caregiver that provides security, comfort, and a sense of belonging.

Secure Base: A trusted caregiver who provides the emotional security a child needs to explore, learn, and interact with others.

Safe Haven: A trusted caregiver to whom a child turns for comfort, protection, and reassurance during distress.

Internal Working Model: A child's developing expectations and beliefs about whether they are worthy of care and whether other people can be trusted and relied upon.

Co-regulation: The process through which a responsive adult helps a child manage emotions, behavior, and physiological responses until the child gradually develops greater self-regulation.

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2.9: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **ZERO TO THREE: Responsive Care/links to an external source:** Explores how observing children's cues and responding sensitively supports strong attachment relationships.
- **Circle of Security International/links to an external source:** Provides a visual explanation of the caregiver's roles as a secure base for exploration and a safe haven during distress.
- **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: Serve and Return/links to an external source:** Explains how responsive, back-and-forth interactions with caregivers support early brain development and emotional well-being.
- **California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations: Social and Emotional Development/links to an external source:** Describes children's attachment relationships, reciprocal interactions with familiar adults, responses to separation, and positive adult-child relationships.

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3: TEMPERAMENT

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3.1: Chapter Introduction

3



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 3.1:** Describe the major temperament dimensions and the flexible, feisty, and slow-to-warm-up temperament styles.
- **SLO 3.2:** Differentiate temperament from behavior and explain how temperament contributes to the development of personality over time.
- **SLO 3.3:** Analyze how culture, neurodiversity, environment, and adult reactions influence the ways children's temperament traits are expressed and interpreted.
- **SLO 3.4:** Apply the principle of goodness of fit to develop responsive, individualized teaching strategies for children with different temperamental characteristics.

Chapter 3 Short Overview

This chapter examines temperament as the biologically influenced individual differences that shape how children respond to people, experiences, and their environments. It introduces the temperament dimensions and the flexible, feisty, and slow-to-warm-up styles identified by Thomas and Chess while emphasizing that children rarely fit neatly into a single category. The chapter also explores goodness of fit and how culture, neurodiversity, environment, and adult responses influence the expression of temperament.

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3.2: The Thomas and Chess Study of Temperament



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Temperament is present from birth and can be observed in the earliest days of life (Thomas & Chess, 1977; Rothbart, 2007). In contrast, attachment develops over time through repeated interactions with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1978). While temperament comes first biologically, attachment provides the relational context through which temperament is understood and supported (Belsky, 2005).

In other words, children come into the world with individual differences, but it is through relationships that those differences are shaped, supported, and expressed.

From the very beginning of life, even as early as the first days, children show us who they are. Some infants are calm and adaptable, while others are intense, sensitive, or cautious. These differences are not the result of parenting; they are rooted in temperament.

Temperament refers to biologically based characteristics that are observable early in life. These include differences in mood, activity level, emotional reactivity, and sensitivity to stimulation. Temperament helps explain why infants can respond so differently to the same environment.

While temperament is present at birth, it does not exist in isolation. It interacts continuously with relationships, experiences, and environments. For early childhood educators, understanding temperament shifts the question from: *"What is wrong with this child?"* to *"What does this child need?"*

The study of temperament was significantly advanced by the work of Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess, who identified patterns of behavior observable early in life. Their research demonstrated that children are born with individual differences that influence how they think, feel, and behave.

Researchers Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess identified nine dimensions of temperament that shape personality, influence developmental processes, and describe how children respond to the world. While these categories can be helpful, it is important to remember that temperament exists along a continuum, rather than as fixed categories. Most children display a combination of traits rather than fitting neatly into a single category.

Temperament Dimensions

These dimensions include:

1. Activity level
2. Rhythmicity (regularity of biological functions)
3. Approach or withdrawal in new situations
4. Adaptability to change
5. Intensity of emotional reactions
6. Threshold of responsiveness
7. Quality of mood
8. Distractibility
9. Attention span and persistence

These traits describe how children behave; not how well they behave. And most importantly, no single temperament profile is better than another.

In the classroom, these differences are visible in everyday moments. One child may eagerly join a new activity, while another may observe quietly before participating. Both are responding in ways that reflect their temperament. These nine temperament traits can be grouped into three general temperament patterns: Flexible, Feisty, and Slow-to-Warm (Cautious).

Temperament Styles in Practice

While temperament traits exist along a continuum, researchers Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess identified three general temperament patterns that can help us understand children's behavior. These categories are not fixed labels, but rather general patterns that describe how children respond to the world.

It is important to remember that most children show a combination of traits, and no temperament is better than another. These patterns are tools for understanding and not for labeling.

Flexible (Easy) Temperament

The flexible child, or sometimes referred to as an "easy child" (approximately 40% of children) tends to:

- Have regular biological rhythms
- Approach new situations with optimism
- Adapt quickly to change
- Show lower intensity in emotional responses
- Maintain a generally positive mood
- May quietly follow routines or rules
- Be easy to comfort and soothe
- May meet expectations without difficulty

Flexible children are often described as "easy," which can sometimes mean they receive less attention because they are not demanding. Because of their easygoing nature, they may also be more vulnerable to being overlooked or taken advantage of by more assertive peers. It is best for educators to avoid using the term "easy" child.

Flexible Temperament in the Classroom:

Educators can support flexible children by:

- Being intentional about checking in with them
- Providing individual attention
- Making sure they do not fall through the cracks.

Feisty (Difficult) Temperament

The feisty child, or sometimes referred to as a "difficult" child (approximately 10% of children) often:

- Has irregular biological rhythms
- Reacts strongly to new situations
- Adapts slowly to change
- Displays intense emotional reactions
- Shows a more negative or irritable mood
- May be highly active
- May be distractible

Children with a feisty temperament tend to be energetic, sensitive, creative, and highly expressive. While their intensity can be challenging, it is also a strength. Many feisty children grow into passionate, unique, and dynamic individuals. It is best for educators to avoid using the term "difficult" child.

Feisty Temperament in the Classroom:

Educators can support these children by:

- Using redirection rather than punishment
- Preparing them in advance for transitions
- Allowing opportunities for movement and expression
- Remaining flexible in expectations
- Using calm moments for connection

Slow-to-Warm-Up (Cautious) Temperament

The slow-to-warm-up or cautious child, or sometimes called the shy child (approximately 15% of children) typically:

- Hesitates in new situations
- Adapts slowly over time
- May show a quieter or more reserved mood (negative mood is expressed slowly)
- Observes before participating
- Prefers familiar environments
- Can be clingy to caregiver
- May or may not be regular with biological rhythms

While often labeled as “shy,” this term can be misleading. These children are often thoughtful observers who take time to feel safe before engaging. It is best for educators to avoid using the term “shy” child.

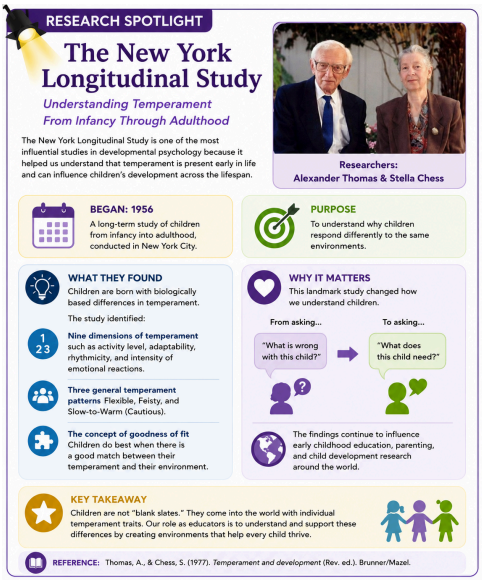
Slow-to-Warm Temperament in the Classroom:

Educators can support these children by:

- Allowing time and space to adjust
- Avoiding pressure to participate immediately
- Gently inviting participation
- Providing predictable routines

Children with slow-to-warm temperaments often thrive when they are given the time they need to acclimate.

Research suggests that long-term outcomes depend less on a child’s temperament and more on the quality of relationships, support, and goodness of fit provided by the environment.



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3.3: Temperament and Individual Differences

Temperament accounts for a significant portion of individual differences in personality, with research suggesting it contributes to approximately 40–60% of variability (Rothbart, 2007; Saudino, 2005; Goldsmith et al., 1987). These traits are biologically based, present as early as four days old, and relatively stable over time.

Temperament influences many areas of development, including, but not limited to:

- Emotional regulation
- Attention and focus
- Behavior
- Motor activity
- Attachment

Development occurs through ongoing, bidirectional interactions between the child and their environment. This means that children influence their environments just as much as environments influence children.

Ultimately, adult personality emerges from the interaction between temperament and lived experience. Temperament sets the foundation, but it does not determine outcomes.

Temperament Is Not Behavior

One common misconception is that temperament and behavior are the same thing. While temperament influences behavior, it does not determine behavior. Temperament reflects a child's natural style of responding to the world, whereas behavior is shaped by the interaction between temperament, development, relationships, experiences, and environmental expectations.

For example, a child with a highly active temperament can learn self-regulation and self-control. Likewise, a cautious child can develop confidence and social competence. Temperament describes how children naturally respond to experiences; it does not predict what they are capable of becoming.

Understanding this distinction helps educators avoid labeling children based on their temperament. Instead of viewing temperament as a problem to be fixed, educators can view it as a source of information that helps them provide responsive support and guidance. This concept is known as goodness of fit.

Goodness of Fit

One of the most important concepts in understanding temperament is goodness of fit. This refers to the match between a child's temperament and the expectations and responses of caregivers.

Healthy development occurs when adults:

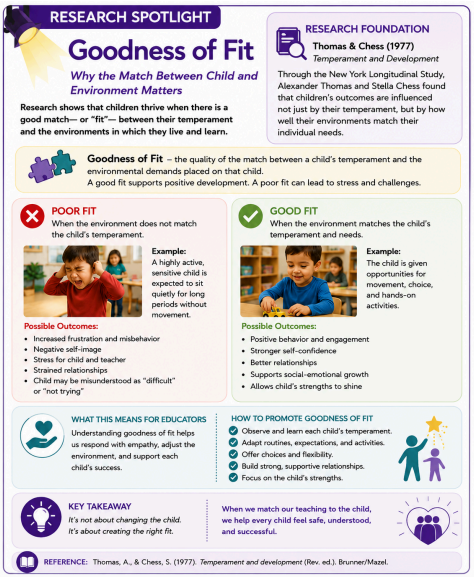
- Accurately read a child's cues
- Adjust their expectations and strategies
- Provide support that aligns with the child's needs

Children do not need to be changed to fit the environment. Instead, the environment should adapt to support the child.

In practice, this means recognizing that:

- A highly active child may need movement and flexibility
- A child who is cautious may need time and preparation

When there is a good fit between the child and the environment, children are more likely to develop healthy attachments, strong self-regulation, and self-confidence.



Temperament and Adult Reactions

Goodness of fit involves more than understanding children's temperaments. It also requires educators to understand their own. Adults bring their own temperamental preferences, expectations, and experiences into every interaction with children.

For example, a teacher with a low activity level may become frustrated by a highly active child who needs frequent movement. Likewise, an outgoing educator may struggle to understand a child who prefers to observe quietly before participating. A teacher who values flexibility may become impatient with a child who needs additional time to adjust to change.

These differences do not indicate that either the child or the adult is wrong. Rather, they highlight the importance of self-awareness. When educators understand their own temperament, they are better able to recognize potential biases and respond thoughtfully rather than react emotionally.

Effective teaching often begins with the question: Is this behavior difficult, or is this temperament different from my own?

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3.4: Key Principles for Understanding Temperament

Temperament should never be used as a label for children. Instead, it should be used as a tool to better understand behavior and guide responsive teaching.

It is important to remember:

- Children rarely fit neatly into one category
- Most children display a combination of traits
- Temperament is not a problem; it is a difference

Cultural context also plays an important role. Different cultures value different temperamental traits. What is encouraged in one setting may be interpreted differently in another. Educators must respond with awareness and sensitivity.

Ultimately, temperament is not something to change; it is something to understand.

Temperament, Culture, and Environment

Temperament does not exist outside of context. Cultural values and environmental expectations influence how temperament is interpreted and supported.

In some cultures, independence and assertiveness are valued. In others, cooperation and restraint are emphasized. A behavior that is seen as positive in one context may be viewed differently in another.

Research indicates that temperament can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the environment. For example, a cautious temperament may be protective in some contexts and limiting in others.

Understanding temperament requires cultural awareness. Educators must consider both the child and the broader context in which development occurs.

Temperament and Neurodiversity

Temperament is only one aspect of a child's individuality. Children with disabilities, developmental delays, or neurodivergent characteristics may express temperament traits in unique ways. For example, sensory sensitivities, communication differences, or challenges with self-regulation may influence how temperament is observed and interpreted.

For this reason, educators should avoid assuming that all behavior can be explained solely by temperament. Instead, they should consider the whole child, including developmental, cultural, social, emotional, and neurological factors. A strengths-based approach encourages educators to view individual differences as valuable aspects of human diversity rather than deficits that need to be corrected.

Understanding temperament within the broader context of neurodiversity helps educators create more inclusive and responsive learning environments.

Temperament and Language Development

Temperament influences language development in indirect ways. Traits such as attention, emotional regulation, and affect can shape how children engage with language.

Children who are able to sustain attention may have more opportunities to process language input. In contrast, children with more intense or reactive temperaments may struggle to attend to communication in certain situations.

However, research findings are mixed, highlighting the complexity of this relationship.

In the classroom, this may look like:

- Providing additional a quiet space for children who are sensitive to loud noises or bright lights
- Supporting physical engagement for highly active children

Caregiver responsiveness plays a key role in supporting language development across all temperament types.

Temperament and Later Personality

Temperament provides the biological foundation for personality, but it does not determine who a child will become.

Personality develops through the interaction of:

- Biological maturation
- Social experiences
- Quality of caregiving

As children grow, their ability to regulate emotions increases, particularly as brain development progresses. With supportive relationships and environments, children learn to manage their temperamental tendencies in adaptive ways.

Temperament Self-Assessment

Understanding our own temperament can help us better understand the children and families we serve. Temperament refers to biologically based individual differences in how people respond to the world around them. These characteristics influence activity level, emotional responses, adaptability, attention, and interactions with others. While temperament is present from birth, self-awareness allows us to recognize our preferences and consider how they influence our relationships and teaching practices.

The following self-assessment was created by Janet Poole of WestEd's Program for Infant Toddler Care. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this activity is to encourage reflection and increase awareness of your own temperament.

TEMPERAMENT TRAITS QUIZ

Directions: For each characteristic, circle the number that best describes you.

TEMPERAMENT TRAIT	1	3	5
1. **Activity Level** – How much do you need to move around during the day? Can you sit through a long meeting without becoming restless?	High Activity	Moderate	Low Activity
2. **Regularity** – How regular are your eating, sleeping, eliminating, and daily routines?	Very Regular	Moderate	Very Irregular
3. **Adaptability** – How quickly do you adjust to changes in schedules, routines, places, or foods?	Adapt Quickly	Moderate	Slow to Adapt
4. **Approach/Withdrawal** – How do you typically respond to new people, places, activities, or experiences?	Initial Approach	Moderate	Initial Withdrawal
5. **Physical Sensitivity** – How aware are you of slight differences in light, sound, temperature, texture, or touch?	Not Sensitive	Moderate	Very Sensitive
6. **Intensity of Reaction** – How strongly do you express your emotions?	High Intensity	Moderate	Mild Reaction
7. **Distractibility** – How easily are you distracted by events occurring around you?	Very Distractible	Moderate	Not Distractible
8. **Mood** – How often do you display a positive, pleasant mood compared with a negative or irritable mood?	Positive Mood	Moderate	Negative Mood
9. **Persistence** – How long do you continue working on a difficult task before giving up?	Long Attention Span	Moderate	Short Attention Span

Reflection Questions

1. Which temperament traits describe you most strongly?
2. Which temperament traits might create challenges for you in a classroom setting?
3. How might your temperament differ from the temperament of the children you teach?
4. How could these differences influence your expectations of children's behavior?

5. Why is it important for educators to understand both their own temperament and the temperaments of the children in their care?

Connecting Temperament and Teaching

There is no “best” temperament for teaching. Effective educators can have many different temperament profiles. However, understanding our own temperament helps us recognize potential biases and respond more thoughtfully to children’s individual differences.

For example, a highly active teacher may easily understand the needs of an energetic child but become frustrated with a child who is slow to engage. Likewise, a teacher who values routine may find it challenging to understand a child who adapts easily to change and seeks novelty. Self-awareness allows educators to move beyond judgment and develop greater empathy for children whose temperaments differ from their own.

The goal is not to change our temperament but to understand it. When educators recognize their own temperament traits, they are better prepared to create responsive environments that honor the unique characteristics of every child.

Conclusion

Temperament reflects stable, biologically based patterns in how children respond to the world. While these traits are unlikely to change dramatically, they can be supported and guided through responsive caregiving and intentional teaching.

Understanding temperament allows educators to move beyond labeling behavior and toward understanding individual needs. When adults respond with flexibility and awareness, children are better able to develop self-regulation, confidence, and positive relationships.

Ultimately, temperament is not something to change; it is something to understand

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3.5: Chapter Vocabulary

Temperament: Biologically influenced individual differences in emotional reactivity, activity, attention, adaptability, and responses to people and experiences.

Goodness of Fit: The degree to which an adult's expectations, responses, and environment are compatible with a child's temperament and individual needs.

Flexible Temperament: A temperament style generally characterized by regular biological rhythms, adaptability, positive mood, and relatively mild emotional reactions.

Feisty Temperament: A temperament style often characterized by high activity, intense emotional reactions, irregular biological rhythms, distractibility, and difficulty adapting to change.

Slow-to-Warm-Up Temperament: A temperament style characterized by cautious responses to unfamiliar people or situations, low initial activity, and gradual adaptation over time.

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3.6: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Head Start: Introduction to Temperament/links to an external source:** Explains temperament traits, temperament styles, and how goodness of fit helps caregivers adjust their responses to support individual children.
- **HealthyChildren.org: Understanding Your Child's Temperament/links to an external source:** Describes common temperament characteristics and explains how temperament is influenced by children's experiences, relationships, health, and environment.
- **Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Temperament/links to an external source:** Provides research-based articles about the biological and environmental influences on temperament and its effects on children's development.
- **ZERO TO THREE: Relationships, the Heart of Development and Learning/links to an external source:** Examines relationships, temperament, and goodness of fit and explains how responsive caregivers can support children with different temperamental characteristics.

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4: SELF-REGULATION

4.1: Chapter Introduction
4.2: From Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation
4.3: Emotional Competence and Self-Regulation
4.4: Supporting Self-Regulation in Early Childhood Classrooms
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4.1: Chapter Introduction

4



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 4.1:** Explain how children progress from dependence on adult co-regulation toward increasingly independent self-regulation.
- **SLO 4.2:** Differentiate self-control from self-regulation and describe the roles of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility.
- **SLO 4.3:** Analyze how temperament, emotional competence, self-efficacy, initiative, and persistence influence children's regulation and approaches to learning.
- **SLO 4.4:** Apply developmentally appropriate strategies that support emotional regulation, coping, attention, impulse control, problem-solving, and persistence in early childhood classrooms.

Chapter 4 Short Overview

This chapter examines how children gradually develop self-regulation through co-regulation, responsive relationships, emotional competence, and repeated opportunities to practice managing feelings, attention, and behavior. It explores executive function, impulse control, self-efficacy, initiative, persistence, and the connections among self-regulation, decision-making, problem-solving, and learning. The chapter also provides practical strategies educators can use to support children's growing independence and approaches to learning.

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4.2: From Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

One of the most important developmental tasks of early childhood is learning how to manage emotions, behavior, and attention. This process, known as self-regulation, influences nearly every aspect of children's social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development (Kopp, 1982; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children who develop strong self-regulation skills are better able to follow directions, solve problems, manage frustration, build friendships, and engage successfully in learning experiences.

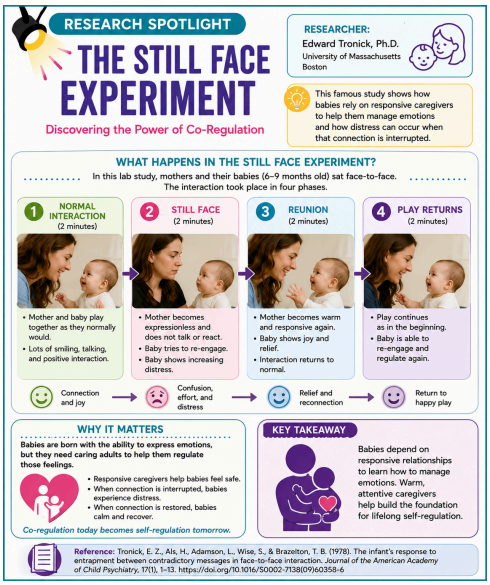
Self-regulation does not emerge overnight. Rather, it develops gradually through supportive relationships, repeated experiences, and brain maturation (Kopp, 1982; Bronson, 2000). Before children can regulate themselves, they rely on caring adults to help regulate their emotions, behaviors, and physiological needs. Over time, children internalize these experiences and begin to manage themselves more independently.

One of the most influential researchers in the study of self-regulation is developmental psychologist Claire B. Kopp. Her work helped explain how children gradually move from dependence on caregivers for regulation to increasing self-control and self-management (Kopp, 1982).

Human infants enter the world completely dependent on others. During pregnancy, the mother's body helps regulate many physiological functions. After birth, caregivers continue this regulatory role by providing comfort, meeting basic needs, establishing routines, and helping infants recover from distress.

Through thousands of daily interactions, infants learn that uncomfortable feelings can be soothed and that trusted adults provide safety and support (Kopp, 1982). Over time, these shared experiences help children gradually develop the ability to manage their own emotions, attention, and behavior (California Department of Education, 2009). Vygotsky (1978) argued that children first learn self-regulation through social interactions with more knowledgeable others before internalizing these skills and using them independently.

As children mature, responsibility for regulation gradually shifts from the caregiver to the child. This shift occurs through co-regulation. Co-regulation occurs when an adult provides the emotional support, guidance, and structure that a child needs to manage feelings and behavior. Through co-regulation, adults model calming strategies, provide emotional support, and help children understand their feelings. Subsequently, children internalize these experiences, begin to regulate their own emotions and behaviors more independently, and use these same strategies on their own (Bronson, 2000). Thus, self-regulation develops through relationships before it becomes an individual skill.



The Emergence of Self-Awareness

During the second and third years of life, children begin to develop a stronger sense of self. They start using personal pronouns such as “I,” “me,” and “mine.” They recognize themselves as separate individuals and begin expressing pride, embarrassment, guilt, shame, and other self-conscious emotions (Kopp, 1982).

As children’s self-awareness grows, they become increasingly capable of monitoring their own behavior and comparing it to the expectations of others. They begin remembering rules, anticipating consequences, and adjusting their actions based on social expectations. These emerging abilities form the foundation of self-regulation.

What Is Self-Regulation?

Researchers have defined self-regulation as the ability to manage emotions, attention, thoughts, and behaviors in ways that are appropriate to the situation. Self-regulation includes the ability to:

- Follow directions and comply with reasonable requests
- Start and stop activities when needed
- Manage strong emotions
- Control impulses
- Delay gratification
- Focus attention
- Persist with challenging tasks
- Demonstrate socially appropriate behavior without constant adult supervision

Kopp (1982) described self-regulation as the ability to comply with requests, initiate and stop activities according to situational demands, modulate behavior and emotions, delay gratification, and demonstrate socially appropriate behavior in the absence of external monitoring. Self-regulation allows children to pause, think, and choose a response rather than reacting automatically. It supports both learning and healthy relationships.

Temperament and Self-Regulation

Not all children begin the journey toward self-regulation in the same way. As discussed in Chapter 3, temperament refers to biologically based individual differences in how children respond to their environment. Researchers have found that children differ in their activity levels, emotional intensity, adaptability, attention, persistence, and sensitivity to stimulation (Thomas & Chess, 1977).

Some children appear calm, flexible, and easily soothed, while others may react more intensely to frustration, change, or sensory experiences. These differences are not signs of good or bad behavior. Rather, they reflect natural variations in temperament.

Temperament influences how easily children develop self-regulation skills. For example, a child with a highly reactive temperament may need additional support learning to manage strong emotions, while a child who is naturally cautious may require encouragement to take risks and engage in new experiences. Children with more adaptable temperaments may appear to regulate themselves more easily in certain situations.

Importantly, temperament does not determine a child's future. Supportive relationships, responsive caregiving, and intentional teaching can help all children strengthen their self-regulation skills. Understanding temperament helps educators recognize that children may need different types of support as they learn to manage emotions, attention, and behavior. When educators adapt their expectations, teaching strategies, and environments to match a child's temperament, they create a goodness of fit that supports the development of self-regulation.

Self-Regulation and Coping Skills

Self-regulation is closely connected to the development of coping skills. Coping skills are the strategies children use to manage stress, frustration, disappointment, and other challenging experiences. As children develop self-regulation, they gradually learn ways to monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional reactions in order to respond effectively to life's demands (Thompson, 1994). These strategies may include seeking support from a trusted adult, using language to express feelings, engaging in calming activities, taking deep breaths, or applying problem-solving skills when challenges arise. Children who develop effective coping skills are often better able to recover from setbacks, manage stress, and respond constructively to life's challenges (Denham, 1998; Kopp, 1989; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Teaching Coping Skills

As children develop self-regulation, they also develop coping skills. Coping skills are the strategies children use to manage stress, frustration, disappointment, anxiety, and other challenging experiences. Some coping strategies are healthy and constructive, while others may provide temporary relief but are less adaptive or effective over time.

Examples of healthy coping skills may include:

- Taking deep breaths
- Asking a trusted adult for help
- Using words to express feelings
- Taking a break in a quiet area
- Engaging in calming activities
- Hugging oneself or using deep pressure
- Bracing feet against the floor
- Taking a drink of water
- Counting slowly
- Using positive self-talk
- Engaging in problem-solving
- Touching the face with hands
- Bringing arms to the midline
- Clasping hands together

Examples of less adaptive coping strategies may include:

- Chewing on clothing
- Picking at skin
- Thumb sucking
- Biting nails or cuticles
- Twirling hair
- Pulling out hair
- Avoiding tasks

- Withdrawing socially
- Aggressive behavior toward people or objects

Rather than viewing these behaviors as simply “good” or “bad,” educators can recognize them as attempts to manage emotions and respond to stress. By teaching and modeling healthy coping strategies, adults help children develop more effective ways to regulate emotions, manage challenges, and recover from difficult experiences (Denham, 1998; Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1994).

Self-Control Versus Self-Regulation

Although the terms self-control and self-regulation are often used interchangeably, they are not identical. Self-control generally refers to inhibiting or stopping an impulse. “I will go to the gym and workout” or “I will not eat that piece of cake.” Whereas self-regulation is broader and more flexible. It involves monitoring situations, evaluating options, adjusting behavior, and responding appropriately to changing circumstances (Shanker, 2013).

For example, a child who refrains from grabbing a toy is demonstrating self-control. A child who recognizes disappointment, asks for a turn, waits patiently, and joins another activity while waiting is demonstrating self-regulation.

Self-regulation represents a more sophisticated developmental skill because it involves thoughtful adaptation rather than simple inhibition.

Emotional Regulation: Managing Big Feelings

An important aspect of self-regulation is emotional regulation. Emotional regulation refers to the ability to recognize, understand, express, and manage emotions in healthy ways. Young children often experience emotions intensely and may need adult support to manage frustration, disappointment, anger, excitement, or fear (Denham, 1998).

Learning emotional regulation does not mean suppressing emotions. Instead, children learn how to experience emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. They learn that feelings are normal and that there are constructive ways to express and manage them.

Children who develop strong emotional regulation skills are often better able to cope with challenges, resolve conflicts, maintain friendships, and recover from setbacks. They are also more likely to experience positive mental health and academic success (Denham, 1998; Goleman, 1995).

Emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are closely connected. When children experience strong emotions, those emotions influence how they think and act. For example, a frustrated child may have difficulty focusing attention, solving problems, or considering alternative solutions. As children develop emotional regulation skills, they become increasingly able to manage emotions in ways that support thoughtful decision-making and appropriate behavior.

Why Self-Regulation Matters

Self-regulation serves as a foundation for social competence, emotional well-being, and academic learning. Children who can manage their emotions and behaviors are better able to participate in classroom activities, engage in cooperative play, solve problems, and build positive relationships with others (Bronson, 2000).

Research consistently demonstrates that self-regulation is one of the strongest predictors of later school success. It influences children’s ability to focus attention, follow directions, persist with difficult tasks, and interact positively with peers and adults (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

For this reason, supporting self-regulation is not a separate activity within early childhood education. It is woven into every relationship, routine, and learning experience. Each time educators help children identify feelings, solve problems, wait for a turn, or recover from disappointment, they are strengthening the self-regulation skills that children will use throughout their lives.

The Caregiver’s Role in Emotional Regulation

Young children do not learn self-regulation alone, but through co-regulation. Caring adults play a critical role in helping children

identify emotions, manage stress, and recover from emotional challenges. Through responsive caregiving, adults help children learn that emotions are manageable and that support is available when needed.

Infants and young children are not born knowing how to calm themselves when they are frightened, frustrated, disappointed, or overwhelmed. In the early years, they depend on caring adults to help regulate their emotional experiences. When caregivers respond consistently and sensitively to children's needs, children gradually develop a sense of safety and trust. These experiences provide the foundation for emotional regulation and self-control (Kopp, 1982).

Educators and caregivers support emotional regulation by:

- Responding sensitively to children's cues
- Providing comfort during distress
- Helping children label emotions
- Redirecting attention when appropriate
- Modeling calm behavior
- Establishing predictable routines

For example, when a toddler becomes frustrated because a block tower falls down, a caregiver might acknowledge the child's feelings by saying, "You're feeling frustrated because your tower fell." The caregiver may then offer comfort, help the child take a deep breath, and encourage them to try again. Through repeated experiences like this, children learn that emotions can be recognized, expressed, and managed in healthy ways.

Adults also serve as powerful models of emotional regulation. Children carefully observe how adults respond to stress, disappointment, conflict, and frustration. When educators remain calm, use respectful language, and demonstrate healthy coping strategies, children learn that strong emotions can be handled safely and constructively (Hyson, 2004).

Predictable routines also support emotional regulation by helping children know what to expect. Consistent schedules, clear expectations, and supportive relationships reduce uncertainty and create a sense of psychological safety. When children feel safe, they are better able to focus their energy on learning, exploration, and social interaction rather than self-protection.

These supportive interactions help children gradually internalize self-regulation skills and become more independent in managing their emotions. Over time, the calming voice of the caregiver becomes the child's own inner voice, guiding thoughts, emotions, and behavior. In this way, emotional regulation develops first between people before it develops within the individual.

Supporting Executive Function in Early Childhood

Executive function skills develop gradually throughout childhood and adolescence as the brain continues to mature. Like self-regulation, these skills are strengthened through relationships, experiences, and practice.

Educators can support executive function development by:

- Establishing predictable routines
- Providing opportunities for problem-solving
- Encouraging imaginative play
- Teaching games that require turn-taking and self-control
- Breaking tasks into manageable steps
- Providing visual cues and step-by-step reminders to help children remember and complete tasks independently
- Modeling flexible thinking
- Creating environments that reduce unnecessary stress

Play is particularly important because it naturally provides opportunities for children to practice remembering rules, controlling impulses, negotiating with peers, and adapting to changing situations.

As executive function skills strengthen, children become increasingly capable of regulating their emotions, managing their behavior, sustaining attention, and engaging successfully in learning experiences. For this reason, executive function is often considered one of the most important foundations for school readiness and lifelong success.

Attention, Learning, and Decision-Making

Self-regulation influences children's ability to learn. Children who can regulate their attention, emotions, and behavior are better able to participate in classroom activities, engage in problem-solving, and persist with challenging tasks. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by distractions, frustration, or impulsive reactions, they can focus on learning and working toward their goals.

Self-regulation supports:

- Attention
- Decision-making
- Problem-solving
- Goal-directed behavior
- Academic learning

Attention

Attention is the ability to focus on relevant information while filtering out distractions. Young children are naturally curious and easily drawn to sights, sounds, and activities in their environment. As self-regulation develops, children become increasingly able to sustain attention, shift attention when needed, and return their focus after interruptions.

Attention serves as the gateway to learning. Children must first attend to information before they can process, remember, and apply it. For example, a child listening to a story must focus on the teacher's words, follow the sequence of events, and connect the story to prior knowledge. Self-regulation helps children maintain this focus long enough for meaningful learning to occur.

Decision-Making

Decision-making involves evaluating options, anticipating consequences, and selecting an appropriate course of action. Even infants and toddlers make simple decisions throughout the day, and these decisions become increasingly complex as children develop. They decide whether to share a toy, join a group activity, ask for help, or persist with a challenging task. For example, a preschooler who is struggling to zip a jacket may decide whether to keep trying independently or ask a teacher for help. After several attempts, the child chooses to ask for assistance.

As self-regulation develops, children become increasingly able to consider their options before making a decision. Rather than responding impulsively, they learn to consider alternatives and make choices that are more likely to produce positive outcomes. This ability helps children solve problems, build positive relationships, and succeed in learning environments.

Problem-Solving

Problem-solving requires children to identify challenges, generate possible solutions, evaluate alternatives, and select appropriate responses. Self-regulation supports this process by helping children manage frustration and remain engaged when solutions are not immediately apparent.

For example, a child whose block tower repeatedly falls must regulate disappointment, think flexibly, and try new strategies. A child experiencing a conflict with a peer must regulate emotions, consider another perspective, and negotiate a solution. In both situations, self-regulation supports effective problem-solving.

Goal-Directed Behavior

Goal-directed behavior refers to the ability to work toward a desired outcome over time. This requires children to maintain attention, persist through difficulties, and resist distractions. Goal-directed behavior is evident when a child completes a puzzle, builds a complex structure, learns a new skill, or follows a multi-step plan. For example, a preschooler who wants to build a tall block tower continues rebuilding it after it falls several times until it finally stands. The child's willingness to keep trying despite repeated setbacks demonstrates goal-directed behavior.

As children develop self-regulation, they become increasingly capable of setting goals, monitoring progress, and adjusting their efforts when obstacles arise. These skills contribute to resilience, persistence, and a sense of competence.

Academic Learning

Research consistently demonstrates that self-regulation is closely linked to academic achievement (Blair & Razza, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children who can manage their attention and behavior are better prepared to engage in classroom instruction, follow directions, participate in learning activities, and complete tasks successfully.

Importantly, self-regulation does not replace academic instruction; it supports it. Skills such as literacy, mathematics, science, and problem-solving are more easily learned when children can focus attention, manage emotions, and persist through challenges. For this reason, many researchers consider self-regulation to be one of the most important foundations for school readiness and lifelong learning.

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4.3: Emotional Competence and Self-Regulation

Emotional competence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, express, and manage emotions while responding appropriately to the emotions of others (Denham, 1998). Emotional competence and self-regulation are closely connected because children must first become aware of their emotions before they can effectively regulate them. As emotional competence develops, children gain the skills necessary to navigate social situations, build relationships, solve problems, and respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

Researchers have identified several key components of emotional competence:

Emotional Recognition

Emotional recognition is the ability to identify emotions in oneself and others. During infancy and early childhood, children begin learning to recognize facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and behavioral cues that communicate emotions. As children become more skilled at recognizing emotions, they are better able to interpret social situations and respond appropriately.

Emotional Expression

Emotional expression refers to the ability to communicate feelings in socially appropriate ways. Young children often express emotions through crying, laughter, gestures, and behavior before they have the vocabulary to describe their experiences. Over time, children learn to use words to communicate emotions such as happiness, sadness, frustration, excitement, disappointment, and fear.

Learning to express emotions appropriately is an important part of self-regulation. Children who can communicate their feelings verbally are often less likely to express distress through aggression, withdrawal, or challenging behavior.

Emotional Understanding

Emotional understanding involves recognizing the causes and consequences of emotions. As children's cognitive abilities develop, they begin to understand that emotions are connected to experiences, thoughts, and events. They learn that different people may respond differently to the same situation and that emotions can change over time.

This understanding helps children make sense of their own experiences and increases their ability to predict and interpret the behavior of others.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotions of others. Empathy begins to emerge during the toddler years and continues to develop throughout childhood. Young children may show empathy by offering comfort to a crying peer, sharing a favorite toy, or expressing concern when someone is hurt.

Empathy supports positive relationships, cooperation, and prosocial behavior. It also encourages children to consider the perspectives and feelings of others when making decisions.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to manage emotions in ways that are appropriate to the situation. Children gradually learn to tolerate frustration, recover from disappointment, calm themselves when upset, and express emotions constructively. Emotional regulation does not mean eliminating emotions; rather, it involves learning how to experience emotions without

becoming overwhelmed by them.

Children who develop strong emotional regulation skills are generally better equipped to handle stress, solve problems, and maintain positive relationships.

Social Referencing

Social referencing occurs when children look to trusted adults for information about how to interpret unfamiliar situations. For example, a toddler who encounters a new experience may look at a caregiver's facial expression before deciding whether to approach or avoid it. If the caregiver appears calm and reassuring, the child is more likely to feel safe and confident.

Social referencing demonstrates how closely emotional development is tied to relationships. Children learn not only from their own experiences but also from observing the emotional responses of the adults around them.

Emotional Competence as the Foundation for Self-Regulation

Emotional competence provides the foundation upon which self-regulation develops. Children who can recognize, understand, and express emotions are better prepared to manage those emotions effectively. Likewise, children who can regulate their emotions are more successful in social interactions, problem-solving, and learning situations.

As emotional competence develops, children become increasingly able to navigate social situations, build friendships, resolve conflicts constructively, and participate successfully in classroom communities. These skills contribute to both social competence and emotional intelligence and play a significant role in children's long-term well-being and success (Denham, 1998; Goleman, 1995).

Knowing What They Can Do: Self-Efficacy and Personal Agency

As children develop self-regulation, they also develop a growing sense of competence and personal agency. They begin to understand that their actions can influence outcomes and that they can make choices, solve problems, and affect the world around them. This understanding helps children move from dependence on adults toward increasing independence and confidence.

Psychologist Albert Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete a task or achieve a goal. Children with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to approach challenges with confidence, persist when tasks become difficult, and recover from setbacks. Rather than viewing mistakes as failures, they begin to see them as opportunities to learn and grow.

As self-efficacy develops, children become increasingly willing to:

- Take initiative
- Solve problems
- Persist through challenges
- Recover from setbacks
- Develop confidence in their abilities
- Attempt new and unfamiliar tasks

Closely related to self-efficacy is the concept of personal agency. Personal agency refers to the understanding that one's actions can influence events and outcomes. Young children begin developing personal agency when they recognize simple cause-and-effect relationships. For example, an infant learns that crying brings a caregiver, a toddler discovers that pushing a button makes a toy light up, and a preschooler learns that practicing a skill improves performance.

Self-regulation plays an important role in the development of both self-efficacy and personal agency. Children who can manage frustration, control impulses, and persist through challenges are more likely to experience success. These successful experiences strengthen children's confidence in their abilities and encourage them to take on increasingly complex tasks.

Educators support the development of self-efficacy and personal agency by providing opportunities for choice, encouraging problem-solving, recognizing effort, and helping children experience success. Rather than solving every problem for children,

effective educators provide guidance and support while allowing children to develop confidence in their own abilities.

When children experience success and receive supportive feedback, they begin to view themselves as capable learners. This growing sense of competence becomes an important foundation for resilience, motivation, and lifelong learning.

Initiative, Persistence, and Approaches to Learning

Children's ability to regulate attention, emotions, and behavior influences how they approach learning. Both the California Infant–Toddler Learning and Development Foundations (ITLDF) and the California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF) include the Approaches to Learning domain addressing the capacities that support children's motivation, engagement, executive functioning, and goal-directed learning. The ITLDF describe development from birth through age three, while the PTKLF continue the progression from ages three to five and a half. These capacities are closely connected to social-emotional development because children need emotional security, confidence, and self-regulation to explore, remain engaged, solve problems, and continue after setbacks (California Department of Social Services, 2025; California Department of Education, 2024).

Initiative is the willingness to begin activities, pursue ideas, initiate social interactions, and seek solutions without waiting for an adult to direct every step. A child demonstrates initiative by choosing materials for a project, beginning a pretend-play scenario, asking a question, inviting another child to participate, or trying a new strategy when the first attempt does not work. Initiative grows when children believe that their ideas matter and that their actions can influence outcomes.

Persistence, sometimes called perseverance, is the ability to continue engaging in an activity despite difficulty, frustration, boredom, or setbacks. Persistence does not mean forcing children to continue when they are overwhelmed. Young children often need co-regulation, encouragement, a manageable level of challenge, or a brief pause before trying again. As self-regulation develops, children become increasingly able to cope with the emotions that arise during challenging tasks and remain engaged for longer periods.

The ITLDF describe the early development of initiative, engagement, and persistence during the first three years of life. Infants demonstrate emerging curiosity and initiative by attending to people and objects, reaching, exploring, and repeating actions that produce interesting results. As they develop, toddlers increasingly initiate activities, make choices, remain engaged for longer periods, try different strategies, and persist when they encounter challenges. Because these capacities are still emerging, infants and toddlers rely heavily on responsive adults who follow their interests, provide safe opportunities for exploration, offer manageable challenges, and support them through encouragement and co-regulation (California Department of Social Services, 2025).

The PTKLF continue this developmental progression. At the Early level, generally ages three to four and a half, children initiate simple activities, social interactions, and attempts to solve problems. They may persist for short periods and often need adult support when they encounter frustration or lose interest. At the Later level, generally ages four to five and a half, children initiate more detailed and complex activities, seek solutions more persistently, sustain engagement for longer periods, and cope with setbacks with less adult support (California Department of Education, 2024).

Educators strengthen initiative and persistence when they provide time for uninterrupted play and investigation, offer meaningful choices, present challenges that are achievable with effort, and allow children to try their own ideas before stepping in. They can scaffold learning with prompts such as, "What have you tried?" "What else might work?" or "Would you like help, or would you like more time?" Acknowledging children's effort, strategies, and progress helps them understand that learning develops through practice. Mistakes and unsuccessful attempts can then be viewed as information rather than as evidence that the child is incapable.

Children vary in how readily they approach unfamiliar activities and how long they remain engaged. Temperament, culture, language, developmental differences, disability, prior experiences, and the emotional safety of the environment can all influence initiative and persistence. A child who watches before participating may be gathering information, while a child who pauses or requests help may be using an appropriate self-regulation strategy. Educators should therefore support growth without comparing children or equating immediate participation with motivation.

Impulse Control and Delayed Gratification

One important aspect of self-regulation is impulse control. Impulse control allows children to pause before acting, consider

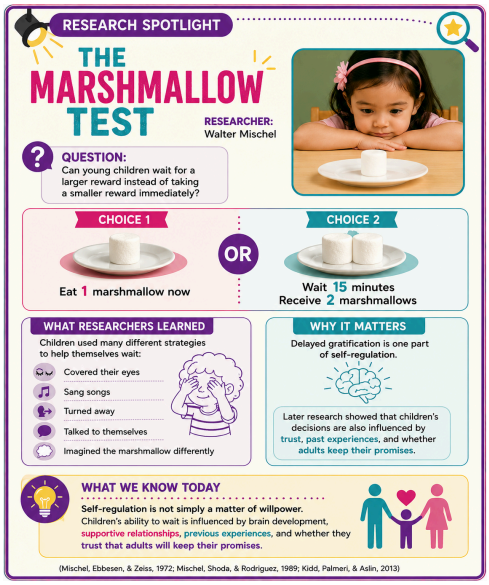
consequences, and choose behaviors that are socially appropriate. Rather than responding immediately to thoughts, feelings, or desires, children gradually learn to stop, think, and make intentional choices.

Impulse control develops slowly throughout childhood as the brain matures and children gain experience navigating social situations. Young children often act on their immediate wants and emotions because the areas of the brain responsible for self-regulation are still developing. With supportive guidance and repeated opportunities to practice, children gradually learn to manage impulses more effectively.

Children gradually learn to:

- Wait their turn
- Follow rules
- Share materials
- Delay gratification
- Manage frustration
- Consider the needs of others

One of the most widely studied aspects of impulse control is delayed gratification, or the ability to wait for a larger reward rather than choosing a smaller reward immediately. In a well-known series of studies, Walter Mischel and his colleagues found that young children who were able to delay gratification demonstrated stronger self-regulation skills than children who struggled to wait (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). Although later research has shown that many factors influence children's ability to wait, the studies highlighted the importance of self-regulation in children's development.



More recent research suggests that children's ability to delay gratification is influenced not only by self-regulation but also by factors such as trust, prior experiences, and environmental stability (Kidd, Palmeri, & Aslin, 2013). Children are often more willing to wait when they believe promises will be kept and when their environments feel safe, predictable, and reliable. These findings remind us that self-regulation develops within relationships and contexts, not in isolation.

For young children, delayed gratification can be seen in everyday situations. A child may wait for a turn on the playground, save a special treat for later, continue working on a challenging task, or follow classroom expectations even when doing so requires patience. These seemingly small moments provide important opportunities for practicing self-regulation.

Impulse control also plays a significant role in children's social development. Children who can manage impulses are often more successful in peer interactions because they are better able to cooperate, negotiate, share, and resolve conflicts. Rather than reacting immediately when frustrated, they gradually learn to communicate their needs, seek help, and consider alternative solutions.

Educators support the development of impulse control by creating predictable environments, modeling self-regulation, teaching

problem-solving skills, and providing opportunities for children to practice waiting, sharing, and taking turns. Expectations should be developmentally appropriate, recognizing that self-regulation develops gradually over time. Young children need guidance, encouragement, and repeated opportunities to practice these skills before they become internalized.

Like all aspects of self-regulation, impulse control is not a skill that children either have or do not have. Instead, it develops gradually through brain maturation, relationships, experiences, and practice. Each time children successfully wait, persist, or manage frustration, they strengthen the self-regulation skills that support lifelong learning, relationships, and well-being.

Executive Function and Self-Regulation

Executive functions are the brain-based processes that help individuals regulate thoughts, emotions, and behavior. These cognitive skills act like the brain's "air traffic control system," helping children manage information, make decisions, solve problems, control impulses, and organize their actions toward a goal. Executive functions are closely connected to self-regulation because they allow children to pause, think, and respond intentionally rather than react automatically (Center on the Developing Child, 2011).

Researchers commonly identify three core executive functions:

- Working Memory
- Inhibitory Control
- Cognitive Flexibility

Together, these skills help children focus attention, remember directions, solve problems, manage impulses, and adapt to changing situations. Executive functions also include the ability to break a large goal into smaller, more manageable steps in order to successfully complete a task. Working memory plays an important role in this process because it helps children keep goals, directions, and information in mind while they work.

Working Memory

Working memory is the ability to hold and manipulate information in the mind for short periods of time. Working memory allows children to remember and follow multi-step directions, keep track of information while completing a task, and connect new learning to previous experiences.

For example, a child uses working memory when they remember the teacher's instructions to "put away your crayons, wash your hands, and line up at the door." Without working memory, children would struggle to retain and act upon information long enough to complete tasks successfully.

Inhibitory Control

Inhibitory control refers to the ability to stop, pause, or resist an immediate impulse in order to respond appropriately. This skill is closely related to impulse control and delayed gratification.

Children use inhibitory control when they:

- Wait for a turn
- Raise a hand instead of calling out
- Resist grabbing a toy from a peer
- Follow classroom rules
- Manage strong emotional reactions

For example, a preschooler may feel angry when a block tower falls but takes a deep breath instead of throwing the blocks. Inhibitory control helps children pause before acting, consider the consequences of their actions, and choose behaviors that are appropriate for the situation rather than simply reacting to immediate impulses.

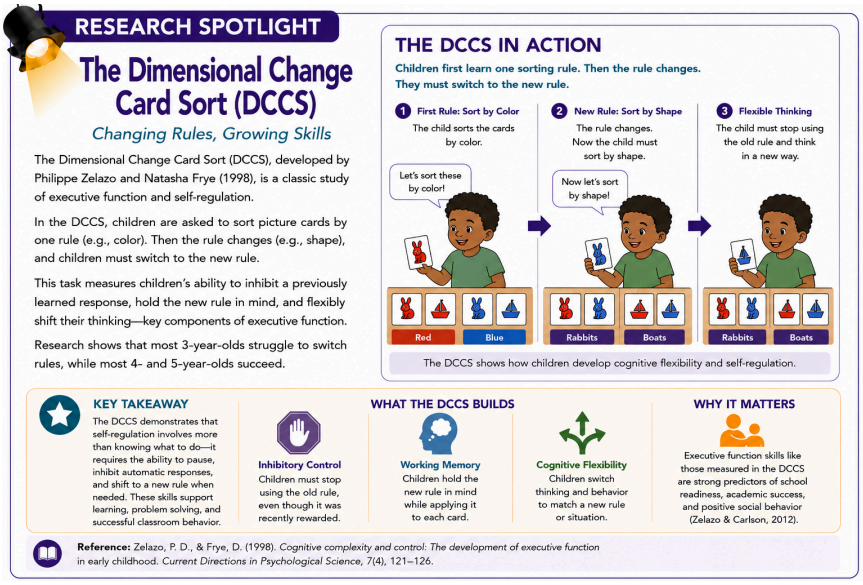
Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to adjust thinking and behavior when circumstances change. It allows children to consider multiple perspectives, shift attention between tasks, and adapt to new situations.

Children demonstrate cognitive flexibility when they:

- Adjust to changes in routine
- Consider another child's point of view
- Try a new strategy when the first one does not work
- Transition from one activity to another
- Modify plans when circumstances change

For example, a toddler may discover that a toy does not fit through an opening, so they turn it a different way and try again. This skill helps children become more adaptable problem-solvers and supports successful social interactions.



Executive Function in Everyday Life

Executive function skills are involved in nearly every aspect of children's daily experiences. Whether children are playing a game, solving a conflict, listening to a story, following directions, or completing a task, they are using executive function skills to manage their attention, emotions, and behavior.

For example, a child building a block tower may use working memory to remember the design they want to create, inhibitory control to avoid knocking the structure over in frustration, and cognitive flexibility to adjust the design when a section collapses. In this way, executive functions support both learning and self-regulation.

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4.4: Supporting Self-Regulation in Early Childhood Classrooms

Self-regulation develops through supportive relationships, intentional teaching, and repeated opportunities for practice. Young children are not born knowing how to manage emotions, control impulses, solve problems, or cope with frustration. These skills develop gradually through interactions with caring adults and experiences within supportive environments.

Because self-regulation is learned, early childhood educators play an important role in helping children develop the skills needed for social, emotional, and academic success. Rather than expecting children to arrive at school with fully developed self-regulation skills, effective educators recognize that self-regulation must be taught, modeled, and practiced.

Educators can intentionally support self-regulation by:

Creating Predictable Routines

Children feel safer and more secure when they know what to expect. Consistent schedules, clear expectations, and familiar routines reduce uncertainty and help children devote more energy to learning rather than managing stress. Predictable environments also help children anticipate transitions and develop a sense of control over their day.

Building Strong Relationships

Self-regulation develops within relationships. When children feel emotionally connected to caring adults, they are more likely to seek support, accept guidance, and develop confidence in their ability to manage challenges. Positive relationships provide the secure base from which children can explore, learn, and practice new skills.

Modeling Emotional Regulation

Children learn by watching the adults around them. Educators who remain calm during stressful situations demonstrate what healthy self-regulation looks like in practice. When teachers manage frustration, solve problems respectfully, and communicate emotions appropriately, they provide children with powerful examples of emotional competence.

As Hyson (2004) reminds us, when adults manage their emotions constructively, children learn that big feelings can be handled safely and calmly.

Using Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching involves helping children recognize, understand, and manage emotions. Rather than dismissing feelings, educators acknowledge emotions while helping children develop appropriate coping strategies.

For example, a teacher might say:

- “I can see that you’re frustrated because the puzzle piece won’t fit. Let’s take a deep breath and figure it out together.”

These interactions help children develop emotional vocabulary, build self-awareness, and learn effective strategies for managing strong emotions.

Teaching Problem-Solving Skills

Many behavioral challenges occur when children lack the skills needed to solve social problems. Educators can support self-regulation by teaching children how to identify problems, consider solutions, evaluate consequences, and choose appropriate responses.

Problem-solving skills can be taught through modeling, guided discussions, conflict resolution activities, and everyday classroom interactions.

Providing Opportunities for Choice

Offering meaningful choices helps children develop independence, responsibility, and self-regulation. When children are given opportunities to make decisions, they learn that their actions have consequences and that they have some control over their environment.

Choices should be developmentally appropriate and manageable. For example, a teacher might ask:

- “Would you like to use markers or crayons for your picture?”

Providing limited choices supports autonomy while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Supporting Peer Interactions

Interactions with peers provide valuable opportunities for practicing self-regulation. During play and social activities, children learn to wait, share, negotiate, cooperate, and resolve conflicts. These experiences help children develop impulse control, empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation.

Educators can support peer interactions by modeling respectful communication, facilitating conflict resolution, and creating opportunities for collaborative play.

Encouraging Reflection

Reflection helps children become aware of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Simple questions such as:

- “How were you feeling?”
- “What happened?”
- “What could you try next time?”
- “How do you think your friend felt?”

These kinds of reflective questions encourage children to think about their experiences, develop self-awareness, and gradually internalize the skills needed for self-regulation. Over time, this process helps children become more thoughtful decision-makers.

Self-Regulation Is Learned Through Practice

Just as children learn to walk through repeated attempts and practice, they learn self-regulation through experience. Mistakes, frustrations, and emotional challenges are not signs of failure; they are opportunities for learning. Each time educators respond with patience, guidance, and support, they help strengthen the neural pathways that support self-regulation.

The goal is not perfect behavior. The goal is helping children gradually develop the skills needed to manage emotions, solve problems, build relationships, and participate successfully in their communities.

Attention, decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-directed behavior do not develop in isolation. They are interconnected processes that depend on self-regulation and executive functioning. When children learn to manage their emotions, control impulses, and sustain attention, they become more capable learners. In many ways, self-regulation serves as the bridge between children’s social-emotional development and their academic success.

Conclusion

Self-regulation develops through the interaction of biology, relationships, experience, and brain development. Children are not born knowing how to manage emotions, control impulses, solve problems, or focus attention. These skills emerge gradually through supportive relationships and repeated opportunities for practice.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored how emotional competence, impulse control, executive functioning, self-efficacy, and personal agency work together to support self-regulation. We have also seen that self-regulation develops first through co-regulation with caring adults before becoming an internal skill that children can use independently.

As educators, our role is not to control children but to help them develop the skills they need to eventually regulate themselves. Through responsive relationships, intentional teaching, predictable environments, and opportunities for practice, educators help children build the foundation for social competence, academic success, and lifelong well-being.

In many ways, self-regulation serves as the bridge between children's social-emotional development and their ability to learn, solve problems, build relationships, and participate successfully in their communities.

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4.5: Chapter Vocabulary

Self-Regulation: The developing ability to manage emotions, attention, thoughts, impulses, and behavior in ways that are appropriate for the situation.

Co-Regulation: The supportive process through which a responsive adult helps a child manage emotions, behavior, and physiological responses.

Executive Function: A group of mental processes, including working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility, that help children plan, focus attention, remember information, and manage behavior.

Inhibitory Control: The ability to pause before acting, resist an immediate impulse, and choose a response that is appropriate for the situation.

Self-Efficacy: A person's belief in their ability to accomplish a task, solve a problem, or influence what happens through their actions.

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4.6: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: A Guide to Executive Function/links to an external source:** Explains how executive-function and self-regulation skills develop and how relationships and experiences can strengthen these abilities.
- **ZERO TO THREE: It Takes Two, the Role of Co-Regulation in Building Self-Regulation Skills/links to an external source:** Describes how warm, responsive adults provide the support, modeling, and coaching children need to develop self-regulation.
- **Head Start: Strategies for Supporting Self-Regulation/links to an external source:** Provides resources about self-regulation development and practical strategies for supporting infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children.
- **California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations: At a Glance/links to a pdf:** Summarizes developmental progressions related to initiative, attention, persistence, working memory, inhibitory control, and other approaches to learning.

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5: TRAUMA, STRESS, AND RESILIENCE

5.1: Chapter Introduction

5.2: Stress and the Developing Brain

5.3: What Trauma Looks Like in Children, Adolescents, and Adults

5.4: Child Abuse and Neglect

5.5: Mandated Reporting Responsibilities

5.6: Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence

5.7: Trauma, Resilience, and Protective Factors

5.8: Ms. Kendra's List

5.9: Chapter Vocabulary

5.10: Extra Internet Resource Links

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5.1: Chapter Introduction



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 5.1:** Explain how positive, tolerable, and toxic stress can affect children's brain development, emotional regulation, behavior, relationships, and learning.
- **SLO 5.2:** Identify potential signs of trauma, abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence in young children while recognizing that behavior may communicate stress, fear, or unmet needs.
- **SLO 5.3:** Describe how ACEs, PACEs, supportive relationships, and other protective factors can influence children's development and resilience.
- **SLO 5.4:** Apply trauma-informed principles and mandated-reporting responsibilities when responding to children and families affected by adversity.

Chapter 5 Short Overview

This chapter examines how stress, trauma, abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence can affect children's brain development, behavior, relationships, learning, and emotional well-being. It explores Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Positive and Compensatory Experiences (PACEs), protective factors, and the development of resilience. Students also learn how trauma-informed educators create safe, predictable environments, respond compassionately to children's behavior, and fulfill their responsibilities as mandated reporters.

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5.2: Stress and the Developing Brain



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

All children experience stress. Learning to wait for a turn, meeting new people, separating from a caregiver, or trying something unfamiliar can create temporary feelings of discomfort. In small doses, these experiences are a normal part of development and can help children build confidence, coping skills, and resilience.

However, not all stress is positive. When children experience chronic adversity, prolonged uncertainty, or traumatic events without the support of caring adults, the effects can extend beyond temporary discomfort. Stress can influence how children think, feel, learn, behave, and form relationships. In some cases, chronic stress and trauma can disrupt the development of self-regulation, attachment relationships, emotional well-being, and overall development.

Early childhood educators are often among the first professionals to observe the effects of stress and trauma in young children. A child who appears aggressive, withdrawn, anxious, inattentive, or overly reactive may not be choosing these behaviors intentionally. Instead, these behaviors may reflect a nervous system that is working hard to adapt to challenging circumstances.

Fortunately, trauma does not define a child's future. Research consistently demonstrates that supportive relationships, predictable environments, and responsive caregiving can help buffer the effects of adversity and promote resilience. Early childhood professionals play an important role in creating the safe, nurturing relationships that help children heal, grow, and thrive.

In this chapter, we will explore the effects of stress and trauma on development, examine the role of attachment and protective factors, and introduce Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Positive and Compensatory Experiences (PACEs). The chapter also addresses child abuse and neglect, children's exposure to domestic violence and intimate partner violence, mandated-reporting responsibilities, and trauma-informed practices that support resilience in young children and their families.

Children's brains are shaped by their experiences. During times of stress, the brain prioritizes survival. Information is often processed through the brain's emotional centers, including the limbic system, before it reaches areas responsible for reasoning, decision-making, and problem solving, such as the prefrontal cortex (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Siegel, 2012). This is one reason why children who are frightened, overwhelmed, or experiencing chronic stress may react emotionally before they are able to think through a situation logically.

When children feel safe and supported, the prefrontal cortex is better able to help regulate emotions, attention, and behavior. However, during periods of intense stress, the brain's survival systems may take priority, making it more difficult for children to focus, learn, remember information, or manage strong emotions.

Short periods of stress are a normal part of life. In fact, learning to cope with manageable challenges helps children develop resilience. Problems arise when stress becomes intense, frequent, or prolonged without the support of caring adults. Researchers refer to this as chronic stress or toxic stress.

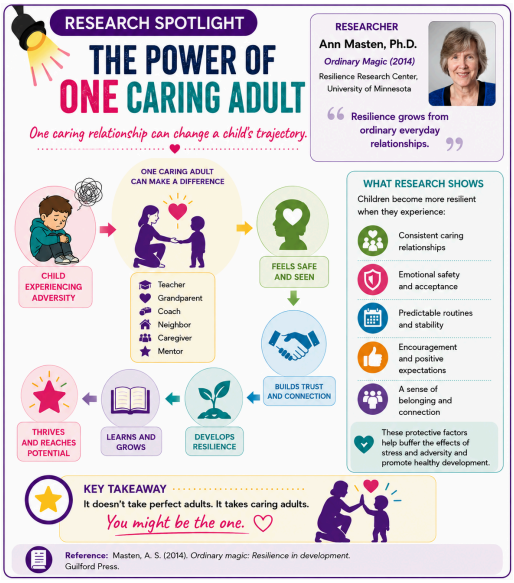
When children experience chronic stress, the body releases stress hormones such as cortisol. Produced by the adrenal glands, cortisol helps the body respond to immediate challenges by increasing alertness and preparing the body for action. During stressful situations, the brain often narrows its focus to potential threats, paying less attention to details that are not directly related to survival. While this response can be helpful in emergencies, prolonged exposure to elevated cortisol levels can interfere with healthy development.

Chronic stress may affect a child's ability to pay attention, remember information, regulate emotions, and learn new skills. Children experiencing ongoing stress may become more reactive, miss important social cues, struggle with self-regulation, or have

difficulty concentrating. Rather than viewing these behaviors as intentional misbehavior, trauma-informed educators recognize them as possible signs that a child's stress-response system is working overtime.

Young children are especially vulnerable because their brains are developing rapidly during the first years of life. Experiences such as abuse, neglect, family conflict, food insecurity, housing instability, exposure to violence, or prolonged separation from caregivers can place significant stress on a developing child. However, supportive relationships with caring adults can help buffer the effects of stress and promote healthy development.

One of the most powerful protective factors in a child's life is a stable, nurturing relationship with a responsive caregiver. These relationships help children feel safe, develop trust, and build the resilience needed to cope with life's challenges. Research suggests that it only takes one single stable, caring, and responsive relationship to help buffer the effects of adversity and promote resilience (Masten, 2014).



Attachment, Stress, and Developmental Pathways

Belsky's (1999) research linked attachment experiences to neurobiological stress regulation. He found that securely attached children tend to develop balanced stress-response systems and their cortisol levels rise in response to challenge but then return to baseline once safety is restored. In contrast, chronically insecure or disorganized attachment can lead to dysregulated stress systems, leaving children either hyperaroused or emotionally shut down.

These physiological findings reinforce what early educators observe every day: children who feel safe and supported can explore, play, and learn; those who feel uncertain or threatened focus their energy on survival, not growth.

What Is Trauma?

Trauma is an emotional, psychological, and physiological response to an event or series of events that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Not everyone experiences events in the same way. What feels traumatic to one person may not feel traumatic to another. Factors such as age, temperament, previous experiences, available support systems, and cultural context can influence how an individual responds to adversity.

Trauma can result from a single event, such as a natural disaster or serious accident, or it can develop from repeated experiences such as abuse, neglect, discrimination, chronic stress, or exposure to violence. Regardless of the source, trauma can affect how people think, learn, feel, behave, and relate to others.

Trauma can also affect attention, memory, executive functioning, and learning. Children who have experienced trauma may appear distracted, impulsive, inattentive, or emotionally reactive because their brains are focused on detecting and responding to potential threats. In some cases, trauma-related behaviors may resemble those associated with attention difficulties, such

as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or other developmental concerns. This is one reason why it is important for educators to consider the role that stress and trauma may play in a child's behavior and learning.

When children are dysregulated, cognitive processing may slow, making it more difficult to focus, remember information, solve problems, and learn new skills. Understanding the relationship between trauma and learning helps educators respond with empathy and provide the support children need to succeed.

Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed care recognizes that many children and families carry invisible experiences that affect how they learn, relate to others, and respond to the world around them. Understanding the effects of trauma helps early childhood educators create environments where children feel safe, valued, supported, and capable of learning and growth.

Over the last several decades, awareness of trauma and its impact on development has grown significantly. Researchers now understand that trauma can affect emotional well-being, relationships, learning, behavior, and physical health across the lifespan. For young children, these effects can be especially significant because development occurs so rapidly during the first years of life.

When people think of trauma, they often imagine major or catastrophic events. However, trauma can also result from smaller but repeated experiences that accumulate over time. Ongoing stressors such as poverty, discrimination, food insecurity, housing instability, family conflict, neglect, or exposure to violence can influence how a child's brain and body respond to the world.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that seeks to understand, recognize, and respond to the effects of trauma. Rather than asking, "What's wrong with this child?" trauma-informed educators ask, "What might this child have experienced, and how can I help?" This shift in perspective encourages empathy, understanding, and supportive relationships.

Trauma-informed early childhood programs emphasize physical, emotional, and psychological safety for children, families, and staff. They create environments that foster trust, belonging, connection, and resilience.

Early childhood educators can support trauma-informed care by:

- Creating environments that are predictable, respectful, and emotionally safe.
- Building trusting relationships through kindness, consistency, and responsive caregiving.
- Establishing routines that help children feel secure and know what to expect.
- Supporting children's social-emotional development and helping them learn healthy ways to express feelings and manage stress.
- Partnering with families to build trust, strengthen communication, and support children's development.
- Reflecting on their own practices to ensure they are responding to children's needs with empathy and understanding.
- Reframing challenging behaviors as possible signs of stress, fear, or unmet needs rather than intentional misbehavior.
- Promoting safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that help buffer the effects of adversity.

Trauma can result from many different experiences that affect children's emotional and physical well-being. Some examples include:

- Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect
- Witnessing violence in the home or community
- Chronic family conflict or exposure to domestic violence
- Having a family member attempt or die by suicide
- Living with a family member who struggles with substance misuse
- Living with a family member who experiences significant mental health challenges
- Family separation, prolonged separation from a primary caregiver, or having a household member who is incarcerated
- Death of a parent, sibling, caregiver, or other significant person
- Serious illness, hospitalization, or medical trauma experienced by the child or a family member
- Frequent moves or disruptions in caregiving arrangements
- Food insecurity
- Housing instability

- Experiencing discrimination, racism, or other forms of bias
- Exposure to natural disasters, wildfires, floods, earthquakes, pandemics, or other community or environmental crises

Understanding the impact of trauma allows educators to respond with compassion rather than judgment. When children experience safety, consistency, and supportive relationships, they are more likely to develop the resilience needed to heal, learn, and thrive.

What Does “Across the Lifespan” Mean?

Trauma does not affect everyone in the same way, and it does not disappear with age. Experiences that occur during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood interact with one another and influence how individuals think, learn, form relationships, and respond to stress throughout their lives. Trauma can shape not only how people see themselves, but also how they perceive safety, trust, and connection with others.

Understanding trauma across the lifespan means recognizing that its effects are developmental. Trauma may look different at various ages and stages of life, but its influence can continue long after the original event has passed.

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5.3: What Trauma Looks Like in Children, Adolescents, and Adults

Trauma in Early Childhood

In early childhood, trauma can disrupt the foundations of attachment and trust. Young children may not have the words to describe what they feel, so their distress shows up in behavior, such as clinginess, aggression, withdrawal, regression, or difficulty concentrating.

- Early experiences of safety and nurturing relationships help protect the developing brain.
- Consistent routines and responsive caregiving promote healing and resilience.
- Support from families, caregivers, and educators can restore a sense of security.

Trauma in Middle Childhood

During middle childhood, children are developing greater independence, academic skills, and peer relationships. Trauma may affect their ability to concentrate, regulate emotions, build friendships, and succeed in school. Because children in this age group are better able to understand events than younger children, they may experience feelings of shame, guilt, worry, or self-blame related to traumatic experiences.

- Trauma may appear as academic difficulties, withdrawal, anxiety, aggression, or changes in behavior.
- Peer relationships and a sense of belonging become increasingly important protective factors.
- Supportive relationships with family members, educators, and other caring adults help children build resilience and cope with adversity.

Trauma in Adolescence

Adolescence brings tremendous brain and identity development. Teens who've experienced trauma may struggle with self-regulation, risk-taking behaviors, or social withdrawal. Their prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making and impulse control, is still developing. Thus, it can make managing stress and emotions even more difficult.

- Trauma can appear as anger, defiance, withdrawal, anxiety, or depression.
- Supportive relationships and clear, respectful boundaries promote trust and growth.
- Connection with peers, supportive adults, and mentors is vital for recovery and resilience.

Trauma in Adulthood

Adults who have experienced trauma may carry unhealed patterns of hypervigilance, avoidance, or self-blame. These responses can influence relationships, parenting, work, learning, and participation in educational settings.

- Adult learners often balance multiple stressors (work, caregiving, finances).
- Trauma-informed teaching and leadership provide structure, predictability, and compassion.
- Healing can occur through connection, self-awareness, therapy, and supportive community.

Early experiences of trauma, often described as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, can continue to shape stress responses, emotional regulation, and executive functioning well into adulthood. What began as a protective survival strategy in childhood can sometimes interfere with focus, trust, and self-regulation in college or professional settings.

Educators and leaders should also be aware of re-traumatization, which can occur when classroom or workplace situations unintentionally trigger feelings of powerlessness or shame. This might happen through public correction, mandatory self-disclosure, classroom discussions involving traumatic experiences, high-stakes testing, or hierarchical power dynamics that echo

past experiences of loss or control. Trauma-informed environments promote psychological safety by balancing structure with empathy and voice.

Healing in adulthood is both possible and powerful. Supportive relationships, predictable structures, and Protective and Compensatory Experiences (PACEs), such as belonging, stability, and encouragement, help restore confidence, connection, and resilience at any age. PACEs are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Intergenerational and Collective Trauma

Trauma is not only personal, but it can also be intergenerational and collective. Historical injustices, systemic racism, poverty, and displacement create layers of community or generational trauma that can be passed down through families and cultures. Recognizing this helps educators and leaders understand the broader contexts in which people live and learn.

Trauma is not what happens to you; it's what happens inside you as a result of what happens to you (Maté, 2022).

Trauma can touch any stage of life, but so can healing and resilience. Supportive relationships, safe environments, and compassionate practices help people regulate, learn, and thrive. No matter our role, educator, colleague, student, friend, family member, or leader, we all have the power to be a protective factor in someone's life.

A Note to the Reader

As you continue reading this chapter, you may find yourself reflecting on your own life experiences as well as those of the children and families you work with. Discussions of trauma, adversity, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), abuse, and violence can sometimes bring up personal memories or emotions.

Please practice self-care as needed. Consider taking breaks, talking with a trusted friend, family member, counselor, or support person, and returning to the material when you feel ready.

Understanding trauma is important because it helps us support children and families more effectively. It can also deepen our understanding of ourselves and remind us that healing, growth, and resilience are possible throughout life.

As you continue reading this chapter, consider how trauma-informed principles of safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness can be incorporated into your daily interactions with children, families, colleagues, and community members.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood (before age 18). These experiences can affect how the brain and body develop, influencing emotional regulation, learning, and long-term health. The original ACE Study (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, Koss, & Marks, 1998) revealed strong links between early adversity and later physical and mental health outcomes.

Some examples include:

- Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect
- Witnessing violence in the home or community
- Having a family member attempt or die by suicide
- Living in a household with substance use or mental health challenges
- Experiencing instability from parental separation or incarceration

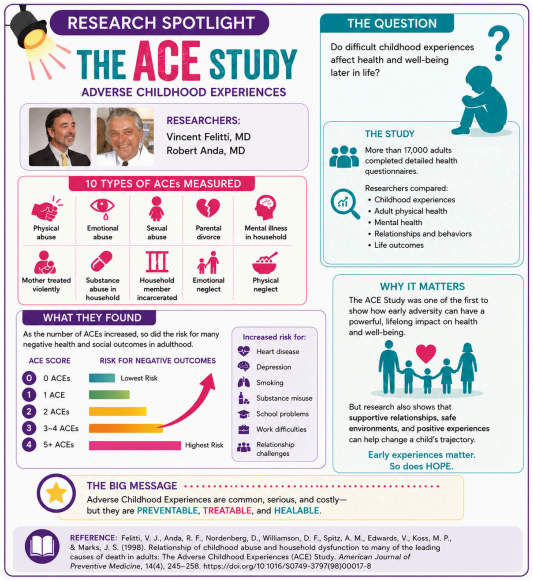
While we often associate ACEs with early childhood, the long-term effects can influence how adults learn, relate, and cope with stress throughout their lives. Understanding ACEs helps educators, staff, and community members recognize that challenging behavior often signals survival, not defiance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; Felitti et al., 1998).

ACEs can contribute to toxic stress, the body's chronic survival response to ongoing danger or uncertainty. Without protective factors, toxic stress can impair relationships and affect emotional and physical well-being, even decades later.

Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has helped identify early life events that can have lasting effects on well-being and health if left unaddressed. These experiences, which include various forms of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, increase the likelihood of chronic health conditions, mental illness, and substance use in adulthood. They can also disrupt concentration, memory, and self-regulation, which are vital skills for learning and professional success. However, the evidence also reminds us that healing and resilience are possible when individuals receive appropriate support and connection within caring environments (Stephens, Peterson, & Eyrich, 2020).

- ACEs are common. About 61% of adults surveyed across 25 states reported that they had experienced at least one type of ACE, and nearly 1 in 6 reported they had experienced four or more types of ACEs (Redford, 2016).
- A score of four or higher significantly increases the risk of heart disease, depression, substance use, and school or work difficulties (Redford, 2016).
- Preventing ACEs could potentially reduce a large number of health conditions. For example, up to 1.9 million cases of heart disease and 21 million cases of depression could have been potentially avoided by preventing ACEs (Redford, 2016).
- Some children are at greater risk than others. Women and several racial/ethnic minority groups were at greater risk for having experienced 4 or more types of ACEs (Redford, 2016).
- ACEs are costly. The economic and social costs to families, communities, and society total hundreds of billions of dollars each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022).
- A 10% reduction in ACEs across North America could save an estimated $56 billion annually in health and social costs (Redford, 2016).

ACEs don't determine a person's future, but without support, they can create patterns of toxic stress that alter brain chemistry, weaken immunity, and reduce lifespan.



The ACE Questionnaire and What It Tells Us

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Questionnaire is a simple screening tool consisting of 10 questions (See Figure 5.1).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Questionnaire **Figure 5.1.**

Finding Your ACE Score (0–10 Points) While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life, did any of the following occur? For each **Yes** response, add **1 point**.

#	Question	Yes	No
1.	Did a parent or other adult in the household often swear at you, insult you, put you down, humiliate you, or act in a way that made you afraid you might be physically hurt?	☐	☐
2.	Did a parent or other adult in the household often push, grab, slap, or throw something at you, or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?	☐	☐
3.	Did an adult or person at least five years older than you ever touch or fondle you in a sexual way, have you touch them sexually, or attempt oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you?	☐	☐
4.	Did you often feel that no one in your family loved you, thought you were important, or that your family did not support, protect, or care for one another?	☐	☐
5.	Did you often feel that you did not have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, had no one to protect you, or that your caregivers were unable to care for your basic needs?	☐	☐
6.	Were your parents or primary caregivers ever separated or divorced?	☐	☐
7.	Was your mother, stepmother, or another caregiver in the household often pushed, grabbed, slapped, kicked, hit, threatened, or otherwise physically harmed?	☐	☐
8.	Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker, alcoholic, or who used illegal drugs?	☐	☐
9.	Was a household member depressed, mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?	☐	☐
10.	Did a household member go to prison or serve time in jail?	☐	☐

ACE Score: _____ (Total number of “Yes” responses)

Possible Range: 0–10

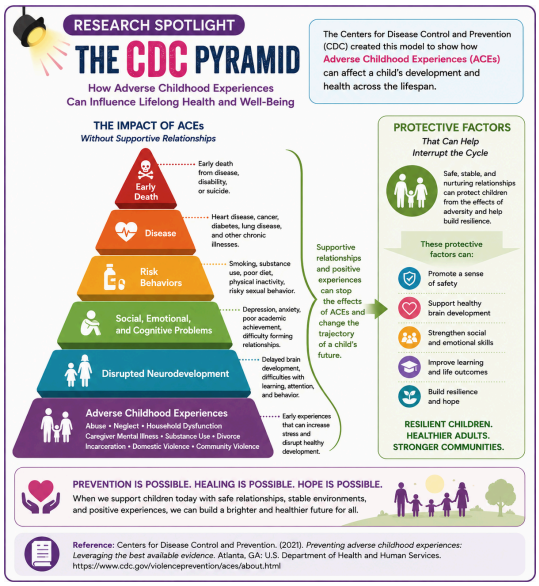
Note: The ACE Questionnaire is a screening and educational tool, not a diagnostic instrument. An ACE score does not determine a person’s future outcomes. Supportive relationships, protective factors, and resilience can help buffer the effects of adversity.

Each “yes” answer is given 1 point, for a total possible ACE score of 0–10.
Higher scores reflect greater exposure to childhood adversity and, therefore, a higher risk of health and social challenges later in life.

Research from the ACE Study (Felitti et al., 1998) and subsequent work by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) found the following patterns:

ACE Scores and Associated Health Outcomes **Figure 5.2** (Redford, 2016)	
ACE Score	**Associated Risk**
3	Twice as likely to develop heart disease
4	Three times more likely to experience depression
4 or higher	32 times more likely to have problems in school
5 or higher	Dramatically increased likelihood of: • Smoking • Teen pregnancy • Risk-taking sexual behavior • Heavy alcohol use • Drug use or abuse (75% more likely) • Financial instability • Exposure to domestic violence • Mental health difficulties • Cancer, heart disease, and COPD
6 and up	Average life expectancy reduced by **20 years**

The ACE score does not predict destiny**,** but it highlights risk and the importance of intervention. Protective factors, community connection, and trauma-informed care can dramatically reduce the impact of high ACE scores and improve lifelong well-being.



The Three Realms of ACEs

ACEs can occur across three interconnected realms that influence well-being throughout life (Quinn, 2020):

🏠 **Household**: • Divorce • Homelessness • Parental mental illness • Substance use • Domestic violence • Abuse or neglect • Incarcerated family member

🌆 **Community**: • Poverty • Structural racism • Substandard housing or schools • Violence • Unemployment • Environmental hazards • Limited mobility or opportunity

🌍 **Environmental**: • Climate-related disasters • Wildfires • Pandemics • Flooding • Drought • Earthquakes • Other natural crises

These realms intertwine, community and environmental instability often amplify household stress, increasing the overall impact of adversity.

Recommended Video Resource

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris: How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime (TED Talk)

In this TED Talk, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, a pediatrician and former California Surgeon General, explains how early adversity and trauma can activate prolonged stress responses in the body, affecting health, learning, behavior, and development across the lifespan. The presentation provides an accessible introduction to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the effects of trauma early in life.

Dr. Burke Harris argues that adverse childhood experiences can trigger prolonged stress responses that influence both physical and mental health. She emphasizes that early identification, supportive relationships, and trauma-informed interventions can help reduce the long-term effects of adversity and promote resilience.

https://yccd.instructure.com/courses...e-harris-video

Reflection Question:

How might an understanding of ACEs and toxic stress influence the way you interact with children, families, or students in your own professional setting?

Introducing PACEs: The Other Side of the Story

Positive and Compensatory Experiences (PACEs) help buffer the effects of adversity and promote healing and resilience. Practical examples in education and community settings include mentoring, financial aid support, peer programs, and predictable class structures that promote stability, all of which communicate safety, care, and belonging.

PACEs include:

- Stable, nurturing relationships with caring adults
- Safe and predictable environments
- Access to basic needs and community support
- Opportunities for purpose, belonging, and empowerment
- Safe opportunities for connection, reflection, and emotional support
- Encouragement, mentorship, and hope

PACEs don't erase trauma, but they provide the protective factors that allow individuals and communities to recover and thrive. In educational settings, this means creating spaces that prioritize trust, belonging, and consistent care.

ACEs remind us that adversity in early life can have lasting effects, but PACEs remind us that healing and growth are

always possible. By promoting connection, predictability, and compassion, educators can help shift the story from trauma to transformation.

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5.4: Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect are serious adverse childhood experiences that can undermine a child's sense of safety, stability, and trust. Because young children may be unable to explain what is happening in their lives, early childhood educators may be among the first adults outside the family to notice concerning injuries, behaviors, or changes in development (Berns, 2022).

The educator's role is not to investigate abuse or determine whether it occurred. Educators are responsible for recognizing possible indicators, responding supportively when children communicate concerns, documenting objective observations, and making required reports. Educators must approach these responsibilities with care, avoiding assumptions while placing the child's safety and well-being first. Mandated-reporting responsibilities are discussed in greater detail later in this section.

Defining Child Abuse and Neglect

Child maltreatment includes acts or failures to act by a parent, caregiver, or another person in a custodial role that result in harm, the potential for harm, or a threat of harm to a child. Child maltreatment may include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse or exploitation, physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical neglect, and other acts or failures to act that threaten a child's safety, health, or development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024a; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Maltreatment can occur in every cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic community and in any setting where children receive care. No single characteristic causes abuse or neglect. Instead, risk may be influenced by a combination of individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. Regardless of where maltreatment occurs or who is responsible, the child is never to blame (CDC, 2024c).

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse involves the intentional use of physical force against a child that causes or has the potential to cause injury. It may include hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, biting, or striking a child with an object.

Physical abuse should be distinguished from accidental childhood injuries. Young children frequently acquire bruises and scrapes through active play. Concern may arise when injuries are inconsistent with the explanation provided, appear in unusual locations, occur repeatedly, or do not appear consistent with the child's developmental abilities.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse involves patterns of behavior that harm a child's emotional well-being or sense of self-worth. Examples may include repeatedly humiliating, threatening, terrorizing, rejecting, isolating, or belittling a child. Constantly telling a child that they are unwanted, worthless, or responsible for adult problems can also cause serious emotional harm.

Emotional abuse may be difficult to recognize because it does not necessarily leave visible injuries. Its effects may instead be reflected in a child's self-concept, relationships, emotional regulation, and behavior. These effects can be as serious and enduring as those associated with physical abuse. Emotional abuse and other forms of psychological maltreatment are associated with a wide range of adverse psychological, developmental, behavioral, and health outcomes (Strathearn, Giannotti, Mills, Kisely, Najman, & Abajobir, 2020).

Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Child sexual abuse occurs when a child is involved in sexual activity that the child does not fully understand, cannot consent to, or is not developmentally prepared to experience. It may involve physical contact, exposing a child to sexual acts or materials, asking a child to engage in sexual behavior, producing or sharing sexual images of a child, or exploiting a child for another person's sexual purposes (CDC, 2024b).

Young children may not have the language or understanding needed to describe sexual abuse directly. They may communicate through behavior, play, artwork, partial statements, physical complaints, or changes in their relationships with adults and other

children. Some children disclose abuse gradually, while others may not disclose it at all.

Neglect

Neglect occurs when a caregiver fails to meet a child's basic physical, emotional, medical, educational, or supervisory needs in ways that harm or threaten the child's health, safety, or development. Neglect may take several forms, and children may experience more than one form at the same time.

Educators must be careful not to equate poverty with neglect. Families may experience food insecurity, unstable housing, transportation difficulties, limited access to health care, or other hardships despite making every effort to care for their children (Kostelnik et al., 2015). Educators should consider objective observations, recurring patterns, the child's immediate safety, and applicable reporting requirements rather than making judgments based on a family's income, culture, or circumstances.

Physical Neglect

Physical neglect occurs when a caregiver does not adequately provide for a child's basic physical needs. It may involve insufficient food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, or supervision. It may also include leaving a young child alone or in the care of someone who cannot provide safe and appropriate supervision (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Possible indicators may include persistent hunger, inadequate clothing for the weather, consistently poor hygiene, frequent fatigue, or repeated incidents in which the child lacks appropriate supervision. These indicators do not independently prove that neglect has occurred and may have explanations other than maltreatment.

Emotional Neglect

Emotional neglect occurs when a caregiver consistently fails to respond to a child's basic emotional needs. It may involve withholding affection, comfort, encouragement, attention, or opportunities for healthy interaction (Kostelnik et al., 2015). A child may also experience emotional neglect when a caregiver remains emotionally unavailable, repeatedly ignores signs of distress, or fails to provide the reassurance and protection the child needs.

Unlike emotional abuse, which involves harmful actions such as threatening, humiliating, or rejecting a child, emotional neglect generally involves the absence of necessary emotional care. Although it may not leave visible injuries, emotional neglect can affect children's attachment relationships, self-worth, emotional regulation, and ability to trust others.

Medical Neglect

Medical neglect involves failing to obtain or follow through with necessary medical, dental, or mental health care when doing so places a child's health or development at risk (Kostelnik et al., 2015). It may include failing to seek treatment for a serious illness or injury, consistently failing to provide prescribed medication, or disregarding professional recommendations concerning a significant health condition.

Educators should not assume that every delay in treatment constitutes medical neglect. Families may encounter financial difficulties, inadequate insurance, transportation problems, language barriers, limited availability of services, conflicting medical information, or religious and cultural beliefs that influence health-care decisions. These circumstances should be considered when seeking to understand why care has been delayed or declined, while keeping the child's health and safety at the center of concern.

Other Forms of Maltreatment

Children may experience forms of maltreatment that do not fit neatly within a single category. These may include abandonment, threats of harm, inadequate supervision, exploitation, exposure to dangerous environments, or permitting a child to use or be exposed to harmful substances (Kostelnik et al., 2015). Maltreatment may also involve encouraging or forcing a child to participate in illegal, dangerous, or developmentally inappropriate activities.

Different forms of maltreatment frequently overlap. For example, a child experiencing physical abuse may also experience emotional abuse, inadequate supervision, or medical neglect. Educators should focus on observable conditions, behaviors,

statements, and patterns rather than attempting to assign a definitive category.

Possible Indicators of Maltreatment

There is no single behavior or physical sign that proves a child has been abused or neglected. Possible indicators may also be associated with developmental differences, disabilities, illness, grief, family transitions, or other sources of stress. Educators should therefore pay attention to combinations of indicators, recurring patterns, sudden changes, and information communicated by the child.

Possible indicators may include:

- Injuries that are unexplained or inconsistent with the explanation provided
- Frequent injuries or delays in obtaining necessary medical care
- Extreme hunger, fatigue, poor hygiene, or clothing that is consistently unsuitable for the weather
- Frequent absences or irregular attendance
- Sudden changes in mood, behavior, eating, sleeping, or toileting
- Extreme withdrawal, aggression, fearfulness, or vigilance
- Flinching or appearing unusually fearful when adults approach
- Developmental regression, such as returning to behaviors the child had previously outgrown
- Sexual knowledge, language, or behavior that appears inconsistent with the child's developmental level
- Fear of going home or being alone with a particular person
- Repeated statements suggesting that the child feels unsafe, unwanted, or responsible for an adult's behavior

The presence of one indicator does not necessarily mean that maltreatment has occurred. At the same time, educators do not need proof before making a mandated report. In California, reporting is based on reasonable suspicion rather than certainty (Cal. Penal Code § 11166).

Understanding Abuse and Children's Behavior

Children affected by maltreatment do not all respond in the same way. Some children become quiet, compliant, or withdrawn. Others demonstrate aggression, impulsivity, defiance, intense emotional reactions, or difficulty following directions. A child may resist physical affection, seek constant reassurance, attempt to control interactions, or appear unusually independent. Some children may display indiscriminate affection, seeking physical closeness, comfort, or attention from unfamiliar adults without the hesitation typically expected for their developmental level.

These behaviors should not be viewed simply as challenging behavior, nor does any single behavior prove that maltreatment has occurred. They may represent attempts to remain safe, anticipate danger, gain control, meet unmet emotional needs, or communicate distress. For example, a child who watches adults constantly may have learned that monitoring adult emotions helps the child predict when conflict might occur. A child who hides food may have experienced inconsistent access to meals. A child who becomes distressed during transitions may associate uncertainty with danger. A child who readily approaches unfamiliar adults for affection may be seeking the comfort and attention that have not been consistently available.

Viewing behavior through a trauma-informed lens does not mean that educators ignore unsafe or disruptive behavior. It means that they respond with curiosity, predictable limits, emotional support, and an understanding that behavior communicates a need.

Effects on Social and Emotional Development

Abuse and neglect can affect children's developing relationships, emotional regulation, self-concept, and ability to learn. Young children develop trust when caregivers respond consistently to their needs. When caregivers are frightening, unavailable, or unpredictable, children may have difficulty believing that adults will protect and comfort them.

Children affected by maltreatment may experience difficulties with:

- Trusting adults and forming secure relationships
- Identifying and expressing emotions
- Calming themselves after becoming distressed

- Interpreting other people's intentions accurately
- Playing cooperatively and developing friendships
- Maintaining attention and participating in learning
- Developing confidence, competence, and a positive sense of identity

As discussed earlier in this chapter, these developmental effects are not inevitable or irreversible. Supportive relationships and safe, predictable environments can help buffer the effects of adversity and promote resilience (CDC, 2024a).

Responding When a Child Discloses Abuse

A child's disclosure may be direct, but it may also begin with a partial statement such as, "I do not want to go home," or "I don't want to sleep with my cousin anymore," or "Someone did something bad." The educator's response can influence whether the child continues to communicate and feels safe seeking help.

When a child discloses possible abuse, educators should:

- Remain calm and listen attentively.
- Allow the child to use their own words.
- Avoid expressing shock, disbelief, anger, or blame.
- Say, "I am glad you told me," and "This is not your fault."
- Avoid asking leading, suggestive, or repeated questions.
- Ask only the limited questions necessary to understand whether an immediate safety concern exists.
- Never promise to keep the information secret.
- Explain simply that the educator must share the information with people whose job is to help keep children safe.
- Document the child's exact words and the circumstances surrounding the disclosure.
- Make the required report promptly, following the mandated-reporting procedures discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Educators should not attempt to investigate, confront the suspected person, or independently determine whether the child's account is accurate. Extensive questioning can overwhelm the child and interfere with an official investigation. The educator's responsibility is to receive the information supportively and report the reasonable suspicion.

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5.5: Mandated Reporting Responsibilities

Early childhood educators throughout the United States have an ethical and legal responsibility to report suspected child abuse and neglect. However, reporting standards and procedures vary by state, so educators must understand and follow the laws of the jurisdiction in which they work. Under California law, a mandated reporter must make a report when, in a professional capacity or within the scope of employment, the person knows or reasonably suspects that a child has experienced abuse or neglect.

Reasonable suspicion does not require proof, certainty, or a medical diagnosis. Educators should report the facts and observations that created the concern. The appropriate agency determines whether an investigation is warranted.

California requires an initial report by telephone immediately or as soon as practicably possible, followed by a written report within 36 hours. Reports must be made to an agency authorized to receive them, such as the county Child Welfare Services agency, police department, sheriff's department, or designated county probation department. Telling a supervisor or program administrator does not replace the individual educator's legal responsibility to report (Cal. Penal Code §§ 11165.9–11166).

Educators should follow current state law, licensing requirements, and program procedures. However, program procedures may not prevent or delay an individual from making a required report. When completing a report, educators should provide the information available to them, even when some details are unknown.

Documenting Concerns Objectively

Accurate documentation helps educators communicate concerns without adding interpretations or accusations. Notes should include dates, times, observable behaviors, descriptions of injuries, relevant circumstances, and the child's exact words whenever possible.

For example, instead of writing, "Maya was clearly neglected," an educator might document:

Maya arrived at 8:10 a.m. and asked for food three times before breakfast. She said, "I didn't eat yesterday." Maya ate two servings of breakfast and placed a piece of bread in her coat pocket.

Objective documentation separates what the educator directly observed or heard from conclusions about what may have happened. Documentation should be stored securely and shared only with individuals authorized to receive it.

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5.6: Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence

Children may experience trauma when violence occurs between the important adults in their lives. The term *domestic violence* is sometimes used broadly to describe violence among people within a household or family. *Intimate partner violence*, or IPV, refers more specifically to abuse or aggression between current or former spouses or dating partners.

Intimate partner violence is not limited to physical assault. It may include sexual violence, stalking, psychological aggression, threats, intimidation, isolation, economic abuse, technological monitoring, or other coercive behaviors used to gain or maintain power and control over a partner (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026; U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). IPV can occur in married, unmarried, separated, or former relationships and can affect people from every cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic background.

Intimate partner violence is widespread. More than one in three women and more than one in six men in the United States have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetimes (CDC, 2026). Children are also frequently affected. Approximately one in four children is exposed to caregiver IPV during childhood through seeing, hearing, or otherwise being near the violence (Thackeray, Livingston, Ragavan, Schaechter, & Sigel, 2023).

How Children Experience Intimate Partner Violence

The phrase *witnessing domestic violence* is often used to describe children's experiences. However, children do not need to see a violent incident directly to be affected by it. They may hear yelling, threats, objects breaking, or physical assaults from another room. They may see injuries, damaged belongings, or emotional distress afterward. They may be awakened during an incident, attempt to intervene, call for help, hide with siblings, or worry about whether a caregiver will be harmed (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2015; Thackeray et al., 2023).

Children may also be used as part of the pattern of power and control. A person using violence may threaten to harm or take the children, force them to monitor a caregiver, ask them to keep secrets, undermine the caregiver's authority, or use custody and visitation arrangements to continue harassment or control. Children may experience sudden moves, separation from family members, changes in child care, housing instability, or the loss of familiar possessions and routines when a caregiver seeks safety (NCTSN, 2015; Thackeray et al., 2023).

For these reasons, the term "*exposure to intimate partner violence*" more accurately represents the many ways children may experience violence between caregivers. Even infants and toddlers can be affected by frightening sounds, abrupt movements, disruptions in caregiving, and changes in a caregiver's emotional availability. Young age does not protect children from the effects of trauma (NCTSN, n.d.-a). In fact, Bruce Perry explains that preverbal children may be especially vulnerable because they experience the physiological effects of fear and stress without yet having the language to understand or communicate what is happening (California Attorney General's Office, 2008).

Effects on Young Children

Children's responses to IPV vary. Their reactions may be influenced by their age, developmental abilities, temperament, relationship with caregivers, the frequency and severity of the violence, and the availability of supportive adults. Some children demonstrate noticeable distress, while others show few outward signs. An absence of visible symptoms does not necessarily mean that a child has been unaffected (NCTSN, 2015; Thackeray et al., 2023).

Possible responses among infants and young children may include:

- Increased crying, irritability, or difficulty being comforted
- Sleep disturbances, nightmares, or fear of sleeping alone
- Changes in appetite or eating patterns
- Clinginess or intense separation anxiety
- Developmental regression, including changes in toileting or language

- Withdrawal, emotional numbing, or reduced interest in play
- Aggression, impulsivity, or reenactment of frightening events in play
- Self-injurious behavior, such as repeatedly biting, scratching, or hitting themselves or banging their head
- Increased fearfulness or sensitivity to loud voices and sudden movements
- Difficulty concentrating, following directions, or participating in learning
- Attempts to monitor adults' emotions or prevent conflict
- Worry about the safety of a caregiver, sibling, or pet
- Self-blame or the belief that the child caused the conflict

Infants and children exposed to IPV demonstrate higher rates of internalizing responses, such as anxiety, withdrawal, and physical complaints, as well as externalizing responses, including aggression and attention difficulties. Exposure has also been associated with developmental delays, academic difficulties, and long-term physical and behavioral health concerns (Thackeray et al., 2023).

Young children depend on caregivers for both physical and emotional security. When one caregiver is frightening another, the child's sense of safety may be disrupted. The caregiver experiencing violence may also be coping with injury, fear, exhaustion, housing instability, financial control, or other stressors that temporarily affect their emotional availability. This does not mean that the survivor is an inadequate parent. Many survivors work continually to protect, comfort, and provide stability for their children under extremely difficult circumstances (NCTSN, 2015; Thackeray et al., 2023).

Chronic exposure to IPV may affect children's emotional regulation, attachment relationships, concentration, learning, and interactions with peers. Children may also form confusing beliefs about power and relationships, such as believing that aggression is an acceptable way to handle conflict or that controlling behavior is an expression of love (NCTSN, n.d.-b). These outcomes are possible effects, not inevitable ones.

Exposure to IPV and child maltreatment may occur together. Research reviewed by the American Academy of Pediatrics indicates that children exposed to IPV have an increased risk of experiencing physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect (Thackeray et al., 2023). However, exposure to IPV does not mean that maltreatment has necessarily occurred. Educators must consider the child's individual circumstances and follow applicable reporting requirements when reasonable suspicion exists.

Understanding Intimate Partner Violence and Children's Behavior

Children may communicate their experiences through behavior before they can describe them with words. A child who becomes distressed when voices are raised may associate loud voices with danger. A child who tries to manage adult interactions may have learned to watch for signs that conflict is beginning. A child who reenacts arguments between dolls may be attempting to understand a frightening experience (NCTSN, n.d.-a).

Some children become highly compliant and try not to draw attention to themselves. Others become controlling, aggressive, or easily overwhelmed. They may have difficulty moving between activities because unexpected change feels unsafe. Rather than viewing these responses only as challenging behavior, educators should consider what the child may be communicating and what support might help the child feel safe.

No single behavior proves that a child has been exposed to IPV. Similar behaviors may arise from developmental differences, other traumatic experiences, illness, grief, or significant changes in the child's life. Educators should observe patterns, document objective information, and avoid questioning a child repeatedly or drawing conclusions beyond what has been observed or disclosed.

Responding to a Child's Disclosure

A child may disclose IPV directly or through a partial statement such as, "Daddy hurt Mommy," "I hid when they were fighting," or "I'm scared when he comes home." Educators should respond with the same calm, supportive practices used for other disclosures of possible trauma or maltreatment.

The educator can say:

- "I am glad you told me."
- "That sounds frightening."
- "It is not your fault."

- “You are not responsible for stopping adults from fighting.”
- “There are adults whose job is to help keep children and families safe.”

Educators should listen without pressing for details, avoid making promises about what will happen, and never ask the child to confront a caregiver or repeat the disclosure for other staff members unnecessarily. The child’s exact words and the circumstances of the disclosure should be documented objectively.

Exposure to IPV and mandated-reporting requirements are addressed differently across jurisdictions. Educators must follow the laws and program procedures applicable where they work when they reasonably suspect that a child has been abused, neglected, injured, or placed in danger. When immediate danger exists, emergency procedures and proper reporting methods should be followed.

Supporting Children After Trauma

Whether children have experienced maltreatment, exposure to intimate partner violence, or another form of trauma, they need continued emotional support in their everyday environments. Educators should not pressure children to discuss private experiences or assume the role of a therapist. Instead, the classroom can provide safety, predictability, belonging, and opportunities to strengthen emotional and relationship skills.

Helpful practices include:

- Maintaining consistent routines and preparing children for changes
- Greeting children warmly and helping them identify trusted adults who are available to help
- Responding calmly to strong emotions and challenging behavior
- Using a calm voice and avoiding sudden, threatening, or humiliating responses
- Establishing clear, predictable limits
- Offering developmentally appropriate choices that provide an appropriate sense of control
- Helping children identify emotions and communicate their needs without pressuring them to discuss private experiences
- Providing quiet spaces, sensory materials, and supportive strategies for calming
- Teaching nonviolent problem-solving and healthy relationship skills
- Avoiding classroom activities that require children to disclose personal or family experiences
- Protecting the child’s and family’s privacy
- Coordinating with qualified mental health professionals and community support services when appropriate
- Continuing to recognize each child’s strengths, interests, relationships, and accomplishments

The classroom should communicate that violence is never the child’s fault and that disagreements can be managed without threats, intimidation, or harm. Educators model healthy relationships when they communicate respectfully, honor boundaries, solve problems cooperatively, and repair relationships after conflict. These consistent experiences of safety and care can help children rebuild trust, strengthen emotional regulation, and develop resilience (NCTSN, 2015; Thackeray et al., 2023).

Supporting Families Without Blame

Educators may become frustrated or frightened when they believe a caregiver or child is living with violence. However, asking, “Why don’t you just leave?” can communicate blame and overlook the realities of coercive control. A survivor may face threats, stalking, financial dependence, limited transportation, lack of housing, concerns about custody, fear for children or pets, immigration concerns, disability-related needs, or isolation from supportive relationships. Violence can also escalate when the person using it believes that control is being lost (National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.).

Educators should not pressure a survivor to take a particular action or attempt to provide counseling beyond their professional role. They can listen without judgment, acknowledge the caregiver’s concern for the child, maintain confidentiality within legal limits, and connect the caregiver with trained domestic-violence advocates and community resources.

Supportive language may include:

- “You do not deserve to be treated this way.”

- “This is not your fault.”
- “You know your circumstances and safety needs best.”
- “Would you like information about confidential support in the community?”
- “How can the program help maintain stability for your child?”

Any conversation should occur privately and only when it is safe to speak. Educators should not send written materials, leave voicemail messages, or use electronic communication about IPV without considering whether the person using violence may monitor the survivor’s phone, email, belongings, or online activity.

Supporting Safety and Resilience

Exposure to IPV can be traumatic, but it does not determine a child’s future. Children are more likely to recover when violence stops, safety increases, and they have stable relationships with supportive caregivers and other trusted adults. Maintaining the child’s connection with a protective caregiver can be especially important to healing (NCTSN, 2015; Thackeray et al., 2023).

Early childhood educators can become part of this network of protection by providing consistency, emotional warmth, respectful boundaries, and opportunities for successful play and learning. These everyday experiences help children rebuild trust, strengthen emotional regulation, and learn that relationships can be safe, predictable, and caring.

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5.7: Trauma, Resilience, and Protective Factors

Child maltreatment and exposure to intimate partner violence are two experiences that may cause childhood trauma, but trauma can arise from many circumstances. Loss, family separation, community violence, discrimination, serious illness, housing instability, natural disasters, and other overwhelming experiences may also affect children's emotional and physical well-being. The impact of any experience depends on the child's developmental level, previous experiences, available support, and sense of safety.

Building Resilience in Children

Although trauma and adversity can affect development and health, they do not determine a child's future. Resilience is the capacity to cope, adapt, and continue developing in the face of significant challenges. It is not a fixed trait that a child either has or does not have. Instead, it develops through experiences and access to meaningful support.

Protective Factors That Support Resilience

Protective factors are strengths, relationships, resources, and conditions that help buffer the effects of stress and adversity. They operate at multiple levels, including the child, family, early childhood program, community, and broader society.

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework identifies five family strengths that promote healthy development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Center for the Study of Social Policy [CSSP], n.d.):

1. **Parental resilience:** The ability of parents and caregivers to manage stress, recover from challenges, and continue meeting their children's needs.
2. **Social connections:** Supportive relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, and community members who provide emotional encouragement and practical assistance.
3. **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** An understanding of children's developmental needs, age-appropriate expectations, and effective approaches to parenting and guidance.
4. **Concrete support in times of need:** Access to food, housing, health care, transportation, child care, mental health services, and other resources that help families meet their basic needs.
5. **Social and emotional competence of children:** Children's developing ability to form relationships, understand and express emotions, regulate behavior, and communicate their needs.

These protective factors are interconnected. For example, social connections may help a family obtain concrete support, while knowledge of child development can strengthen parental resilience by helping caregivers understand and respond to children's behavior. Early childhood programs can help families build these protective factors through respectful partnerships, family education, resource connections, and support for children's social and emotional development.

Although the Strengthening Families framework emphasizes family strengths, protective experiences within children's everyday environments also support resilience. These experiences may include:

- Secure and responsive relationships with teachers and other trusted adults
- Consistent routines and predictable environments
- Opportunities for play, exploration, and creativity
- Positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging
- Opportunities to develop competence, independence, and problem-solving skills

Resilience Is Built Through Positive Relationships

Resilience develops through repeated experiences of safety, consistency, and care. When educators respond with empathy, listen attentively, and take children's concerns seriously, they become trusted adults in children's lives. These relationships not only buffer the effects of adversity but also help children learn that it is safe to identify harmful experiences and seek support.

Ms. Kendra's List, presented next, illustrates how educators can communicate clear messages about children's right to safety and

care without requiring them to disclose personal experiences.

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5.8: Ms. Kendra's List

Modeling Safe Truth-Telling in Education

Trauma-informed care begins with the recognition that everyone carries experiences that shape how they feel, think, and learn. Ms. Kendra's List offers a powerful way to acknowledge those hidden experiences while promoting safety, honesty, and empathy.

Originally created by Erica Paske and Dr. James S. Gordon through the Ms. Kendra Program in New Haven, Connecticut, the list was designed to help children and adults speak the truth about violence, neglect, and fear in their communities. Over time, it has evolved into a teaching and reflection tool for children, educators, families, and community members.

Why It Matters

Ms. Kendra's List reminds us that:

- Many children carry invisible stories of loss, instability, fear, or adversity.
- Safety is not a given; it must be intentionally created through predictable, nurturing relationships.
- Trauma-informed educators seek to understand the whole child rather than focusing solely on behavior.
- Every child deserves to feel safe, heard, valued, and protected.

The list reflects many of the core principles of trauma-informed care, including safety, trust, empowerment, community, and cultural responsiveness.

Ms. Kendra's List (For Elementary-Age Children)

- No child should be harmed because of their race, religion, or gender.
- No child should be punched or kicked.
- No child should be left alone for a long time.
- No child should be hungry for a long time.
- No child should be bullied or told they are no good.
- No child should be touched in their private parts.
- No child should be scared by gun violence at home or in school.
- No child should have to see other people hurt each other.

Because

- It makes a child feel bad about themselves.
- It makes a child not care about school.
- It makes a child feel sad, scared, or lonely.
- It makes a child feel angry and want to fight.
- It makes a child feel like giving up.
- It makes a child worry about their family.

As educators, caregivers, and community members, our role extends beyond instruction. We help create the conditions for safety, connection, healing, and growth. Ms. Kendra's List reminds us that when children feel seen, heard, valued, and protected, resilience can flourish and learning can thrive.

Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed care is more than a theory; it's a daily practice that shapes how we teach, lead, and interact. In education, it means recognizing that every learner brings a story, and our classrooms and workplaces can either reinforce stress or become spaces of healing and trust. Trauma-informed educators recognize that behavior is often a form of communication and that supportive relationships can help buffer the effects of stress and adversity.

These five guiding principles provide a framework for creating nurturing environments that support healthy development, resilience, and well-being: Safety, Trust & Transparency, Peer & Community Support, Empowerment & Voice, and Cultural & Historical Responsiveness.

1. Safety: Establish Predictable Routines and Transparent Expectations

Safety is the cornerstone of trauma-informed work. Predictable structures, consistent routines, and clear boundaries help students and staff feel secure enough to engage fully.

In practice:

- Establish consistent daily routines and schedules.
- Prepare children for transitions and changes in routine.
- Create calm, welcoming environments that support learning and exploration.
- Use a warm tone of voice, responsive body language, and nurturing interactions.
- Minimize unnecessary stressors such as excessive noise, confusion, or unpredictability.

• 2. Trust and Transparency: Clear Communication Builds Credibility

Trust grows when educators are consistent and transparent. Ambiguity can create anxiety, especially for individuals with trauma histories.

In practice:

- Follow through on commitments and expectations.
- Communicate openly and respectfully with families.
- Explain routines and expectations in developmentally appropriate ways.
- Respond consistently to children's needs.
- Model honesty, respect, and accountability.

• 3. Peer and Community Support: Foster Connection and Shared Experiences

Healing happens in community. Meaningful relationships buffer stress and strengthen resilience.

In practice:

- Encourage positive peer interactions and friendships.
- Create opportunities for cooperative play and shared experiences.
- Build strong partnerships with families.
- Connect families with community resources when appropriate.
- Promote a classroom culture where everyone feels valued, respected, and included.

4. Empowerment and Voice: Offer Choice and Agency in Learning

Trauma often involves loss of control. Empowerment restores agency and dignity.

In practice:

- Offer age-appropriate choices throughout the day.
- Encourage children to express their feelings, interests, and preferences.
- Support children's growing independence and problem-solving abilities.
- Recognize strengths and celebrate effort and progress.

- Provide opportunities for children to participate in decisions that affect them.

5. Cultural and Historical Responsiveness: Honor Identity and Experience

Trauma does not occur in isolation; it's shaped by culture, history, and systems of power.

In practice:

- Honor family cultures, traditions, and values.
- Support children's home languages whenever possible.
- Incorporate diverse materials, books, and perspectives into the learning environment.
- Reflect on personal biases and assumptions.
- Recognize the effects of collective and intergenerational trauma and respond with sensitivity and respect.

Trauma-informed care is not a separate curriculum or program. Rather, it is a way of thinking about and responding to children and families. When educators create environments characterized by safety, trust, connected community, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness, they help build resilience and support healthy development for all children.

Putting Trauma-Informed Care into Practice

Understanding trauma is only the first step. Trauma-informed care becomes meaningful when educators apply this knowledge in their daily interactions with children and families. Every routine, relationship, and response provides an opportunity to promote safety, connection, and resilience.

1. Begin with Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation

Before we can co-regulate with children, we must be able to regulate ourselves. Early childhood educators often serve as emotional anchors for young children. When adults remain calm and responsive during stressful situations, children learn that they are safe and supported.

In practice:

- Recognize your own stress signals, triggers, and limits.
- Pause and take a breath before responding during challenging moments.
- Use self-regulation strategies such as deep breathing, stretching, movement, or mindfulness.
- Model calm and respectful communication.
- Remember that children often borrow the emotional state of the adults around them.

2. Support Co-Regulation

Young children are still developing self-regulation skills and often rely on caring adults to help them manage strong emotions and stressful experiences.

In practice:

- Acknowledge children's feelings.
- Provide comfort and reassurance when children are distressed.
- Use a calm voice and supportive body language.
- Help children label emotions and develop coping strategies.
- Focus on connection before correction.

3. Build Strong Relationships

Supportive relationships are among the strongest protective factors in a child's life. Children thrive when they experience trust, consistency, and belonging.

In practice:

- Build warm, responsive relationships with children.
- Develop strong partnerships with families.
- Encourage positive peer interactions.
- Celebrate effort, growth, and kindness.
- Create opportunities for children to feel successful and valued.

4. Create Supportive Environments

Trauma-informed environments help children feel safe, secure, predictable, and included.

In practice:

- Maintain consistent routines.
- Prepare children for transitions.
- Create welcoming and culturally responsive learning environments.
- Provide opportunities for choice and independence.
- Use visual supports and clear expectations.

5. Cultivate Resilience and Hope

Healing occurs through relationships, positive experiences, and opportunities to develop competence.

In practice:

- Focus on children's strengths.
- Encourage problem solving and persistence.
- Celebrate progress rather than perfection.
- Help children develop confidence in their abilities.
- Remember that supportive relationships can help children overcome adversity and thrive.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed care is not about fixing children or families. Rather, it is about creating environments where children feel safe, valued, connected, and capable of learning. Through empathy, consistency, and responsive relationships, early childhood educators become powerful protective factors in children's lives.

Throughout this chapter, we explored how stress, adversity, trauma, abuse, and violence can influence development during the earliest years of life. We also examined the powerful role that relationships, protective factors, and supportive environments play in promoting resilience. While trauma may become part of a child's story, it does not have to determine the ending. Children are remarkably resilient when surrounded by caring adults who provide safety, connection, and hope.

As early childhood educators, we may not be able to remove every challenge children face, but we can create environments where healing, growth, and learning are possible. Every warm interaction, comforting response, predictable routine, and trusting relationship helps build the foundation for healthy development. By viewing behavior through a trauma-informed lens and responding with compassion rather than judgment, we help children develop the skills, confidence, and resilience they need to

thrive.

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5.9: Chapter Vocabulary

Trauma: An emotional, psychological, and physiological response to an event or series of events that overwhelms a person's ability to cope.

Toxic stress: Prolonged or excessive activation of the body's stress-response systems without sufficient support from caring adults.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Potentially traumatic experiences occurring before age 18 that can affect development, health, relationships, and well-being.

Protective factors: Relationships, strengths, resources, and environmental conditions that help reduce the effects of stress and adversity.

Trauma-informed care: An approach that recognizes the possible effects of trauma and emphasizes safety, trust, connection, empowerment, cultural responsiveness, and compassionate support.

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5.10: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: A Guide to Toxic Stress/links to an external source:** Explains how prolonged stress can affect early development and how responsive caregiving and supportive environments can protect children.
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Early Childhood Trauma/links to an external source:** Provides information about how trauma affects infants and young children, possible behavioral and emotional responses, and protective factors that support recovery.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences/links to an external source:** Explores ACEs, their possible long-term effects, and strategies for creating safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments.
- **California Department of Social Services: Child Abuse Mandated Reporter Training/links to an external source:** Provides California-specific training and resources concerning the identification and reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect.

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6: EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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6.1: Chapter Introduction

6



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 6.1:** Describe how biological processes, cognitive development, relationships, language, culture, and environmental experiences influence emotional development.
- **SLO 6.2:** Compare major theories of emotion and human development and explain how they contribute to understanding children's emotional experiences.
- **SLO 6.3:** Identify developmental changes in children's emotional expression, recognition, understanding, vocabulary, regulation, and sense of self.
- **SLO 6.4:** Apply culturally responsive strategies that support children's emotional competence, emotional intelligence, and healthy expression of feelings.

Chapter 6 Short Overview

This chapter examines how children learn to recognize, express, understand, and manage emotions through biological maturation, relationships, language, culture, and experience. It introduces major theories of emotion and development, explores the brain systems involved in emotional experiences, and describes the growth of emotional competence and emotional intelligence. The chapter also emphasizes how responsive adults and culturally supportive environments foster children's emotional development.

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6.2: James-Lange Theory of Emotion



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Emotions are a fundamental part of being human. They influence how we think, learn, communicate, build relationships, and respond to the world around us. From an infant's first social smile to a preschooler's growing ability to express empathy, emotional development plays an important role in every aspect of growth and learning.

Emotional development refers to the process through which children learn to recognize, express, understand, and manage emotions. These skills do not develop automatically. Rather, they emerge through a combination of biological maturation, relationships, experiences, language, culture, and learning.

Emotions serve important functions. They communicate needs, guide behavior, strengthen relationships, and help individuals respond to opportunities and challenges. Joy encourages social connection, fear promotes safety, sadness elicits comfort and support, and anger signals that something may be unfair or threatening (Santrock, 2021). In this way, emotions help children make sense of their experiences and navigate their social worlds.

As children grow, they become increasingly capable of understanding their own emotions, recognizing the emotions of others, expressing feelings appropriately, and using emotional information to guide their behavior. These abilities form the foundation for emotional competence, empathy, emotional intelligence, and healthy relationships.

In this chapter, we will explore how emotions develop, the biological and cognitive processes that influence emotional experiences, and the ways children learn to understand, express, and regulate emotions throughout early childhood.

James-Lange Theory of Emotion

The James-Lange Theory, developed independently by William James (1842–1910) and Carl Lange (1834–1900) in the late 1800s, proposes that emotions result from physiological reactions in the body (James, 1884; Lange, 1885). According to this theory, people do not cry because they feel sad; rather, they feel sad because they notice themselves crying. In other words, a physical response occurs first, and the emotional experience follows. For example, a child who encounters a barking dog may experience a racing heart, trembling, and rapid breathing. According to James and Lange, the child interprets these bodily reactions and then experiences the emotion of fear. Although modern researchers recognize that emotions are more complex than this explanation suggests, the theory was influential because it highlighted the important connection between the body and emotional experience.

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6.3: Cannon-Bard Theory of Emotion

The Cannon-Bard Theory was developed by Walter Cannon (1871–1945) and Philip Bard (1898–1977) in the 1920s as a response to the James-Lange Theory (Cannon, 1927). Cannon and Bard argued that physiological reactions and emotional experiences occur simultaneously rather than one causing the other. Using the previous example, a child who encounters a barking dog would experience fear and physical reactions such as a racing heart at the same time. According to this theory, the brain processes emotional information and sends signals that produce both the emotional feeling and the physical response simultaneously. The Cannon-Bard Theory helped expand understanding of the brain's role in emotional experiences and remains an important contribution to the study of emotions.

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6.4: Schachter-Singer Two-Factor Theory of Emotion

Psychologists Stanley Schachter (1922–1997) and Jerome Singer (1924–2010) proposed the Two-Factor Theory of Emotion in 1962 (Schachter & Singer, 1962). Their theory suggests that emotions are determined by two factors: physiological arousal and cognitive interpretation. According to this perspective, people experience a physical reaction first and then interpret the situation to determine which emotion they are feeling. For example, a child with a racing heart may interpret the feeling as excitement while opening a birthday present or as fear while hearing a loud thunderstorm. The same physiological response can lead to different emotional experiences depending on how the situation is understood. In fact, emotions such as excitement and anxiety often produce very similar physical responses, including a faster heart rate, increased alertness, and heightened energy. What distinguishes one emotion from the other is often how the individual interprets the situation. This theory highlights the important role that thinking and context play in emotional development.

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6.5: Appraisal Theory of Emotion

Appraisal Theory proposes that emotions are influenced by the way individuals evaluate or interpret events (Lazarus, 1991). According to this theory, people continuously assess situations and determine whether they are threatening, helpful, pleasant, unfair, or important. These evaluations, known as appraisals, shape emotional responses. For example, one child may view a new classroom as exciting and feel eager to explore, while another child may interpret the same situation as frightening and feel anxious. The difference lies not in the situation itself but in how it is perceived. Appraisal Theory emphasizes that emotions are closely connected to cognition and that people's thoughts and interpretations influence how they feel and respond to the world around them.

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6.6: Constructivist Theory of Emotion

Constructivist theories of emotion propose that emotions are not simply automatic biological reactions, but are actively constructed through experience, learning, language, and culture (Barrett, 2017). According to this perspective, individuals interpret bodily sensations, environmental cues, memories, and social experiences to create emotional meaning. As a result, the same physiological response may be experienced as different emotions depending on the situation and a person's prior experiences.

For example, a racing heart might be interpreted as excitement before a birthday party, nervousness before speaking in front of a group, or fear when hearing an unexpected noise. Constructivist theorists argue that emotions are shaped by how individuals make sense of their experiences rather than by physiological reactions alone.

This perspective has important implications for children's emotional development. As children gain language, social experiences, and emotional knowledge, they become increasingly skilled at identifying, labeling, and understanding their feelings. Caregivers and educators play an important role in this process by helping children develop emotional vocabulary, discuss emotional experiences, and understand the feelings of others. From a constructivist perspective, emotional development is influenced not only by biology but also by relationships, culture, and learning.

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6.7: Facial Feedback Theory

The Facial Feedback Theory suggests that facial expressions not only communicate emotions to others but may also influence emotional experiences themselves (Tomkins, 1962). According to this theory, the physical act of smiling, frowning, or displaying another facial expression can contribute to the emotions a person experiences.

For example, smiling may enhance feelings of happiness, while frowning may increase feelings of sadness or frustration. Rather than emotions simply causing facial expressions, the relationship works in both directions. Facial expressions may provide feedback to the brain that helps to shape emotional experiences.

Researchers have found that facial expressions and emotional experiences are closely connected, although emotions are influenced by many factors beyond facial movements alone. The theory highlights the important relationship between the body and emotions.

For young children, facial expressions play a critical role in emotional communication. Long before children can use language to describe their feelings, they communicate emotions through smiles, frowns, laughter, crying, and other facial expressions. Caregivers respond to these expressions, helping children learn about emotions and social interactions. Facial Feedback Theory reminds us that emotions are not experienced only in the mind; they are also expressed and communicated through the body.

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6.8: The Biology of Emotion

Emotions are not experienced only in the mind. They involve complex interactions between the brain, body, nervous system, and environment. While emotions are influenced by experiences, relationships, language, and culture, they also have important biological foundations. Several structures within the brain work together to help individuals recognize, experience, remember, and respond to emotional events (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Many of these structures are located within the limbic system, a group of interconnected brain structures that play a central role in emotion, motivation, memory, and behavior (Santrock, 2021).

The Limbic System

The limbic system is often referred to as the brain's emotional center. Rather than functioning as a single structure, it is a network of regions that work together to process emotional experiences and guide behavioral responses. The limbic system helps individuals recognize danger, experience pleasure, form emotional memories, and respond to social interactions (Santrock, 2021).

Several important structures within the limbic system contribute to emotional development, including the amygdala, hippocampus, hypothalamus, and thalamus.

The Amygdala

The amygdala is a small almond-shaped structure located deep within the brain. It plays an important role in processing emotions, particularly fear, anxiety, and threat detection (Siegel & Bryson, 2011). The amygdala helps individuals quickly recognize situations that may require an emotional response.

For example, when a child hears a loud noise or encounters an unfamiliar situation, the amygdala helps determine whether the event may be threatening. Because the amygdala develops relatively early, young children often experience strong emotional reactions before they have fully developed the cognitive skills needed to understand or regulate those emotions (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

The Hippocampus

The hippocampus is involved in learning and memory. It helps individuals store and retrieve information about experiences, including emotional experiences (Santrock, 2021). The hippocampus allows children to connect emotions with specific events and situations.

For example, a child who has a positive experience at preschool may develop pleasant emotional memories associated with school, while a frightening experience may create memories that influence future emotional reactions. The hippocampus works closely with the amygdala to help form emotional memories.

The Hypothalamus

The hypothalamus helps regulate many basic bodily functions, including hunger, thirst, body temperature, sleep, and stress responses. It also plays a key role in connecting emotions to physical reactions within the body (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

When a child experiences fear, excitement, or anger, the hypothalamus helps activate the body's stress response system. This may result in changes such as increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, or muscle tension. These physical reactions prepare the body to respond to challenges or threats.

The Thalamus

The thalamus serves as the brain's relay station. It receives sensory information from the environment and directs that information

to other areas of the brain for processing (Santrock, 2021). Before emotional reactions occur, information about sights, sounds, touch, and other sensory experiences often pass through the thalamus.

For example, when a child sees a caregiver's smile or hears a comforting voice, the thalamus helps transmit this information to areas of the brain involved in emotional processing. In this way, the thalamus helps connect sensory experiences with emotional responses.

Emotions, the Brain, and Development

Although specific brain structures contribute to emotional experiences, emotions do not originate from a single area of the brain. Instead, emotional development results from the interaction of many brain systems working together (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). As children's brains mature and their experiences expand, they become increasingly capable of understanding, expressing, and regulating emotions.

Supportive relationships also influence the development of these emotional systems. When caregivers respond consistently, provide comfort, and help children manage stress, they contribute to the healthy development of the brain structures involved in emotional regulation (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). In this way, biology and experience work together to shape emotional development.

Emotions, the Brain, and Development **Figure 6.1**

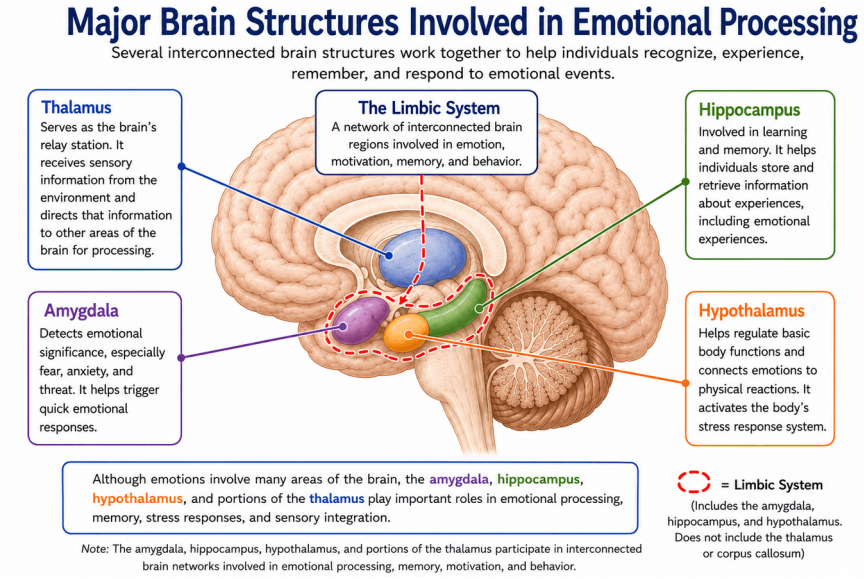


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6.9: Emotional Beginnings

Emotional development begins at birth. Although newborns do not experience emotions in the same way that older children and adults do, they quickly begin displaying emotional reactions that help them communicate needs and respond to their environment. Early emotional experiences lay the foundation for later emotional competence, relationships, and social understanding.

Researchers have identified two broad emotional responses that appear early in infancy: attraction and withdrawal. Attraction refers to positive responses toward pleasant or interesting experiences. Infants are naturally drawn toward comforting voices, familiar faces, gentle touch, and enjoyable interactions. Withdrawal refers to negative responses to unpleasant or overwhelming experiences. Infants may turn away, cry, arch their backs, or avoid stimulation when they are uncomfortable, frightened, or overstimulated.

One of the earliest social-emotional milestones is social smiling. Unlike reflexive smiles that occur during sleep, social smiles emerge around six to eight weeks of age and occur in response to people. Social smiling helps strengthen attachment relationships and encourages positive interactions between infants and caregivers. Through these early emotional exchanges, infants begin learning that relationships are sources of comfort, safety, and enjoyment.

Expression of Emotion

Long before children can communicate through language, they express emotions through facial expressions, vocalizations, and body language. These early forms of communication help caregivers understand children's needs and respond appropriately.

Facial expressions are among the earliest forms of emotional communication. Smiles, frowns, widened eyes, and furrowed brows provide important information about a child's emotional state. Caregivers often rely on these expressions to determine whether an infant is content, distressed, curious, or fearful.

Vocalizations also communicate emotions. Crying, cooing, squealing, laughing, and changes in tone of voice provide clues about children's feelings and needs. As language develops, children increasingly use words to express emotions, but vocal cues continue to play an important role in emotional communication.

Body language provides another source of emotional information. Children may raise their arms to be picked up, cling to a caregiver when anxious, jump with excitement, or withdraw from situations that feel overwhelming. These nonverbal behaviors often communicate emotions before children can explain them verbally.

Together, facial expressions, vocalizations, and body language allow children to communicate emotions and build relationships long before they have the vocabulary to describe their feelings.



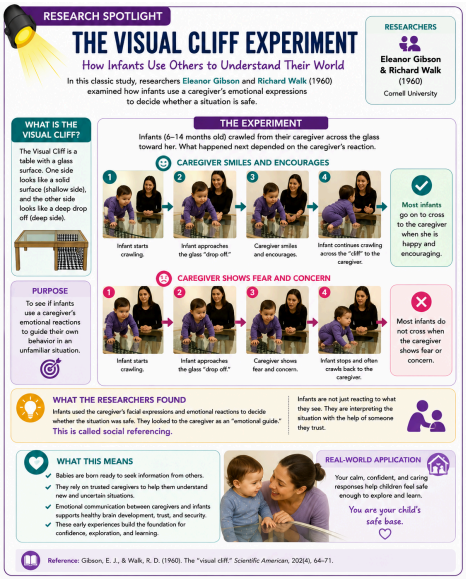
Facial Expression and Recognition of Emotion

As children develop, they become increasingly skilled at recognizing emotions in themselves and others. Researchers have found that certain facial expressions associated with basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust appear to be recognized across many cultures (Ekman, 1992). These findings suggest that some aspects of emotional expression may be universal.

One important milestone in emotional development is emotion recognition, or the ability to identify and interpret emotional cues in others. Young children gradually learn to recognize emotions by observing facial expressions, listening to tone of voice, and paying attention to social situations. This ability supports empathy, perspective-taking, and successful social interactions.

Children also learn through social referencing, which involves looking to trusted adults for emotional information about unfamiliar situations. For example, a toddler encountering a new toy may glance at a caregiver's face before deciding whether to approach it. If the caregiver smiles, the child is more likely to explore. If the caregiver appears fearful or anxious, the child may hesitate or withdraw. Social referencing helps children learn how to interpret and respond to their environment.

The ability to recognize emotions in others provides an important foundation for empathy, emotional competence, and healthy relationships throughout life.



The Role of Language in Emotional Development

Language plays a critical role in emotional development. Although infants experience emotions from birth, they initially lack the words needed to describe their feelings. As language develops, children become increasingly able to identify emotions, communicate their experiences, understand the feelings of others, and regulate their emotional responses. Language provides children with tools for making sense of emotional experiences and supports the development of emotional competence and self-regulation.

Emotion Labels

One of the earliest steps in emotional development is learning to identify and label emotions. Young children gradually acquire words such as "*happy,*" "*sad,*" "*angry,*" "*scared,*" "*excited,*" and "*frustrated.*" These emotion labels help children recognize and communicate their feelings to others.

Research suggests that children who can accurately label emotions are often better able to regulate their emotional responses because they can identify what they are feeling and seek appropriate support (Denham, 1998). When caregivers and educators help children name emotions, they provide an important foundation for emotional understanding.

Emotional Vocabulary

As children mature, their emotional vocabulary becomes increasingly sophisticated. Rather than describing all unpleasant feelings as "mad" or all pleasant feelings as "happy," children begin learning words such as "*disappointed,*" "*jealous,*" "*embarrassed,*" "*proud,*" "*worried,*" and "*grateful.*"

An expanded emotional vocabulary allows children to communicate their experiences more precisely and supports emotional awareness. Emotional vocabulary also contributes to empathy because children become better able to understand and discuss the emotions of others.

Language and Emotional Understanding

Language does more than provide labels for emotions. Through conversations with caregivers, teachers, and peers, children learn why emotions occur, how emotions influence behavior, and how emotions can be managed. Discussions about feelings help children connect emotions to thoughts, experiences, and social situations.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher mental processes develop through social interaction and language. From this perspective, conversations about emotions help children internalize emotional concepts and develop greater emotional understanding. Through storytelling, pretend play, shared reading, and everyday conversations, children learn to interpret emotional experiences, understand the perspectives of others, and develop the skills needed for emotional competence and self-regulation.

Increasingly, as children's language skills expand, they become able to reflect on their emotions, discuss emotional experiences, and use language as a tool for emotional regulation. In many ways, language serves as a bridge between emotional experience and emotional understanding. As children develop language to describe themselves and their feelings, they also begin developing a more sophisticated sense of self.

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6.10: A Developmental Progression of Emotional Capacities

Emotional development is closely connected to children's relationships, communication, play, and growing ability to organize their behavior. Greenspan and Greenspan described six overlapping emotional capacities that typically emerge during the first four years of life (Greenspan & Greenspan, 1985, as cited in WestEd, 1995). Each capacity builds upon earlier development, but earlier capacities do not disappear when a new one emerges. For example, preschoolers continue to need help regulating strong emotions even after they have developed language and increasingly complex pretend play.

The age ranges associated with these capacities are approximate. They should not be treated as deadlines or used as a checklist for determining whether a child is typically developed. Children may demonstrate abilities from several capacities at the same time, and their behavior will vary across people, environments, and situations. Contemporary developmental guidance emphasizes that each child develops at an individual pace within the context of the child's family, community, culture, language, temperament, experiences, and abilities (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020; WestEd, 2025).

Emotional Milestones **Table 6.1**

Stage and approximate age	
I. Self-regulation and Interest in the World – Birth to 3 months	**Increasingly, but still** • Able to calm • Sleeps regul • Brightens to • Brightens to • Enjoys touch • Enjoys move
II. Falling in Love – 2 to 7 months	**When wooed, increasi** • Looks at you • Gazes at you • Joyfully smil • Joyfully smil • Vocalizes ba
III. Developing Intentional Communication – 3 to 10 months	**Increasingly, but still** • Your gesture • Your vocaliza • Your emotion • Pleasurable • Encouragem **Increasingly, but still** • Interactions • Joy and plea • Comforting b • Exploration a

IV. The Emergence of an Organized Sense of Self – 9 to 18 months	**Increasingly, but still** • Initiates a cc chase game, • Uses comple • Uses comple • Plays in a foc • Examines toy • Responds to • Recovers fro • Can use obje • Seems to kn
V. Creating Emotional Ideas – 18 to 36 months	**Increasingly, but still** • Engages in p • Engages in p • Makes spatia • Uses words c such as “me, • Uses words c lap • Uses words c exploring a t • Is able to rec minutes **Later in this stage an** • Uses your he a favorite stu • Uses your he monsters cha • Develops mo repeatedly pu may race, cra • Creates more furniture, and
VI. Emotional Thinking: The Basis for Fantasy, Reality, and Self-Esteem – 30 to 48 months	**Increasingly, but still** • Knows what i • Follows rules • Remains calr • Feels optimis • Realizes how may please a do somethin • Realizes the such as know

Note. Adapted from *First Feelings: Milestones in the Emotional Development of Your Baby and Child*, by S. I. Greenspan and N. T. Greenspan, 1985, Viking. Copyright 1985 by Stanley Greenspan, M.D., and Nancy Thorndike Greenspan. Adapted with permission.

The repeated phrase "*increasingly, but still only sometimes*" is important when considering these capacities. A toddler who can sometimes recover from disappointment may still become overwhelmed when tired, hungry, overstimulated, or faced with an unexpected transition. Similarly, a preschooler who understands a classroom expectation may not be able to follow it consistently while experiencing an intense emotion. Development is demonstrated through growing capacity, not perfect performance.

Responsive adults play an essential role throughout this progression. Infants first experience regulation through the calm, predictable support of another person. Over time, these repeated experiences contribute to children's ability to communicate intentionally, organize their behavior, use symbols to represent feelings, and think about the connections among emotions, actions, relationships, and consequences. Current California foundations likewise emphasize that infants and toddlers develop through responsive, emotionally secure relationships and active, playful exploration (WestEd, 2025).

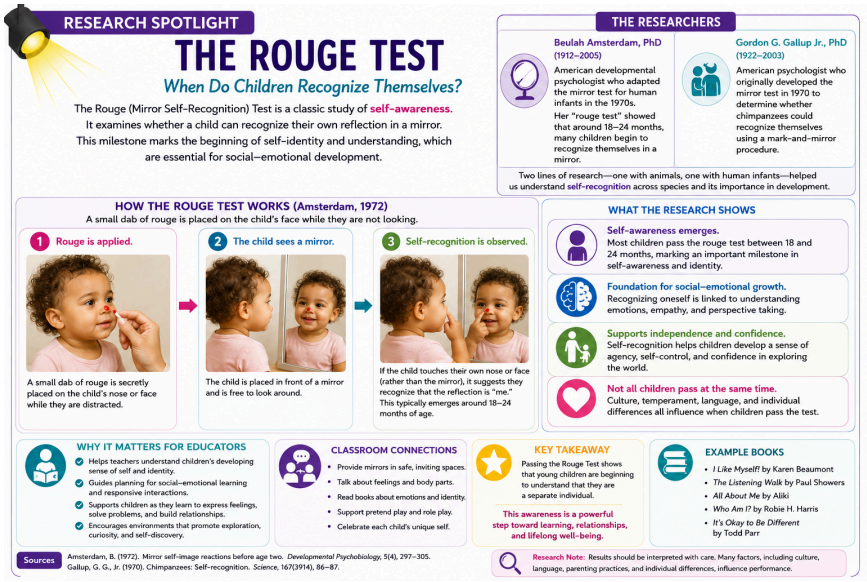
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6.11: Development of Sense of Self

One of the most important accomplishments of early emotional development is the emergence of a sense of self. A sense of self refers to the understanding that one is a unique individual with distinct thoughts, feelings, abilities, and experiences. As children develop self-awareness, they begin to recognize themselves as separate from other people and develop an understanding of who they are.

The development of self-awareness begins during infancy and continues throughout childhood. During the first year of life, infants gradually learn that their actions can influence the world around them. They begin to recognize familiar people, anticipate routines, and understand that their behaviors can produce predictable responses from caregivers.

Researchers often study self-awareness using the mirror self-recognition task, sometimes called the rouge test (Amsterdam, 1972). In this assessment, a small amount of rouge or lipstick is placed on a child's nose without the child's knowledge. The child is then placed in front of a mirror. Children who touch their own nose rather than the reflection demonstrate an awareness that the image in the mirror represents themselves. Most children begin to pass the rouge test between 18 and 24 months of age, suggesting that self-recognition typically develops during the second year of life.



Developmental psychologist Philippe Rochat (1950–) proposed that self-awareness develops gradually through a series of stages rather than emerging all at once (Rochat, 2003). His model describes five levels of self-awareness:

Stage 1: Differentiation

Infants begin distinguishing themselves from their environment. They recognize that their bodies and actions are separate from objects and people around them.

Stage 2: Situation

Infants become aware of themselves in relation to their surroundings and other people. They begin understanding that they occupy a particular place within the social and physical world.

Stage 3: Identification

Children recognize themselves as unique individuals. This stage is often demonstrated through successful mirror self-recognition

and marks an important milestone in the development of self-awareness.

Stage 4: Permanence

Children begin understanding that they continue to exist across time and space. They recognize that they remain the same person even when circumstances, locations, or appearances change.

Stage 5: Self-Consciousness

Children become increasingly aware of how others perceive them. This growing social awareness contributes to the development of self-conscious emotions such as pride, embarrassment, guilt, and shame.

Although these stages generally occur in sequence, self-awareness develops gradually and unevenly. Children's understanding of themselves continues to become more sophisticated throughout childhood and adolescence.

As self-awareness develops, children begin using personal pronouns such as "*I*," "*me*," and "*mine*." They start expressing preferences, making choices, and asserting independence. They also begin experiencing self-conscious emotions that require an awareness of oneself in relation to others.

As children move through the preschool years, their sense of self becomes increasingly sophisticated. They begin describing themselves using physical characteristics, abilities, preferences, and social roles. Statements such as "I am fast," "I like dinosaurs," or "I am a big sister" reflect a growing self-concept.

The development of a healthy sense of self is closely connected to emotional development. Children who understand themselves are better able to recognize their emotions, communicate their feelings, regulate their behavior, and develop empathy for others. In many ways, self-awareness serves as a foundation for emotional competence, self-regulation, and social relationships.

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6.12: Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory and Emotional Development

Developmental psychologists have proposed a variety of theories to explain how emotions develop. Some theories focus on children's emerging sense of self, while others emphasize relationships, cognition, personality, or social experiences. Together, these perspectives provide complementary ways of understanding children's emotional growth.

Building upon Freud's work, Erik Erikson (1902–1994) proposed that development occurs through a series of psychosocial stages that span the entire lifespan (Erikson 1950, 1968). At each stage, individuals encounter a developmental challenge or crisis that influences their sense of self, relationships, and emotional well-being. Successful resolution of these challenges contributes to healthy development, while difficulties may create emotional struggles that influence later growth.

Erikson believed that emotional development occurs within relationships and social experiences. His theory emphasizes the importance of supportive caregivers, opportunities for independence, and positive social interactions in helping children develop confidence, competence, and a healthy sense of self.

Although Erikson described eight stages across the lifespan, the first five stages are particularly important during childhood.

Trust vs. Mistrust (Birth to 18 Months)

During the first stage, infants learn whether the world is a safe and predictable place. When caregivers consistently respond to children's needs with warmth, sensitivity, and reliability, infants develop trust. They learn that others can be depended upon and that their needs will be met.

When caregiving is inconsistent, neglectful, or unpredictable, infants may develop mistrust. They may become more cautious, anxious, or uncertain about their environment. The development of trust provides an important emotional foundation for later relationships and learning.

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 Months to 3 Years)

As toddlers gain mobility and independence, they begin asserting control over their actions and choices. They want to feed themselves, make decisions, explore their environment, and demonstrate that they can do things independently.

When caregivers provide appropriate opportunities for independence while offering guidance and support, children develop autonomy and confidence in their abilities. When children are overly criticized, shamed, or prevented from exploring, they may develop feelings of doubt about their competence.

This stage is closely connected to emerging self-awareness, self-regulation, and the desire for independence.

Initiative vs. Guilt (3 to 5 Years)

During the preschool years, children become increasingly curious about themselves, others, and the world around them. They ask questions, initiate activities, engage in imaginative play, and experiment with new roles and ideas.

When adults encourage exploration and support children's efforts, children develop initiative and a sense of purpose. They learn that their ideas, questions, and actions have value. However, when children are consistently criticized, discouraged, or made to feel that their efforts are wrong, they may develop feelings of guilt and become hesitant to take initiative.

This stage supports the development of confidence, responsibility, creativity, and social competence.

Industry vs. Inferiority (6 to 12 Years)

During the elementary school years, children's attention shifts toward developing competence and mastering new skills. Success is no longer measured primarily by gaining approval from caregivers but by achieving goals, learning new abilities, and comparing one's performance with peers. School, sports, hobbies, friendships, and extracurricular activities are all important settings for developing a sense of competence.

When children experience success, receive encouragement, and have opportunities to demonstrate their abilities, they develop a sense of industry. They begin to view themselves as capable, productive, and able to accomplish meaningful tasks. Industry fosters self-confidence, persistence, and motivation to learn.

However, repeated failure, excessive criticism, unrealistic expectations, or unfavorable comparisons with others can contribute to feelings of inferiority. Children who frequently experience setbacks may begin to doubt their abilities and question whether they are capable of success. These feelings can affect self-esteem, motivation, and academic achievement.

Erikson emphasized that competence develops not through perfection but through opportunities to practice, make mistakes, and experience growth. Educators play an important role in helping children develop industry by creating supportive learning environments, recognizing effort as well as achievement, and helping children view mistakes as opportunities for learning. Successful resolution of this stage results in the development of competence, a belief that one can effectively meet challenges and achieve goals.

Identity vs. Role Confusion (12 to 20 Years)

Adolescence is characterized by the search for identity. During this stage, young people explore who they are, what they believe, and what they value. They begin asking important questions such as: "Who am I?" "What do I believe?" "What kind of person do I want to become?" "What role will I play in society?"

Physical maturation, cognitive growth, changing social relationships, and increasing independence all contribute to this process. Adolescents experiment with different interests, friendships, values, activities, and future goals as they work toward developing a coherent sense of self.

When adolescents are given opportunities to explore their identities within supportive environments, they are more likely to develop a stable sense of self and direction. Successful resolution of this stage leads to identity achievement and the development of fidelity, the ability to remain true to one's values and commitments while respecting the perspectives of others.

However, when opportunities for exploration are limited or when conflicting expectations create confusion, adolescents may experience role confusion. They may struggle to develop a clear sense of who they are or where they belong. Identity development is often accompanied by periods of questioning, uncertainty, and experimentation, all of which are considered normal aspects of adolescent growth.

Erikson viewed identity formation as one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence because it provides the foundation for future relationships, career choices, personal values, and life goals.

Later Psychosocial Stages

Erikson's later stages continue throughout adulthood:

- **Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young Adulthood):** Forming close relationships or being isolated.
- **Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle Adulthood):** Contributing to society and future generations or being unproductive.
- **Integrity vs. Despair (Later Adulthood):** Reflecting on one's life with satisfaction or having regret.

Together, Erikson's stages illustrate how emotional development continues across the lifespan and how relationships shape an individual's sense of self, competence, and well-being.

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6.13: Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and Emotional Understanding

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) proposed that children actively construct knowledge as they interact with their environment (Piaget, 1932, 1952). According to Piaget, children's thinking develops through a series of stages, each characterized by increasingly sophisticated ways of understanding the world. Although Piaget's theory is primarily a theory of cognitive development, it has important implications for emotional development because children's understanding of emotions depends on their ability to think, reason, remember, and take the perspectives of others (Piaget, 1952; Santrock, 2021).

Sensorimotor Stage (Birth to Approximately 2 Years)

During the sensorimotor stage, infants learn about the world through their senses and physical actions. Emotional experiences are immediate and closely connected to present events. Infants communicate emotions through crying, smiling, vocalizations, and body movements rather than through language.

A major accomplishment of this stage is the development of object permanence, the understanding that people and objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen. This cognitive achievement contributes to emotional development because infants begin to understand that caregivers continue to exist even when they leave the room. However, infants may still experience separation anxiety because they lack confidence that caregivers will return.

Preoperational Stage (Approximately 2 to 7 Years)

During the preoperational stage, children begin using language, symbols, and imagination to represent the world. Their emotional understanding expands as they learn to label feelings and discuss emotional experiences.

Piaget described young children as egocentric, meaning they often have difficulty understanding perspectives that differ from their own. Although Piaget believed that young children are largely egocentric during the preoperational stage, more recent research suggests that perspective-taking abilities may emerge earlier than he proposed. For example, studies have found that toddlers can sometimes recognize that another person may have preferences that differ from their own (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997). While young children still often struggle to fully understand the thoughts and feelings of others, researchers now view perspective-taking as a skill that develops gradually rather than appearing suddenly at a particular age. As a result, preschool children may sometimes assume that others think and feel exactly as they do. This can make empathy and perspective-taking challenging.

Children in this stage also engage in magical thinking, which may influence their emotional experiences. They may believe that their thoughts caused an event to happen or that wishing something could make it occur. As a result, young children sometimes experience guilt, fear, or anxiety about events they do not fully understand.

Concrete Operational Stage (Approximately 7 to 12 Years)

During the concrete operational stage, children's thinking becomes more logical and organized. They become increasingly capable of understanding cause-and-effect relationships, considering multiple aspects of a situation, and recognizing that other people may have different thoughts and feelings.

These cognitive advances support emotional development by improving perspective-taking, empathy, and problem-solving skills. Children become better able to understand why others feel a certain way and can consider multiple viewpoints during social interactions and conflicts.

As children's understanding of emotions becomes more sophisticated, they also become increasingly capable of regulating their emotional responses and using emotional information to guide decision-making.

Formal Operational Stage (Adolescence and Beyond)

During the formal operational stage, adolescents develop the ability to think abstractly and reason about hypothetical situations. They can consider possibilities, evaluate complex ideas, and reflect on their own thinking.

These cognitive advances contribute to emotional development by allowing adolescents to think about emotions in more nuanced ways. They become better able to understand mixed emotions, reflect on their personal values, and consider how emotions influence behavior and relationships.

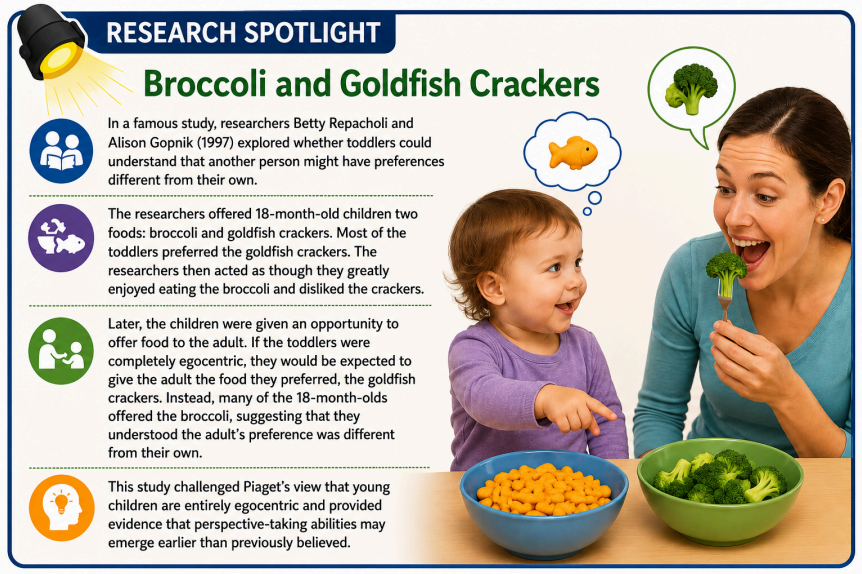
Adolescents also become increasingly capable of exploring questions related to identity, morality, purpose, and future goals. These abilities support the development of emotional maturity and self-understanding.

Schemas, Assimilation, and Accommodation

Piaget believed that children organize knowledge into mental structures called schemas. As children encounter new experiences, they continually modify these schemas through two complementary processes: assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation occurs when children interpret new experiences using existing knowledge. Accommodation occurs when children modify existing schemas to incorporate new information. Through this process, children gradually develop more accurate and sophisticated understandings of themselves, others, and the emotional world around them.

Piaget referred to the balance between assimilation and accommodation as equilibrium. When new experiences challenge existing understanding, children experience disequilibrium and are motivated to learn and adapt. This process contributes not only to cognitive development but also to children's growing understanding of emotions, relationships, and social interactions.



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6.14: Sigmund Freud's Psychosexual Theory of Development

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was one of the earliest theorists to propose that childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping personality and emotional development (Freud, 1905). Freud believed that children progress through a series of psychosexual stages, each characterized by pleasure and gratification focused on different areas of the body. According to Freud, experiences during these stages influence later personality development and emotional functioning.

Although many aspects of Freud's theory are controversial and not strongly supported by contemporary research, his work was highly influential because it emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences and the role of unconscious processes in human behavior.

Oral Stage (Birth to 18 Months)

During the oral stage, pleasure is centered on the mouth. Infants explore the world through sucking, biting, chewing, and mouthing objects. Feeding interactions provide not only nourishment but also comfort, security, and emotional connection. Freud believed that experiences during this stage contribute to the development of trust and attachment.

Anal Stage (18 Months to 3 Years)

During the anal stage, pleasure is associated with bowel and bladder control. Toilet learning becomes a central developmental task. Freud believed that children's experiences with autonomy, self-control, and parental expectations during this period influence later personality characteristics related to independence, responsibility, and **self-control.**

Phallic Stage (3 to 6 Years)

During the phallic stage, children become increasingly aware of differences between males and females and begin developing a stronger sense of gender identity. Freud proposed that children identify with the same-sex parent during this period. While many of Freud's explanations are no longer widely accepted, modern developmental psychologists acknowledge the importance of this stage for identity formation and social development.

Latency Stage (6 Years to Puberty)

During the latency stage, sexual interests become less prominent as children focus their energy on friendships, school, hobbies, and skill development. Social relationships and learning become increasingly important during this period.

Genital Stage (Adolescence and Adulthood)

The genital stage begins during adolescence when sexual interests reemerge as part of normal development. According to Freud, individuals seek mature relationships and direct their emotional energy toward relationships outside the family. Successful navigation of earlier stages contributes to healthy adult relationships and emotional adjustment.

Freud's Legacy

Although many aspects of Freud's theory have been criticized and revised by modern researchers, his work had a lasting impact on the field of developmental psychology. Freud helped establish the idea that early experiences matter and that emotional development during childhood can influence later behavior, relationships, and personality. His ideas also influenced later theorists, including Erik Erikson, who expanded Freud's work by emphasizing social and emotional development across the lifespan.

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6.15: Carolyn Saarni's Theory of Emotional Competence

Developmental psychologist Carolyn Saarni (1999) expanded our understanding of emotional development by introducing the concept of emotional competence. Emotional competence refers to the ability to understand, express, regulate, and use emotions effectively in social situations. Saarni shifted the focus of emotional development away from simply experiencing emotions and toward developing the skills needed to navigate emotional and social situations successfully.

Rather than viewing emotions as isolated feelings, Saarni emphasized that emotional competence involves understanding emotions, communicating emotions, regulating emotions, and using emotional knowledge effectively in relationships. According to Saarni, these skills develop gradually through interactions with caregivers, peers, and the broader social environment. Children must learn how to recognize emotions in themselves and others, communicate feelings appropriately, cope with emotional challenges, and navigate relationships successfully. These abilities develop over time and are influenced by both maturation and experience.

Saarni identified eight emotional skills that support healthy social and emotional development:

1. Awareness of One's Own Emotions

Children gradually learn to recognize and identify their feelings. Self-awareness helps children understand emotional experiences and forms the foundation for emotional regulation.

2. Recognizing the Emotions of Others

Children learn to interpret facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and situational cues. The ability to read emotional cues from others supports empathy, perspective-taking, and positive social interactions.

3. Using Emotional Vocabulary

Children develop language for expressing feelings such as happiness, sadness, frustration, disappointment, pride, or fear. Emotional language helps children communicate experiences and seek support when needed.

4. Empathy and Sympathy

As emotional understanding grows, children become increasingly able to recognize, feel "with," and respond to the feelings of others. Empathy supports caring, helping, sharing, connecting with others, and other prosocial behaviors.

5. Understanding That Feelings May Be Hidden

Children eventually learn that people do not always display their true emotions. For example, a child may smile even when feeling disappointed or nervous. This understanding contributes to emotional self-regulation, social awareness, and emotional maturity.

6. Adaptive Coping Skills

Children learn strategies for managing emotional challenges such as frustration, disappointment, fear, and stress. Healthy coping strategies support resilience, emotional self-regulation, problem-solving, and emotional well-being.

7. Emotional Communication in Relationships

Children learn that emotions influence relationships and that emotional expression affects how others respond. For example,

different relationships have different emotional rules, and competent people navigate relationships differently. Effective emotional communication helps strengthen friendships and social connections.

8. Emotional Self-Efficacy

Children develop confidence in their ability to understand, express, and manage emotions, even during challenging situations. Emotional self-efficacy reflects the belief that one's emotional experiences are valid and that difficult emotions can be managed successfully. Children learn to accept what they are feeling without becoming overwhelmed by shame or self-doubt. Ultimately, emotional self-efficacy involves trusting one's own emotional experiences as valuable sources of information rather than viewing them as threats.

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6.16: Emotional Competence in Early Childhood Classrooms

Early childhood educators play an important role in fostering emotional competence. Through responsive relationships, emotion coaching, modeling, storytelling, play, and conversations about feelings, educators help children develop the skills needed to navigate emotional experiences successfully.

When children develop emotional competence, they are better able to regulate emotions, build friendships, solve social problems, demonstrate empathy, and participate successfully in learning environments. Emotional competence provides an important foundation for emotional intelligence, social competence, and lifelong well-being.

Daniel Goleman's Theory of Emotional Intelligence

In 1995, psychologist and science writer Daniel Goleman (1946–) expanded and popularized the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) through his influential book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Goleman built upon the earlier work of psychologists Peter Salovey (1958–) and John Mayer (1953–), who first introduced the concept of emotional intelligence in 1990 (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Goleman argued that success in life depends on more than cognitive intelligence alone. He suggested that the ability to understand and manage emotions plays an equally important role in personal well-being, relationships, decision-making, and achievement.

According to Goleman, emotional intelligence involves recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions in ourselves while also recognizing and responding appropriately to the emotions of others. Emotional intelligence helps individuals navigate social situations, cope with challenges, and build positive relationships.

Although emotional intelligence and emotional competence are closely related, the two concepts are not identical. Saarni focused primarily on the specific emotional skills children develop, while Goleman emphasized how these skills contribute to success in relationships, learning, decision-making, and overall well-being. Together, these theories provide complementary perspectives on how children learn to understand and manage emotions throughout development.

Goleman identified five major components of emotional intelligence:

1. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions. Children who develop self-awareness begin to identify feelings such as happiness, frustration, disappointment, pride, or fear. Self-awareness serves as the foundation for emotional growth because children must first recognize their emotions before they can manage them effectively.

2. Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage emotions, impulses, and behaviors appropriately. Rather than reacting automatically, children learn to pause, think, and choose constructive responses. Self-regulation helps children cope with frustration, solve problems, and adapt to changing situations.

3. Motivation

Motivation involves using emotions to pursue goals, persist through challenges, and remain engaged in learning. Children who develop intrinsic motivation often demonstrate curiosity, perseverance, and a willingness to continue working even when tasks become difficult.

4. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize and understand the feelings of others. Empathetic children are more likely to show kindness, compassion, helping behaviors, and concern for others. Empathy supports friendship development and positive social interactions.

Empathy was later divided into three types:

- **Cognitive Empathy**: Understanding another person's thoughts or perspective.
- **Emotional Empathy**: Feeling or sharing another person's emotions.
- **Empathic Concern:** Understanding and caring enough to want to help (Empathy is explored in greater detail in Chapter 7.)

5. Social Skills

Social skills involve communicating effectively, cooperating with others, resolving conflicts, and building positive relationships. Children who develop strong social skills are often better able to work collaboratively, negotiate disagreements, and participate successfully in group settings.

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6.17: Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood

Although emotional intelligence theory was originally developed for individuals across the lifespan, its principles have important implications for early childhood education. Young children are continually learning to recognize emotions, communicate feelings, manage frustration, and interact with others. Every conversation about feelings, every opportunity to solve a social problem, and every supportive relationship contributes to the development of emotional intelligence.

Educators foster emotional intelligence when they help children label emotions, model empathy, encourage problem-solving, and create environments where children feel safe expressing their feelings. These experiences help children develop the emotional skills needed for learning, relationships, and lifelong well-being.

Goleman (1995) emphasized that emotional intelligence is not a fixed trait. Like other developmental skills, it can be strengthened through supportive relationships, intentional teaching, and practice. This perspective offers an encouraging message for educators: emotional intelligence can be nurtured and developed throughout childhood and beyond.

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6.18: Cultural Influences on Emotional Development

Although some aspects of emotional development appear to be universal, culture plays an important role in shaping how emotions are expressed, interpreted, and valued. Children learn cultural expectations about emotions through family relationships, community experiences, traditions, and social interactions. As a result, emotional development occurs within a cultural context.

Display Rules

Display rules are culturally learned expectations or guidelines regarding when, where, and how emotions should be expressed. Children gradually learn which emotional expressions are encouraged, discouraged, or considered appropriate within their families and communities (Kostelnik, Soderman, Phipps Whiren, Rupiper, & Murphy Gregory, 2015).

For example, some cultures encourage open emotional expression, while others place greater value on emotional restraint and self-control. Children learn these expectations through observation, modeling, and feedback from adults and peers.

Children also learn display rules through subtle nonverbal cues from adults. For example, a parent may communicate disapproval with a raised eyebrow or a stern facial expression, sometimes referred to by families as “the look.” Over time, children learn to recognize these cues and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Display rules help children navigate social situations, but they may vary considerably across cultural groups. Understanding these differences helps educators respond to children’s emotional expressions in culturally responsive ways.

Cultural Expression of Emotion

Although emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust appear to be recognized across many cultures (Ekman, 1992), cultures differ in how these emotions are expressed. Behaviors viewed as appropriate emotional expression in one culture may be interpreted differently in another (Kostelnik, Soderman, Phipps Whiren, Rupiper, & Murphy Gregory, 2015).

For example, direct eye contact, emotional intensity, physical affection, and verbal expression of feelings may vary across cultural communities. These differences do not indicate deficits or delays; rather, they reflect diverse cultural values and social expectations.

Educators who understand cultural differences are better able to avoid misinterpreting children’s emotional behaviors and can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Emotional Worldviews

Culture influences not only how emotions are expressed but also how they are understood. Emotional worldviews are the beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape how individuals interpret emotional experiences.

Some cultures emphasize individual emotional expression and personal feelings, while others place greater importance on group harmony, social responsibility, and emotional moderation. These cultural values influence how children learn to understand emotions, regulate emotional responses, and interact with others.

Recognizing diverse emotional worldviews helps educators appreciate the many ways children experience and express emotions.

Cultural Responsiveness and Emotional Development

Early childhood educators play an important role in supporting emotional development within culturally diverse classrooms. Culturally responsive educators recognize that there is no single “correct” way to express emotions. Instead, they seek to understand children’s cultural backgrounds, honor diverse emotional expressions, and create environments where all children feel respected and valued.

When educators embrace cultural diversity, they help children develop emotional competence while also fostering a sense of belonging, identity, and inclusion. Supporting emotional development within a cultural context strengthens relationships, promotes equity, and helps children build positive connections with others.

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6.19: Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) proposed that human behavior is motivated by a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943, 1954). According to Maslow, individuals are motivated to satisfy basic needs before focusing on higher-level psychological growth and fulfillment. Although Maslow's theory is often discussed in relation to motivation, it also provides important insights into emotional development. Children's ability to learn, regulate emotions, build relationships, and develop a positive sense of self is influenced by whether their basic needs are being met.

Maslow's theory is often illustrated as a pyramid consisting of five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, 1954). Physiological needs include food, water, sleep, shelter, and other necessities required for survival. Safety needs involve physical and emotional security. Love and belonging needs include relationships, friendship, acceptance, and a sense of connection with others. Esteem needs involve competence, confidence, achievement, and self-respect. Self-actualization refers to the desire to reach one's full potential and become the best version of oneself.

From an emotional development perspective, each level of the hierarchy contributes to children's ability to learn, regulate emotions, and build positive relationships. Children whose physiological needs are unmet may struggle to focus attention or manage emotions effectively. Children who do not feel safe may have difficulty exploring their environment or trusting others. A sense of belonging supports attachment, friendship, and emotional security, while positive experiences of competence and achievement contribute to self-esteem and self-confidence. When these foundational needs are met, children are better able to develop emotional competence, engage in learning, and reach their full potential.

Later versions of Maslow's theory expanded the hierarchy to include three additional levels: cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and transcendence (Huitt, 2007). Cognitive needs reflect the desire to learn, understand, explore, and make sense of the world. Aesthetic needs involve an appreciation for beauty, balance, order, and harmony. Transcendence refers to moving beyond personal fulfillment by helping others grow, contributing to the community, and making a positive difference in the lives of others. These additional levels emphasize that human development continues beyond meeting personal needs and includes the pursuit of knowledge, meaning, and contribution.

Although individuals do not always move through the hierarchy in a rigid sequence, unmet needs at lower levels can interfere with emotional well-being, learning, and development. For example, a child who is hungry, exhausted, frightened, or socially isolated may find it difficult to focus on learning or participate fully in classroom experiences.

Maslow's theory reminds us that emotional development does not occur in isolation. Children's ability to understand emotions, build relationships, develop self-regulation, and achieve their potential depends upon having their physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs met. When educators create environments that support these needs, they provide a foundation for healthy emotional growth, learning, and lifelong well-being.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Figure 6.2

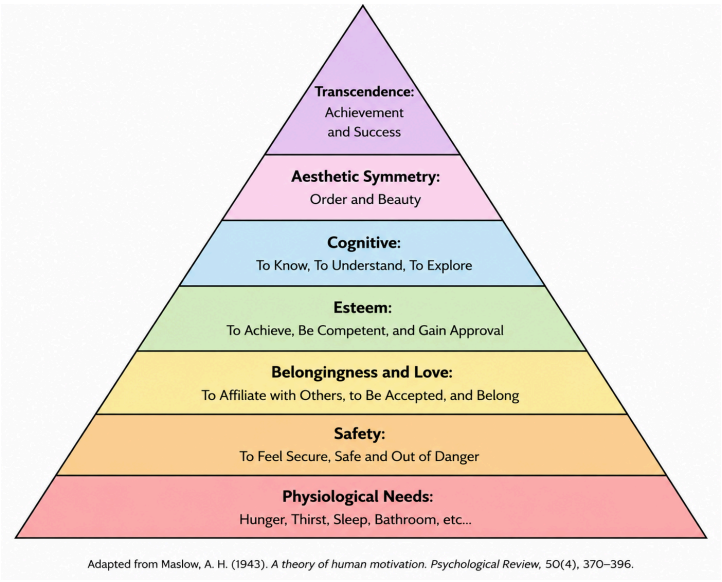


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6.20: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Emotional Development

While Maslow focused on the needs that support healthy development, Bronfenbrenner emphasized the environmental systems that influence children's growth and emotional well-being. Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that child development occurs within a complex system of relationships and environments. Rather than viewing development as the result of individual characteristics alone, Bronfenbrenner argued that children's growth is influenced by multiple interconnected systems that interact with one another over time.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides an important framework for understanding emotional development because children's emotions are shaped not only by biology and temperament but also by family relationships, schools, communities, culture, and historical events.

The Microsystem (Micro means small)

The microsystem refers to the child's immediate environment and the relationships they experience directly. Examples include family members, teachers, caregivers, peers, and early childhood classrooms.

Because children spend much of their time within the microsystem, these relationships have a powerful influence on emotional development. Warm, responsive relationships support emotional security, self-regulation, and social competence, while stressful or inconsistent relationships may contribute to emotional challenges.

The Mesosystem (Meso means intermediate)

The mesosystem consists of the connections between different parts of a child's microsystem. Examples include communication between families and teachers, relationships between caregivers and community organizations, or interactions between peer groups and school environments.

When these systems work together effectively, children experience greater consistency and support. Positive partnerships between families and educators often strengthen children's emotional well-being and social development.

The Exosystem (Exo means outside)

The exosystem includes settings that indirectly influence children's lives even though children do not actively participate in them. Examples include parents' workplaces, community services, local government agencies, and social support systems.

Changes within the exosystem can affect children's emotional experiences. For example, parental job stress, access to community resources, or availability of family support services may influence family relationships and emotional well-being.

The Macrosystem (Macro means large)

The macrosystem refers to the larger cultural, social, economic, and political influences that shape development. Cultural values, traditions, laws, beliefs, and societal expectations all contribute to how emotions are understood and expressed.

For example, cultures differ in their expectations regarding emotional expression, independence, family relationships, and social behavior. These cultural influences shape children's emotional development from an early age.

The Chronosystem (Chrono means time)

The chronosystem refers to the influence of time on development. Children's lives are shaped by both personal life events and broader historical changes.

Examples may include family transitions, divorce, relocation, economic hardship, technological advances, natural disasters, or significant societal events. These experiences can influence emotional development in both positive and challenging ways.

Bronfenbrenner and Emotional Development

Bronfenbrenner's theory reminds us that emotional development does not occur in isolation. Children's emotional experiences are shaped by interactions among family members, educators, peers, communities, culture, and historical circumstances. Understanding these environmental influences helps educators view children's behavior within a broader context and respond with greater empathy and support.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems: Figure 6.3

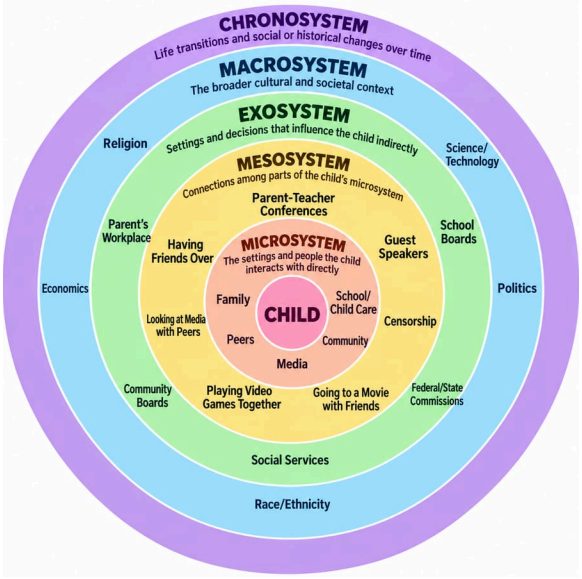


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Conclusion

Emotional development is a lifelong process that begins at birth and continues throughout the lifespan. From an infant's earliest emotional expressions to an adolescent's search for identity, emotions influence how individuals think, learn, communicate, build relationships, and understand themselves. Emotional development involves far more than experiencing feelings. It includes learning to recognize emotions, express them appropriately, understand the emotions of others, regulate emotional responses, and use emotional information to guide behavior and decision-making.

As this chapter has demonstrated, emotional development is influenced by many factors. Biological processes within the brain and nervous system provide the foundation for emotional experiences, while relationships with caregivers, teachers, peers, and family members help shape how emotions are understood and expressed. Cognitive development, language, culture, and social experiences further contribute to children's growing emotional competence and self-awareness.

The theories presented in this chapter offer different perspectives on emotional development. Some theories emphasize biological processes, while others highlight cognition, social relationships, emotional competence, cultural influences, or environmental factors. Together, these perspectives remind us that emotional development is a complex process shaped by the interaction of multiple influences.

For early childhood educators, understanding emotional development is essential. Children learn emotional skills through responsive relationships, supportive environments, meaningful conversations, play, and everyday interactions. Educators who model empathy, teach emotional vocabulary, support self-regulation, and create culturally responsive learning environments help children develop the emotional competencies needed for success in school and life.

Ultimately, emotional development provides the foundation for emotional intelligence, resilience, social competence, positive relationships, and lifelong well-being. By understanding how emotions develop and by intentionally supporting children's emotional growth, educators can help children build the skills needed to thrive both academically and personally.

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6.21: Chapter Vocabulary

Emotional development: The process through which children learn to recognize, express, understand, and manage their emotions and respond to the emotions of others.

Emotional competence: The ability to understand emotions, use emotional vocabulary, express feelings appropriately, cope with emotional experiences, and respond sensitively to others.

Emotional intelligence: The ability to recognize, understand, use, and manage emotions in oneself and in relationships with others.

Limbic system: A network of interconnected brain structures involved in emotion, motivation, memory, stress responses, and behavior.

Display rules: Socially and culturally influenced expectations concerning when, where, and how emotions should be expressed.

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6.22: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Head Start: Social and Emotional Development/links to an external source:** Provides research-based resources and teaching practices that support children's relationships, emotional functioning, identity, belonging, and emotional regulation.
- **ZERO TO THREE: First Feelings, the Foundation of Healthy Development Starting from Birth/links to an external source:** Explores the emotional lives of infants and toddlers and explains how responsive relationships help young children understand and manage their feelings.
- **California Department of Education: Social and Emotional Development, Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations/links to a pdf:** Describes the social and emotional competencies children ages three to five and a half can develop through responsive relationships and high-quality early learning experiences.
- **Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Emotions/links to an external source:** Offers research-based articles about the emergence, expression, understanding, regulation, and cultural influences of emotions during early childhood.

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7: EMPATHY AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

7.1: Chapter Introduction

7.2: What Are Empathy and Moral Development?

7.3: Developmental Foundations of Empathy

7.4: Empathy

7.5: Prosocial Behavior

7.6: Theories of Moral Development

7.7: Moral Thinking and Moral Behavior

7.8: Chapter Vocabulary

7.9: Extra Internet Resource Links

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7.1: Chapter Introduction

7



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 7.1:** Explain the relationship between empathy, perspective taking, prosocial behavior, and moral development.
- **SLO 7.2:** Describe how joint attention, social referencing, and Theory of Mind contribute to children's developing social understanding.
- **SLO 7.3:** Compare Hoffman's theory of empathy, Kohlberg's stages of moral development, and Gilligan's ethics of care.
- **SLO 7.4:** Identify developmentally appropriate strategies educators can use to foster empathy, caring behavior, fairness, and moral understanding in young children.

Chapter 7 Short Overview

This chapter explores how empathy and moral development emerge through responsive relationships, shared experiences, perspective taking, and children's growing understanding of others. It examines the theories of Hoffman, Kohlberg, and Gilligan and describes how educators can foster empathy, prosocial behavior, moral reasoning, compassion, fairness, and ethical decision-making in early childhood classrooms.

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7.2: What Are Empathy and Moral Development?



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Empathy and moral development are closely related but distinct aspects of children's social-emotional growth. Together, they help children understand the feelings of others, distinguish right from wrong, and develop caring, responsible relationships. Both empathy and moral development emerge gradually through responsive relationships, perspective taking, and everyday social experiences. As children mature, they become increasingly capable of understanding others' emotions, acting with compassion, and making decisions based on fairness, kindness, honesty, and respect.

Empathy is the ability to recognize, understand, and respond to another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. It involves recognizing another person's emotional experience, appreciating their perspective, and responding with compassion and concern. Empathy allows children to move beyond focusing only on their own needs and begin considering the needs and feelings of others.

Moral development refers to the gradual process through which children develop an understanding of right and wrong, fairness, responsibility, honesty, and respect (Damon, 1988). As children mature, they begin making decisions not simply to avoid punishment or gain rewards but because they recognize how their actions affect other people and because they value caring, fairness, and justice.

Although empathy and moral development are closely connected, they are not identical. Empathy focuses on understanding and responding to another person's emotions, whereas moral development involves making judgments about how people should behave. Together, they provide the foundation for kindness, compassion, prosocial behavior, ethical decision-making, and healthy relationships throughout life.

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7.3: Developmental Foundations of Empathy

Joint Attention

Joint attention is one of the earliest building blocks of social understanding. It occurs when two people intentionally focus on the same object, event, or experience while recognizing that they are sharing that attention with one another. Joint attention typically begins developing during the first year of life and becomes increasingly sophisticated throughout infancy.

For example, an infant may point toward an airplane in the sky while looking back at a caregiver to make sure the caregiver also sees it. Likewise, a caregiver may point to a butterfly and say, “Look at the butterfly!” while the child follows the adult’s gaze. These shared moments help children learn that other people have thoughts, interests, and experiences that can be shared.

Joint attention provides an important foundation for language development, communication, learning, and social relationships. Through these early interactions, children begin recognizing that attention, thoughts, and experiences can be shared with others. Researchers consider joint attention one of the earliest indicators of children’s developing social understanding (Tomasello, 1995).

Social Referencing

As children become more aware of the people around them, they begin using others’ emotional reactions to help interpret unfamiliar situations. This process, known as social referencing, involves looking to trusted adults for guidance about how to respond when something is uncertain or unfamiliar.

For example, a toddler who encounters a friendly dog may pause and look toward a parent or teacher before deciding whether to approach. If the adult smiles and speaks calmly, the child is more likely to feel comfortable. If the adult appears frightened or concerned, the child may become cautious or avoid the situation altogether.

Social referencing helps children learn about safety, emotional expression, and appropriate social behavior. Through repeated interactions with responsive adults, children gradually develop confidence in interpreting social situations while also learning to regulate their own emotional responses. These early experiences lay the foundation for later perspective taking, empathy, and moral understanding (Campos & Stenberg, 1981).

Theory of Mind

As children’s social understanding continues to develop, they gradually acquire what psychologists refer to as Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind is the understanding that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge that may differ from one’s own.

This developmental milestone typically begins emerging around four years of age, although its foundations develop much earlier through responsive relationships and social experiences.

Theory of Mind allows children to recognize that another person may think differently, know different information, or feel differently about the same situation (Wellman, 2014). This understanding provides an important cognitive foundation for perspective taking, empathy, prosocial behavior, and moral development. Once children recognize that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, they become increasingly capable of responding with compassion, fairness, and concern for others.

For example, a preschooler who understands that a friend is sad because they lost a favorite toy demonstrates an emerging awareness that another person’s emotional experience may differ from their own.

Perspective Taking

Closely related to Theory of Mind is perspective taking, or the ability to consider another person’s point of view. While Theory

of Mind focuses on recognizing that others have separate mental states, perspective taking involves using that understanding to guide social interactions.

Perspective taking allows children to:

- Understand how their behavior affects others.
- Resolve conflicts more effectively.
- Cooperate during play.
- Show empathy and compassion.
- Develop stronger friendships.

Perspective taking continues developing throughout childhood as children's cognitive abilities, language skills, and social experiences become increasingly sophisticated (Hoffman, 2000).

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7.4: Empathy

Joint attention, social referencing, Theory of Mind, and perspective taking work together to help children understand themselves and others. Together, these developing abilities provide the cognitive and emotional foundation for empathy, compassion, prosocial behavior, and moral reasoning. As children become increasingly aware of the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others, they become better able to respond with kindness, fairness, and concern for those around them (Hoffman, 2000; Thompson, 2006).

Empathy develops gradually during early childhood through warm, responsive relationships with caring adults. Although empathy continues to develop throughout childhood, its foundations begin during the first three years of life through everyday interactions with parents, caregivers, teachers, siblings, and peers (Hoffman, 2000; Thompson, 2006).

Researchers have described empathy in several ways, including:

- Knowing what another person is feeling.
- Feeling or sharing another person's emotions.
- Responding with compassion and concern (Goleman, 1995).

As children's social understanding develops, they become increasingly able to recognize emotions in others, appreciate different perspectives, and respond with kindness and concern. Empathy strengthens relationships by helping children understand how their actions affect others and encouraging caring, compassionate interactions (Denham, 2006; Hoffman, 2000).

Adults play an essential role in fostering empathy. Children learn empathy by experiencing empathy. When parents, caregivers, and teachers respond warmly to children's feelings, model caring behavior, and encourage children to consider the feelings of others, they help build the foundation for empathy (Denham, 2006; Hoffman, 2000).

A classroom culture of caring, respect, and inclusion further strengthens empathy by providing children with daily opportunities to practice kindness, cooperation, and compassion. Over time, these experiences help children develop meaningful relationships and become caring members of their communities (Denham, 2006).

Empathy is one of the most important social-emotional competencies children develop because it influences nearly every aspect of their relationships with others. It influences the quality of friendships, cooperation, conflict resolution, moral decision-making, and healthy relationships throughout life. Children who learn to recognize and respond compassionately to the feelings of others are better prepared to become caring family members, friends, classmates, coworkers, and citizens.

Because empathy serves as the foundation for healthy relationships, nurturing empathy during the early years is one of the most important priorities of families, caregivers, and early childhood educators. Difficulties in empathic behavior can contribute to significant social and interpersonal relationship challenges throughout life.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Felix Warneken & Michael Tomasello

Young Children as Natural Helpers



Felix Warneken



Michael Tomasello

Researchers Felix Warneken and Michael Tomasello have shown that even very young children are motivated to help others without being asked and without expecting a reward.

In a series of "helping" studies, toddlers (as young as 14 months of age) saw an adult struggling with a simple task, such as reaching an object. Many children spontaneously helped by handing the adult the needed item—even when the adult did not ask for help and could not see the child.

These findings challenge the idea that helping behavior must be learned through rewards or adult direction. Instead, Warneken and Tomasello argue that young children have an early-emerging prosocial motivation—what they call "natural helping"—that forms the foundation for empathy, cooperation, and moral understanding.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Young children have an early natural motivation to help others, showing that prosocial behavior begins very early in development.

Reference: Warneken, F., & Tomasello, M. (2007). Helping and cooperation at 14 months of age. *Infancy*, 12(3), 271–294.

Empathy Versus Sympathy

Although the terms empathy and sympathy are often used interchangeably, they describe different responses to another person's emotions. Understanding the distinction helps educators respond more effectively to children's emotional needs.

Empathy is the ability to understand another person's feelings while also appreciating their perspective. It is often described as "feeling with" another person. Empathy involves both an emotional response and a cognitive understanding of another person's experience. As children develop Theory of Mind and perspective-taking abilities, they become increasingly capable of recognizing how another person may be thinking or feeling, even when those feelings differ from their own (Hoffman, 1977).

Sympathy, in contrast, refers to feeling concern, sorrow, or compassion for another person's difficulties. Rather than sharing another person's emotional experience, sympathy is often described as "feeling for" someone. Sympathy communicates kindness and concern, but it does not necessarily require understanding another person's perspective or emotional experience.

Both empathy and sympathy contribute to caring relationships. However, empathy is particularly important because it encourages children to consider another person's thoughts and feelings, strengthening cooperation, prosocial behavior, and healthy relationships. As educators support children's social-emotional development, they help children move beyond simply recognizing another person's distress toward understanding how that person feels and responding with genuine compassion.

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7.5: Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary actions intended to benefit others. These behaviors include helping, sharing, comforting, cooperating, encouraging, and showing kindness. Prosocial behaviors reflect children's growing ability to recognize the needs of others and respond in caring and supportive ways.

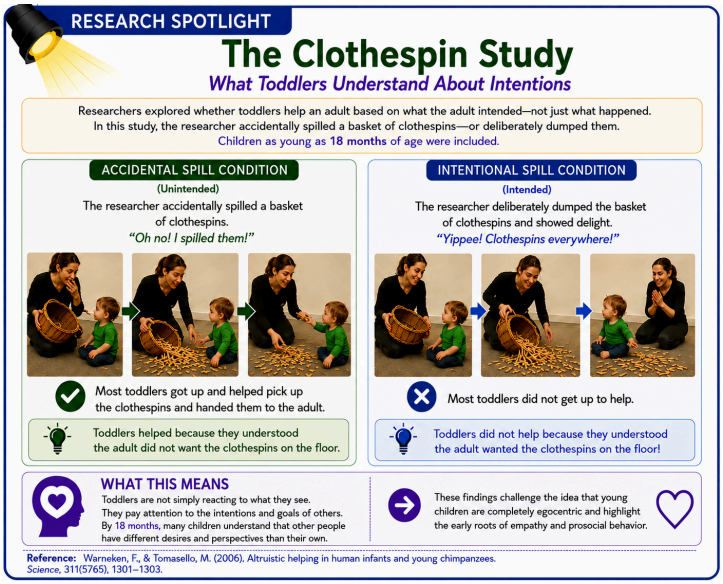
Prosocial behaviors begin emerging during the toddler years and continue developing throughout childhood. As children's empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional understanding grow, they become increasingly likely to help others, offer comfort, share materials, cooperate during play, and respond compassionately when peers are upset. Caring relationships, positive role models, and supportive classroom environments all encourage children to develop habits of compassion and generosity.

Prosocial behavior is closely connected to empathy. While empathy involves understanding and sharing another person's feelings, prosocial behavior involves acting on those feelings. As children's empathy develops, they become increasingly likely to demonstrate prosocial behaviors such as:

- Helping others who are struggling.
- Sharing toys and materials.
- Comforting someone who is hurt or upset.
- Offering encouragement and support.
- Showing kindness and compassion (Denham, 2006; Eisenberg, Spinrad & Morris, 2006; Hoffman, 2000).

A child who notices that a classmate is sad demonstrates empathy. A child who offers a hug, shares a favorite toy, or asks an adult for help demonstrates prosocial behavior.

Early childhood educators foster prosocial behavior by modeling kindness, acknowledging caring actions, creating opportunities for cooperation, and encouraging children to consider the thoughts and feelings of others. Through repeated positive experiences, children gradually develop the habits of caring, generosity, and compassion that support healthy relationships throughout life.



Recognizing Empathy in Action (Classroom Vignette)

Four-year-old Liam trips while running on the playground and begins to cry. Maya notices that he is upset, walks over, gently pats his shoulder, and brings him his favorite stuffed animal from the classroom comfort basket. She quietly says, "It's okay, Liam."

Their teacher kneels beside the children and responds, "Maya, you noticed that Liam was feeling sad and wanted to help him feel better. That was a very caring thing to do."

Although Maya cannot take away Liam's pain, she recognizes his feelings and responds with kindness and compassion. By acknowledging Maya's caring behavior, the teacher reinforces empathy and prosocial behavior while helping all the children recognize the importance of noticing and responding to the feelings of others.

Reflection Questions:

- Which concepts from this chapter are illustrated in this vignette?
- How did the teacher intentionally support empathy and moral development?
- In what ways did Maya demonstrate prosocial behavior?

Values

Values are the principles and ideals that guide how people think, make decisions, and treat others. Values such as kindness, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and compassion help children understand what is considered appropriate behavior within their families, schools, and communities.

Young children are not born with fully developed values. Instead, values gradually develop through everyday experiences with parents, caregivers, teachers, peers, and the larger community. Children learn values by observing the behavior of others, participating in caring relationships, and receiving guidance about how their actions affect other people.

As children mature, these developing values begin to influence their decisions, relationships, and moral understanding. Values provide an important foundation for empathy, prosocial behavior, and ethical decision making.

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7.6: Theories of Moral Development

Children's moral understanding develops gradually through their relationships, experiences, and growing cognitive abilities. Developmental theorists have proposed different explanations for how children learn to distinguish right from wrong, develop concern for others, and make ethical decisions. The following theories provide complementary perspectives on the development of morality throughout childhood.

Moral development grows out of children's relationships and everyday experiences. As empathy, perspective taking, and prosocial behaviors become more established, children gradually develop an internal sense of responsibility toward others. They begin to understand that their choices have consequences and that treating others fairly and compassionately contributes to healthy relationships and communities.

Theories of moral development help explain how children's understanding of right and wrong evolves throughout childhood.

Hoffman's Theory of Empathy and Moral Development

Psychologist Martin Hoffman (1931–2015) proposed that empathy is one of the primary foundations of moral development. Unlike theories that focus primarily on reasoning or rules, Hoffman believed that children's moral behavior begins with their ability to recognize and respond to the feelings of others. As children develop empathy, they become increasingly motivated to help others, reduce another person's distress, and act with kindness and compassion (Hoffman, 2000).

According to Hoffman, empathy develops gradually throughout childhood as children's cognitive abilities, language, and perspective-taking abilities mature. Infants initially experience what Hoffman described as global empathy, in which they respond to another person's distress as though it were their own. For example, one infant may begin crying after hearing another infant cry. As children grow, they gradually become able to distinguish between their own emotions and the emotions of others.

With increasing cognitive development, children begin to recognize that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, experiences, and needs. This growing understanding allows children to respond more thoughtfully and compassionately. Rather than reacting automatically, children begin to comfort a friend who is upset, share toys with a peer, or offer assistance when needed. These caring actions represent the emergence of prosocial behavior and provide an important foundation for moral development.

Hoffman believed that empathy motivates moral action because children become concerned about the well-being of others. As they recognize that their behavior can either help or harm another person, they gradually develop internal standards of kindness, fairness, responsibility, and compassion. Over time, moral behavior becomes increasingly guided by concern for others rather than by fear of punishment or the desire for rewards.

Hoffman's theory highlights the important role that caring relationships play in children's moral development. Warm, responsive interactions with parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers provide daily opportunities for children to experience empathy, observe compassionate behavior, and practice caring responses. Through these repeated experiences, empathy gradually becomes an important foundation for conscience, prosocial behavior, and moral reasoning (Hoffman, 2000).

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Martin Hoffman

Empathy as the Foundation of Moral Development



Psychologist Martin Hoffman transformed our understanding of moral development by proposing that empathy is one of the primary foundations of caring behavior. Rather than viewing morality as simply learning rules or avoiding punishment, Hoffman believed that children become moral because they gradually learn to recognize and respond to the feelings of others.

According to Hoffman, empathy develops through warm, responsive relationships and increasingly sophisticated social understanding. As children's ability to recognize another person's thoughts and feelings grows, so does their motivation to comfort, help, share, and act with compassion. In other words, children become caring not simply because they know the rules, but because they genuinely care about how their actions affect other people.

Hoffman's work reminds early childhood educators that every caring interaction—comforting a crying child, modeling kindness, encouraging perspective taking, and discussing emotions—helps build the foundation for empathy, prosocial behavior, and moral development throughout life.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Children are more likely to act with kindness when they understand and care about how others feel.

Reference: Hoffman, M. L. (2000). *Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice.* *Cambridge University* Press.

Hoffman's Stages of Empathy Development

Hoffman proposed that empathy develops through a series of increasingly sophisticated stages:

- **Global Empathy (Infancy):** Infants respond to another person's distress as though it were their own. For example, one baby may cry when hearing another baby cry.
- **Egocentric Empathy (Toddlerhood):** Young children recognize that another person is upset but often respond based on what would comfort themselves, such as offering their own favorite toy or blanket.
- **Empathy for Another's Feelings (Preschool Years):** Children begin recognizing that other people have feelings and needs that differ from their own. They become increasingly capable of comforting others in ways that are appropriate to the other person's situation.
- **Empathy for Another's Life Condition (Later Childhood):** As children's cognitive abilities mature, they begin understanding that people may experience long-term challenges such as illness, poverty, or disability. Their empathy expands beyond immediate situations to include concern for the ongoing well-being of others.

Hoffman's theory emphasizes that empathy is not simply an emotion but a developmental process that gradually becomes the foundation for compassion, prosocial behavior, and moral responsibility throughout life.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) expanded upon Jean Piaget's work by proposing that moral development occurs through a series of developmental stages. Kohlberg believed that children's understanding of right and wrong becomes increasingly sophisticated as their cognitive abilities mature. Rather than focusing on the specific choices people make, Kohlberg was interested in why people believe an action is right or wrong (Kohlberg, 1984).

Kohlberg proposed that moral reasoning develops through three levels consisting of six stages. As children mature, they gradually move from making decisions based on avoiding punishment and seeking rewards to making decisions based on fairness, justice, and ethical principles. Progression through the stages depends on cognitive development and opportunities to think about moral dilemmas.

The Three Levels of Moral Development

Level I: Preconventional Morality

Preconventional morality is most common during early childhood. At this level, children base decisions primarily on the direct

consequences of their actions.

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment

Children obey rules primarily to avoid punishment.

“I shouldn’t hit because I’ll get in trouble.”

Stage 2: Self-Interest

Children begin recognizing that different people have different wants and needs but continue making decisions based largely on personal benefit.

“I’ll help you if you help me.”

Level II: Conventional Morality

Conventional morality typically develops during later childhood and adolescence. Children begin considering the expectations of family, teachers, friends, and society.

Stage 3: Interpersonal Relationships

Children want to be viewed as kind, helpful, and cooperative.

“I want to be a good friend.”

Stage 4: Law and Order

Individuals recognize the importance of rules, laws, and responsibilities for maintaining an orderly society.

“Rules help everyone stay safe.”

Level III: Postconventional Morality

Postconventional morality is less common and generally develops during adolescence or adulthood. Individuals begin evaluating rules according to broader ethical principles.

Stage 5: Social Contract

People recognize that laws should promote fairness and protect individual rights.

“Rules are important, but they should protect people’s rights.”

Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles

Moral decisions are guided by deeply held principles such as justice, human dignity, and respect for others, even when these principles conflict with existing laws.

“I must do what is right, even if it means breaking an unfair rule.”

Kohlberg and Early Childhood Education

Most preschool children reason at the preconventional level, making decisions primarily to avoid punishment or obtain rewards.

As children mature, caring relationships, meaningful discussions, and opportunities to solve everyday social problems help support the gradual development of moral reasoning. During the elementary school years, many children begin reasoning at the conventional level, placing greater importance on following rules, meeting social expectations, and maintaining positive relationships. During adolescence, some individuals begin developing postconventional moral reasoning by questioning whether laws and rules are fair and considering broader principles of justice, individual rights, and the common good.

Kohlberg believed that discussing moral dilemmas encourages children to think about fairness, justice, and the reasons behind their decisions. While young children are not expected to reason at the higher stages, educators can support moral development by encouraging perspective taking, discussing fairness, modeling ethical behavior, and creating classroom communities built on kindness, cooperation, and respect (Kohlberg, 1984).



Hoffman and Kohlberg Compared

Although both Hoffman and Kohlberg studied moral development, they approached it from different perspectives. Hoffman emphasized why children care about others, proposing that empathy provides the emotional foundation for moral behavior. Kohlberg focused on how children reason about moral dilemmas and make decisions about right and wrong. Together, these theories suggest that both compassion and moral reasoning contribute to children's developing sense of ethics and responsibility.

Gilligan's Ethics of Care

Psychologist Carol Gilligan (1936–) expanded the study of moral development by suggesting that moral reasoning involves more than justice, rules, and individual rights. While Lawrence Kohlberg emphasized justice as the foundation of morality, Gilligan argued that caring, compassion, and relationships are equally important. She proposed that people often make moral decisions by considering how their actions affect others and by seeking to maintain caring relationships (Gilligan, 1982).

According to Gilligan, moral development involves balancing concern for oneself with concern for others. Rather than asking only, "What is fair?" individuals also ask, "How will my decision affect the people involved?" This perspective emphasizes empathy, responsibility, compassion, and the importance of maintaining healthy relationships.

Gilligan's theory is especially relevant in early childhood education because young children's moral development occurs within the context of relationships. Caring interactions with parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers help children learn kindness, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility. Through these daily experiences, children begin to understand that moral behavior involves not only following rules but also caring for the well-being of others.

Although Kohlberg and Gilligan emphasized different aspects of moral reasoning, their theories complement one another. Kohlberg helps explain how children develop increasingly sophisticated reasoning about fairness and justice, while Gilligan highlights the importance of empathy, compassion, and caring relationships. Together, these perspectives provide a more

complete understanding of children's moral development.

Applying Gilligan's Theory in Early Childhood Classrooms

Early childhood educators support children's developing ethics of care by creating classroom communities built on kindness, empathy, respect, and cooperation. Educators encourage children to consider how their actions affect others, resolve conflicts peacefully, comfort classmates who are upset, and participate in helping behaviors. Through responsive relationships and everyday social interactions, children learn that caring for others is an important part of becoming a responsible member of their classroom and community.

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7.7: Moral Thinking and Moral Behavior

Understanding what is right and wrong does not always guarantee that children will act accordingly. Young children may know that sharing is kind or that hitting hurts others, yet they still struggle to regulate their emotions or behavior in the moment. Moral behavior develops gradually as children's empathy, self-regulation, perspective taking, and moral reasoning become increasingly integrated.

Early childhood educators recognize that learning about kindness is only one part of moral development. Children also need repeated opportunities to practice caring behaviors through play, everyday interactions, problem solving, and responsive relationships. As children gain experience resolving conflicts, helping others, cooperating with peers, and reflecting on the consequences of their actions, moral understanding becomes increasingly connected to moral behavior (Hoffman, 2000; Kohlberg, 1984).

Ultimately, moral development involves both knowing what is right and choosing to act on that knowledge. Through supportive relationships and consistent guidance, children gradually develop the empathy, self-regulation, and ethical understanding needed to translate caring intentions into caring actions.

Supporting Empathy and Moral Development

Although empathy develops naturally through responsive relationships and everyday experiences, educators play an important role in intentionally nurturing children's ability to understand and care about others. Everyday interactions provide countless opportunities to strengthen empathy, compassion, and moral understanding.

Early childhood educators support empathy and moral development by:

- Modeling empathy, kindness, and respectful communication.
- Responding warmly and sensitively to children's emotions.
- Helping children identify and label their own feelings and the feelings of others.
- Encouraging perspective taking by asking reflective questions such as, "How do you think she feels?" or "What could we do to help?"
- Reading and discussing stories that explore emotions, fairness, kindness, and caring.
- Providing opportunities for dramatic play, puppet shows, and role-playing, where children practice seeing situations from another person's perspective.
- Recognizing and reinforcing acts of helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperation.
- Creating classroom communities where kindness, fairness, and respect are valued and practiced every day.

Conclusion

Children learn empathy by experiencing empathy. When adults consistently demonstrate warmth, respect, patience, fairness, and compassion, they create classroom communities where caring becomes a shared value. Over time, these daily experiences help children develop empathy, prosocial behaviors, and the moral understanding needed to build healthy relationships and become responsible members of their families, schools, and communities.

Empathy and moral development begin in infancy and continue throughout life. Every caring interaction, every opportunity to help another person, every discussion about fairness, and every act of kindness contributes to children's growing understanding of what it means to be a caring member of a family, classroom, and community. By intentionally nurturing empathy and moral understanding during the early years, families, caregivers, and early childhood educators help lay the foundation for compassionate relationships, ethical decision-making, and responsible citizenship that can last a lifetime.

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7.8: Chapter Vocabulary

Empathy: The ability to recognize, understand, and respond to another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.

Moral development: The gradual process through which children develop an understanding of right and wrong, fairness, responsibility, honesty, and respect.

Theory of Mind: The understanding that other people have thoughts, feelings, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge that may differ from one's own.

Perspective taking: The ability to consider a situation from another person's point of view.

Prosocial behavior: Voluntary actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, comforting, cooperating, and showing kindness.

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7.9: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **National Association for the Education of Young Children: Caring Relationships, the Heart of Early Brain Development/links to an external source:** Explores how responsive relationships contribute to emotional, social, and moral development.
- **ZERO TO THREE: Social-Emotional Development From 24 to 36 Months/links to an external source**: Describes the emergence of empathy, perspective taking, emotional understanding, and social skills during toddlerhood.
- **Great Good Science Center: Why We Should Teach Empathy to Preschoolers/links to an external source:** Discusses the importance of empathy and offers practical strategies for cultivating it in early childhood settings.
- **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: Children's Emotional Development Is Built Into the Architecture of Their Brains/links to an external source**: Explains how early experiences and relationships shape emotional development, empathy, self-regulation, and relationships.

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8: SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

8.1: Chapter Introduction

8.2: What Is Social Development?

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8.4: Theories of Social Development

8.5: Sociocultural Theory

8.6: Developing Social Understanding

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8.8: Theories of Play

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8.1: Chapter Introduction

8



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 8.1:** Explain how biology, temperament, relationships, culture, and environmental experiences interact to influence children's social development.
- **SLO 8.2:** Compare Social Learning Theory and Sociocultural Theory and describe how modeling, observational learning, language, and social interaction contribute to development.
- **SLO 8.3:** Differentiate the major types and stages of play and explain how play supports communication, cooperation, self-regulation, friendship, and social understanding.
- **SLO 8.4:** Apply developmentally appropriate strategies that support children's peer relationships, friendship skills, cooperation, social competence, and sense of belonging.

Chapter 8 Short Overview

This chapter examines how social development begins with children's earliest reciprocal relationships and continues through social interaction, play, cooperation, and friendship. It explores Social Learning Theory, Sociocultural Theory, social understanding, types and stages of play, peer relationships, and the development of social competence. The chapter also describes how educators can create inclusive classroom communities that promote communication, friendship, cooperation, and belonging.

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8.2: What Is Social Development?



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

The empathy and perspective-taking skills explored in the previous chapter become visible in children's everyday social interactions. As children participate in play, form friendships, cooperate with peers, and resolve conflicts, they strengthen these skills while building positive relationships and becoming socially competent members of their classroom communities.

Human beings are inherently social. From the moment they are born, infants begin building relationships with the people around them. Long before children can speak, they communicate through eye contact, facial expressions, crying, smiling, and gestures. These early interactions form the foundation for social development and influence how children learn to trust, communicate, cooperate, and develop meaningful relationships throughout life.

One of the main questions in child development is: how do children learn to live, learn, and thrive with other people? Social development helps answer this question. It encompasses the lifelong process of learning to form relationships, understand social expectations, communicate effectively, cooperate with others, and develop a sense of belonging within families, schools, and communities.

Closely related to social development is the process of socialization. Socialization is the process through which children learn the values, behaviors, customs, and expectations of their culture. It includes developing the capacity to cooperate within a group, regulate one's behavior according to social expectations, and build positive relationships with others. Through socialization, children gradually learn not only how society works, but also how they fit within it.

Like every aspect of development, social development results from the continuous interaction of biology and experience (Thompson, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). Children bring their own temperaments, personalities, and developmental abilities into relationships, while caregivers, peers, families, schools, and communities shape the experiences that influence social growth. Together, these interactions help children develop the social competence they will use throughout their lives.

Social development refers to the gradual process through which children learn to interact effectively with other people and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to build healthy relationships. Social development includes learning how to communicate, cooperate, share, resolve conflicts, express empathy, and participate successfully in family, school, and community life (Thompson, 2006).

Social development is much more than learning appropriate behavior. It involves developing an understanding of oneself in relation to others and learning how relationships influence thoughts, feelings, and actions. As children mature, they become increasingly able to understand social rules, appreciate different perspectives, develop friendships, and contribute positively to their communities. Because social development occurs through everyday interactions, every conversation, shared experience, conflict, and act of kindness provides an opportunity for learning.

Why Relationships Matter

Relationships are the foundation of social development. Through responsive relationships with parents, caregivers, teachers, siblings, peers, and other important adults, children learn what it means to trust others, communicate effectively, cooperate, solve problems, and develop empathy. These early experiences provide the foundation for the empathy, moral understanding, and social competence that continue to develop throughout childhood.

Healthy relationships provide children with emotional security while also encouraging exploration, learning, and independence

(Bowlby, 1982). As children experience consistent, caring interactions, they begin to develop confidence in themselves and in the people around them. These relationships become the foundation upon which later friendships, teamwork, and social competence are built (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Throughout this textbook, we have seen that secure relationships support children with diverse temperamental styles while fostering attachment, emotional development, and self-regulation. Social development builds upon each of these earlier foundations by helping children learn how to successfully participate in relationships within an ever-expanding social world.

Nature and Nurture

Social development is shaped by the continuous interaction between nature and nurture. Children are born with biologically based characteristics, such as temperament, activity level, and emotional reactivity, that influence how they respond to other people. At the same time, their experiences with caregivers, families, peers, schools, and communities influence how these characteristics are expressed over time (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Neither biology nor environment acts alone. Instead, development results from an ongoing reciprocal relationship between children's individual characteristics and the experiences they encounter (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). A naturally cautious child may become increasingly confident when supported by patient caregivers, while an outgoing child may learn empathy and cooperation through positive peer interactions. Understanding this interaction reminds educators that behavior is influenced by both the child and the environment, rather than by either one alone.

Social Development as Lifelong Change

Social development begins at birth and continues throughout the lifespan. Although this chapter focuses primarily on infancy and early childhood, social learning does not end when children enter school. Throughout life, individuals continue developing new relationships, adapting to changing social roles, and learning from new experiences (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

During infancy, social development centers on forming secure relationships with caregivers. During the toddler and preschool years, children begin expanding their social world through play, friendships, communication, and cooperation. As children grow older, social development becomes increasingly complex as they learn perspective-taking, conflict resolution, leadership, and collaboration.

Each developmental stage builds upon earlier experiences, demonstrating that social development is a lifelong process rather than a series of isolated milestones (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Social Development Versus Emotional Development

Although social development and emotional development are closely connected, they are not identical. Emotional development focuses on understanding, expressing, and regulating emotions, while social development focuses on building relationships and interacting successfully with others.

The two areas continuously influence one another. Children who can recognize and regulate their emotions are often better able to cooperate, solve conflicts, and develop friendships (Denham, 1998). Likewise, positive social relationships provide opportunities for children to practice the empathy, communication, self-regulation, and emotional understanding they have been developing.

Rather than viewing these developmental domains separately, early childhood educators recognize that they work together to support children's overall well-being. Emotional competence strengthens social competence, and positive social experiences continue to support emotional growth throughout childhood (Hyson, 2004).

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8.3: Foundations of Social Development

Social development does not occur in isolation. Rather, it emerges through the continuous interaction of children's biology, relationships, experiences, and developing understanding of themselves and others. Researchers recognize that no single factor determines social development. Instead, children's social competence develops through the dynamic interplay of several important influences.

Social Context

Children develop within relationships. Families, caregivers, teachers, mentors, coaches, siblings, peers, pets, and communities all contribute to children's social learning. These relationships provide opportunities for children to communicate, cooperate, solve problems, and demonstrate empathy. Every interaction teaches children something about how relationships work and how they fit within their social world (Vygotsky, 1978).

As children's social worlds expand, so do their opportunities to learn new social skills. Early relationships with caregivers provide the foundation for later interactions with peers, teachers, and other adults.

Gender and Social-Emotional Development

Gender is one aspect of children's developing social-emotional identity. From an early age, children notice similarities and differences among people and receive messages about what those differences mean. Their understanding of gender develops within the context of family relationships, cultural values, peer interactions, educational experiences, media, and the larger community. These experiences contribute to children's self-concept, emotional expression, relationships, interests, and sense of belonging.

Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense and understanding of their gender. During early childhood, children begin learning gender-related words and labels and may use them to describe themselves and others. As their thinking develops, they gradually form a more complex understanding of gender as one part of identity. Children do not all develop or express their gender identity in the same way or at the same pace. Educators support healthy identity development when they listen respectfully, use children's names and pronouns, avoid making assumptions, and communicate that every child is a valued member of the classroom community.

Gender-role development refers to the process through which children learn the behaviors, interests, characteristics, and responsibilities that families, cultures, and societies associate with gender. Children receive gender-role messages through adult behavior, toys, books, clothing, television, social media, advertisements, and interactions with peers. They may also observe how adults respond differently to children based on gender. Because gender roles vary among families, cultures, communities, and historical periods, they are not fixed standards for how children naturally behave.

Gender-role expectations can influence children's social-emotional development in both subtle and direct ways. For example, boys may receive messages discouraging them from crying, expressing fear, or seeking comfort, while girls may be praised for being quiet, agreeable, or helpful and discouraged from being assertive. Children may also conclude that certain toys, activities, friendships, occupations, or forms of emotional expression are only appropriate for one gender. These messages can limit children's opportunities to explore their interests, develop a full range of emotional and interpersonal skills, and feel confident in who they are.

Educators can promote healthy social-emotional development by ensuring that classroom experiences do not limit children according to gender. Books, dramatic-play materials, photographs, and classroom examples can depict people of all genders participating in caregiving, leadership, construction, creative expression, athletics, and many different occupations. Teachers can invite every child to explore all classroom areas, encourage the expression of a full range of emotions, and challenge stereotypes when they arise. By supporting each child's individual strengths, interests, identity, and ways of participating, educators help create a community in which all children experience acceptance, belonging, and the freedom to develop their full potential.

Biological Maturation

Social development is also influenced by biological maturation. As children's brains develop, they become increasingly capable of understanding emotions, controlling impulses, taking the perspectives of others, and participating in more complex social interactions (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Developmental changes in language, executive functioning, and self-regulation also contribute to children's growing ability to build friendships, resolve conflicts, and cooperate with others. While experience shapes social development, biological maturation provides the neurological foundation upon which these new abilities emerge. As the brain matures within the context of nurturing relationships and enriching experiences, children become increasingly capable of participating in more complex social interactions (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

Mental Representations

Children gradually develop internal mental representations of themselves, other people, and relationships. These mental representations influence how children interpret social situations, respond to others, and develop expectations about relationships.

For example, children who experience warm, responsive relationships often develop expectations that others will be trustworthy, supportive, and available. These expectations influence future interactions and contribute to children's developing sense of self, belonging, and social competence (Bowlby, 1982).

Temperament

As discussed in Chapter 3, children are born with individual differences in temperament that influence how they experience and respond to the social world. Some children eagerly approach new people and situations, while others observe cautiously before participating. Some express emotions intensely, while others respond more quietly.

Temperament does not determine children's social outcomes. Instead, it influences the way children engage with others and how adults respond to them. When caregivers recognize and respond appropriately to individual temperamental differences, children are more likely to experience a positive goodness of fit that supports healthy social development (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2015; Thomas & Chess, 1977).

Reciprocal Influences Among Children, Caregivers, and the Environment

Social development is best understood as a reciprocal process. Children influence the people around them, just as caregivers, peers, and environments influence children. A child's temperament, behavior, and communication style affect how adults respond, while adult responses shape children's future behavior and social expectations.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) described development as the result of ongoing interactions between the individual and the environment. Likewise, Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism emphasizes that children, their behavior, and their environment continually influence one another (Bandura, 1986).

Rather than asking whether biology or environment is more important, early childhood educators recognize that social development results from the continuous interaction of both. Every relationship, experience, and interaction contributes to children's growing understanding of themselves and the social world around them.

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8.4: Theories of Social Development

Several developmental theories help explain how children learn to interact with others and become socially competent. Although each theory emphasizes different aspects of development, together they demonstrate that children learn social skills through observation, relationships, communication, and participation in meaningful social experiences.

Social Learning Theory

One of the most influential explanations of social development is Albert Bandura's (1925–2021) Social Learning Theory. Bandura proposed that children learn many social behaviors by observing others and then imitating what they see (Bandura, 1986). Rather than learning solely through direct instruction or trial and error, children continuously watch parents, caregivers, siblings, teachers, peers, and even media models to understand how people behave.

This process is known as observational learning. Children observe how others solve problems, express emotions, communicate, cooperate, and respond to challenges. They then decide whether to imitate those behaviors based on what they observe.



Modeling

Modeling occurs whenever children observe another person's behavior and use that behavior as a guide for their own actions. Adults serve as powerful models because children carefully watch not only what adults say but also what they do. Through everyday interactions, teachers model respectful communication, cooperation, patience, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and positive social interactions. As children observe these behaviors, they gradually learn the social skills needed to build healthy relationships and participate successfully in their classroom community (Bandura, 1986).

Observational Learning

Bandura (1986) emphasized that learning often occurs without direct reinforcement. Children can acquire new behaviors simply by watching others. They observe which behaviors are rewarded, ignored, or discouraged and use this information to guide their own actions.

For example, a child may learn to take turns, use polite language, or resolve a disagreement peacefully after observing a teacher model these behaviors. Likewise, children may imitate aggressive, disrespectful, or uncooperative behaviors when those behaviors are frequently modeled by others (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

Four Processes of Observational Learning

Bandura (1986) identified four processes that influence whether observational learning occurs:

1. **Attention**: Children must first pay attention to the model.
2. **Retention**: Children must remember what they observed.
3. **Reproduction**: Children must have the physical and cognitive ability to reproduce the behavior.
4. **Motivation**: Children must have a reason or desire to perform the behavior.

These four processes explain why children do not imitate every behavior they observe. Learning depends upon attention, memory, developmental readiness, and motivation.

Reciprocal Determinism

Bandura (1986) also introduced the concept of reciprocal determinism, which explains that behavior is shaped through the continuous interaction of three factors:

1. The individual
2. The environment
3. Behavior

Each factor influences the others. For example, a child's temperament may influence how teachers respond, while teacher responses influence the child's future behavior. Likewise, children's behaviors help shape the classroom environment just as the classroom environment influences children's behavior.

Rather than viewing children as passive recipients of their environment, Bandura emphasized that children actively influence the social world around them while simultaneously being influenced by it.

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8.5: Sociocultural Theory

While Bandura emphasized observational learning, Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) focused on the importance of social interaction in children's learning and development. According to Vygotsky (1978), children develop knowledge and skills through interactions with more knowledgeable members of their community. Learning is fundamentally a social process.

Learning Through Social Interaction

Children construct understanding by participating in conversations, shared activities, play experiences, and collaborative problem-solving. Everyday interactions with adults and peers provide opportunities for children to acquire language, develop thinking skills, and learn cultural expectations.

Rather than viewing learning as an individual activity, Vygotsky (1978) believed that development occurs through participation in meaningful social experiences.

More Knowledgeable Others

The term "more knowledgeable other," commonly used to explain Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, refers to a person or resource that provides knowledge or skills beyond what the learner can access independently. This may include parents, teachers, siblings, peers, other members of the community, or resources such as books and computers.

More knowledgeable others support children's learning by providing information, guidance, encouragement, demonstrations, or feedback until children become capable of performing tasks independently.

Language as a Tool for Learning

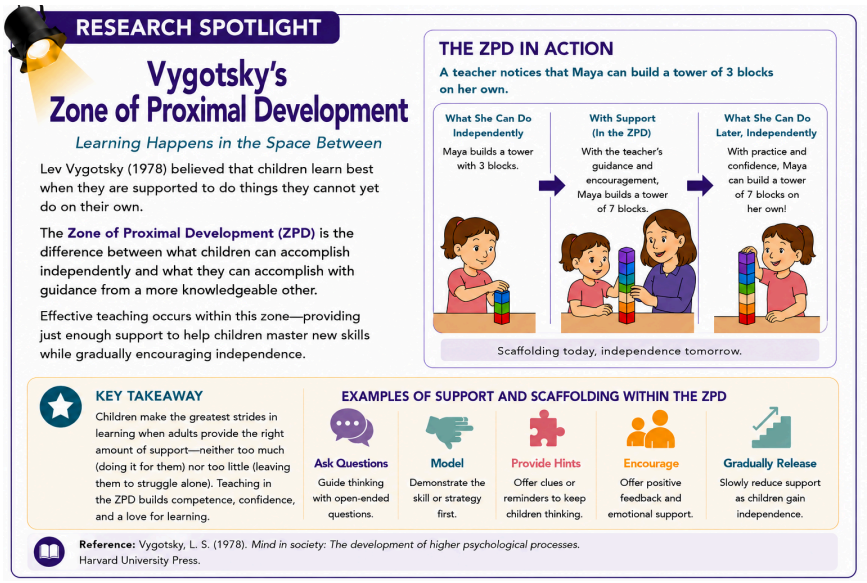
Vygotsky believed that language plays a central role in social and cognitive development. Through conversations with others, children learn vocabulary, social rules, cultural values, and ways of thinking about the world.

As language develops, children gradually begin talking themselves through tasks. This private speech eventually becomes internal thought, helping children plan, solve problems, regulate behavior, and guide their own learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Zone of Proximal Development

One of Vygotsky's best-known contributions is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the difference between what children can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with guidance from a more knowledgeable other.

Effective teaching occurs within this zone by providing just enough support to help children master new skills while gradually encouraging independence.



Cooperative Learning

Vygotsky believed that children learn best when they actively participate in meaningful social interactions (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Cooperative learning experiences encourage children to share ideas, solve problems together, negotiate differences, and learn from one another.

Play, conversations, collaborative projects, and peer interactions all provide opportunities for children to develop communication skills, perspective-taking, self-regulation, and social competence. Through these shared experiences, children not only acquire knowledge but also learn how to participate successfully within their social communities (Paratore & McCormack, 1997).

The First Relationships

Social development begins at birth through relationships with caring adults. From their first moments of life, infants are active participants in social interactions. Although they cannot yet speak, infants communicate through eye contact, facial expressions, body movements, crying, smiling, and vocalizations. Caregivers respond to these cues by comforting, talking, smiling, holding, and meeting infants' needs. Through thousands of these daily interactions, infants begin learning that relationships are safe, predictable, and meaningful.

Unlike earlier views of infancy that portrayed babies as passive recipients of care, researchers now recognize that infants actively influence the people around them. Infants and caregivers continually respond to one another in a reciprocal process that shapes both partners' behavior. As caregivers respond to infants' cues, infants learn that their actions have meaning and that they can influence the social world around them (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Reciprocal Interactions

Reciprocal interactions are the back-and-forth exchanges that occur between infants and their caregivers. These interactions begin almost immediately after birth and become increasingly sophisticated as infants develop. A baby cries, and a caregiver responds with comfort. The baby smiles, and the caregiver smiles back. The infant coos, and the caregiver answers with words, facial expressions, or gentle touch. Each interaction strengthens the relationship while helping infants learn the basic patterns of human communication (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2015).

These reciprocal exchanges provide the foundation for trust, attachment, language development, emotional regulation, and social competence. Over time, infants begin anticipating these interactions and actively seeking engagement with familiar caregivers.

Serve and Return Interactions

Researchers at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University describe these early reciprocal exchanges as serve and return interactions. Much like a game of tennis, one partner “serves” by initiating an interaction, and the other “returns” by responding appropriately (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015).

For example:

- An infant smiles, and the caregiver smiles back.
- An infant points toward a toy, and the caregiver names the object.
- An infant babbles, and the caregiver responds with conversation.
- An infant cries, and the caregiver provides comfort.

Thousands of these seemingly simple interactions help build the architecture of the developing brain. When caregivers consistently respond with warmth, sensitivity, and attentiveness, children develop stronger language skills, emotional regulation, secure relationships, and social competence. Responsive interactions literally help shape the neural pathways that support lifelong learning and healthy development.

Social Smiling and the First Conversations

One of the earliest milestones in social development is social smiling, which typically emerges around six to eight weeks of age. Unlike reflexive smiles seen during the newborn period, social smiles occur in response to people and social interactions. Infants begin smiling at familiar caregivers, making eye contact, and seeking interaction.

These early smiles are often followed by cooing, babbling, facial expressions, gestures, and shared attention. Together, these behaviors form the child’s first conversations (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2015). Long before children speak their first words, they are learning the rhythm of communication through turn-taking interactions with caring adults.

Caregivers naturally support these early conversations by responding enthusiastically to infants’ vocalizations, imitating sounds, talking throughout daily routines, and encouraging continued interaction. These experiences strengthen both communication and social development.

Responsive Caregiving

Responsive caregiving refers to consistently recognizing, interpreting, and responding appropriately to children’s cues and needs. Responsive caregivers observe children’s signals, respond promptly, and provide comfort, encouragement, guidance, and support based on each child’s individual needs.

Responsive caregiving supports every area of development. Children who experience consistent, responsive care are more likely to develop secure attachments, stronger emotional regulation, greater self-confidence, and positive social relationships. They also learn that adults can be trusted and that relationships provide safety during times of stress or uncertainty (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004/2007; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; & Siegel & Bryson, 2020).

Responsive caregiving does not require perfection. Rather, it involves being emotionally available, repairing misunderstandings, and consistently returning to positive interactions after moments of frustration or distress.

Emotional Availability

Emotional availability refers to a caregiver’s ability to be emotionally present, attentive, and responsive during interactions with children. Emotionally available adults notice children’s emotional cues, respond with warmth and sensitivity, and communicate genuine interest in the child’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Children who experience emotionally available caregivers are more likely to develop confidence, empathy, resilience, and healthy relationships with others. They learn that their emotions matter and that trusted adults will provide support when needed.

As children grow, these early relationship experiences become the foundation for later friendships, cooperation, communication, and social competence. In many ways, the quality of children's first relationships shapes how they approach relationships throughout the rest of their lives.

The importance of these early interactions cannot be overstated. Every smile returned, every comforting embrace, every shared glance, and every conversation, long before words are spoken, helps build the social foundation upon which all later relationships are constructed.

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8.6: Developing Social Understanding

As children grow, they begin to move beyond simply interacting with others to understanding them. Social understanding refers to children's growing awareness that other people have thoughts, feelings, intentions, beliefs, and perspectives that may differ from their own. This developing awareness allows children to build friendships, cooperate with others, solve conflicts, and interact more successfully within their social world (Kostelnik et al., 2015; Denham, 2006; Hyson, 2004).

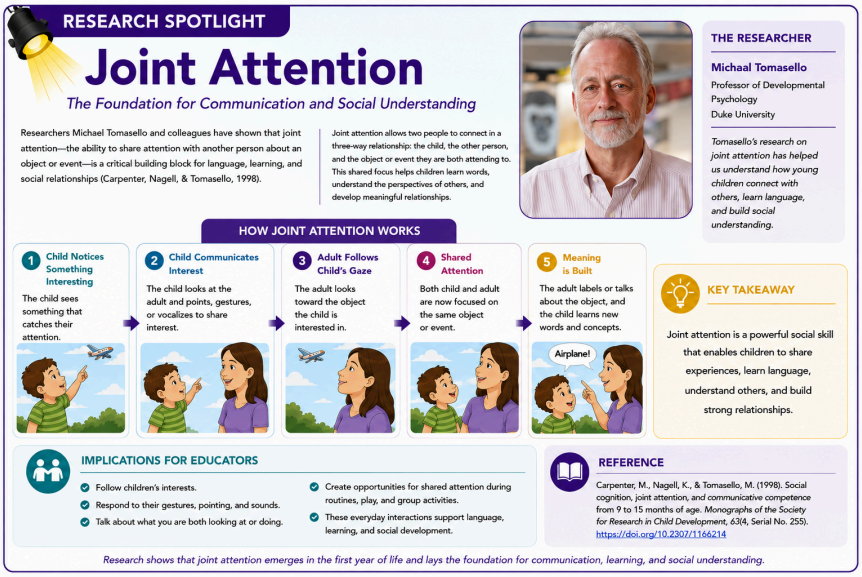
Social understanding develops gradually during infancy and early childhood through everyday interactions with caring adults and peers. Experiences such as shared play, conversations, and responsive caregiving help children learn that other people have their own emotions, goals, and ideas (Thompson, 2006).

Joint Attention

One of the earliest building blocks of social understanding is joint attention. Joint attention occurs when two people intentionally focus on the same object, event, or experience while being aware of one another's shared attention (Tomasello, 2019).

Joint attention typically begins to emerge during the second half of the first year of life. At first, infants learn to respond to joint attention by following another person's gaze or pointing gesture. Soon afterward, they begin initiating joint attention by pointing, looking back and forth between an object and a caregiver, or vocalizing to direct another person's attention.

These simple interactions become powerful learning opportunities. Joint attention supports language development, communication, social learning, and the development of relationships because children and caregivers are sharing attention and meaning together (Carpenter, Nagell, & Tomasello, 1998).



Social Referencing

As infants encounter unfamiliar people, objects, or situations, they begin looking to trusted caregivers for emotional information. They observe the caregiver's facial expressions, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues before deciding how to respond (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2015). This process is known as social referencing and becomes increasingly refined with age and experience (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

For example, a toddler approaching an unfamiliar dog may first look at a parent's facial expression. If the parent smiles calmly, the child is more likely to approach with confidence. If the parent appears fearful or anxious, the child may hesitate or withdraw.

Social referencing typically emerges between 7 and 10 months of age and helps children learn how to interpret unfamiliar situations. Through repeated experiences, children begin understanding that other people's emotional reactions provide valuable information about the world around them.

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8.7: Play - The Work of Childhood

Play is often described as the work of childhood because it is through play that children make sense of the world around them. Although play is enjoyable and self-directed, it is also one of the most important contexts for learning and development. During play, children experiment with ideas, practice new skills, solve problems, communicate with others, and develop the social competencies that will serve them throughout life (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

Play provides children with opportunities to explore relationships, express emotions, negotiate rules, and develop empathy. As children interact with peers, they learn to cooperate, share materials, resolve conflicts, and appreciate different perspectives. In many ways, play serves as the laboratory of social development. Through play, children practice the skills they will later use to build friendships, solve conflicts, cooperate with others, and participate successfully in society.

Research consistently demonstrates that play supports every domain of development. It contributes to children's cognitive, language, physical, emotional, and social growth while fostering creativity, curiosity, resilience, and self-confidence. Rather than viewing play as a break from learning, early childhood educators recognize that play is one of the most powerful ways young children learn.

Why Play Matters

Play allows children to actively construct knowledge while interacting with people, materials, and ideas. Unlike passive learning experiences, play encourages children to make decisions, solve problems, test hypotheses, and learn from the natural consequences of their actions.

Through play, children learn to:

- Develop friendships and positive relationships
- Cooperate with peers
- Practice communication skills
- Express and regulate emotions
- Negotiate rules and solve conflicts
- Apply empathy and perspective-taking skills during interactions with peers
- Strengthen creativity and imagination
- Build confidence and independence

Because play is internally motivating, children willingly spend long periods engaged in activities that challenge their thinking and expand their social understanding. These repeated experiences help children gradually develop the social competence needed for success in school and beyond.

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8.8: Theories of Play

Developmental theorists have long recognized the importance of play in children's learning and development. Although Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner approached play from different theoretical perspectives, they all agreed that play provides essential opportunities for growth. Each theorist offered a unique explanation for why play is such a powerful context for children's learning and development.

Piaget: Play Reflects Cognitive Development

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) believed that children's play reflects their stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1962). As children's thinking becomes more sophisticated, their play also becomes increasingly complex.

Piaget identified several forms of play that correspond to cognitive development:

- **Practice play**, in which infants repeat simple actions for enjoyment and mastery.
- **Symbolic play**, in which children use imagination and pretend that one object represents another.
- **Games with rules**, which emerge as children become capable of understanding shared expectations and cooperation.

According to Piaget, play allows children to actively construct knowledge by exploring, experimenting, and making sense of their experiences.

Vygotsky: Play Promotes Learning

Lev Vygotsky believed that play is one of the most important contexts for learning and social development (Vygotsky, 1978). During pretend play, children practice language, self-regulation, problem-solving, and cooperation while interacting with others.

Vygotsky believed that play naturally places children within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where they can accomplish more with the support of peers or adults than they could independently. Through collaborative play, children learn to negotiate roles, follow rules, communicate effectively, and consider multiple perspectives.

Before we continue, it is helpful to understand two terms used to describe play. Explicit means clearly stated or directly expressed, whereas implicit means understood or assumed without being directly stated.

Vygotsky also argued that all play contains rules, even when those rules are not explicitly stated (Vygotsky, 1978). During the preschool years, children typically engage in dramatic play that involves explicit fantasy and implicit rules (Van Hoorn et al., 2015). For example, children may pretend to be firefighters, veterinarians, or parents while naturally following the expectations associated with those roles. A child pretending to be a firefighter understands that firefighters rescue people and put out fires; these implicit "rules" guide the play even though no one has formally stated them.

As children mature, this relationship gradually changes. School-age children increasingly participate in games with explicit rules and implicit fantasy, such as board games, card games, and organized sports (Van Hoorn et al., 2015). The rules become clearly defined, while imagination continues to operate in the background as children anticipate strategies, imagine outcomes, and engage in friendly competition. For example, children playing a game of basketball must follow clearly established rules regarding dribbling, fouls, and scoring. At the same time, they may imagine they are professional athletes competing in a championship game. They shoot, score… and the (imaginary) crowd goes wild! The rules are explicit, while the fantasy remains implicit.

For Vygotsky, play was not simply entertainment; it was a powerful vehicle for cognitive, social, emotional, and language development.

Bruner: Play Encourages Creativity and Problem-Solving

Jerome Bruner (1915–2016) emphasized the role of play in fostering creativity, flexible thinking, and problem-solving (Bruner, 1972). He believed that play provides children with a safe environment for experimentation because mistakes have few negative

consequences.

During play, children explore ideas, test solutions, imagine alternatives, and adapt their thinking as situations change. This freedom encourages curiosity, innovation, and confidence while supporting both social and cognitive development.

Although Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner approached play from different perspectives, they shared a common belief: play is essential for healthy development.

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8.9: Types of Play

While Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner explained why play is important, Sara Smilansky (1922–2006) described the different ways children engage in play (Smilansky, 1968). Her work expanded Piaget's ideas and demonstrated how different types of play contribute to children's cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.

Smilansky identified four major types of play that become increasingly complex as children mature.

Functional Play

Functional play involves simple, repetitive movements that allow children to explore their bodies, objects, and the environment. Infants and toddlers often enjoy activities such as banging blocks together, pushing toy cars, stacking cups, pouring water, or repeatedly filling and emptying containers.

Through functional play, children develop motor skills, coordination, and an understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

Constructive Play

Constructive play occurs when children use materials to create or build something. Examples include building with blocks, drawing pictures, assembling puzzles, creating collages, or constructing objects from recycled materials.

Constructive play encourages planning, creativity, problem-solving, persistence, and cooperation when children work together.

Dramatic (Sociodramatic) Play

Dramatic play involves pretending, role-playing, and using imagination to represent real-life experiences. Children may pretend to be parents, doctors, firefighters, restaurant workers, teachers, or animals.

Smilansky believed sociodramatic play was especially important because it supports:

- Language development
- Self-regulation
- Perspective taking
- Cooperation
- Problem-solving
- Creativity
- The application of empathy during social interactions

During dramatic play, children negotiate roles, create rules, solve conflicts, and practice understanding other people's perspectives.

Games with Rules

As children's thinking becomes more sophisticated, they begin enjoying games that involve agreed-upon rules. Board games, card games, organized sports, and classroom games all require children to understand expectations, wait their turn, cooperate, and manage winning and losing appropriately.

Games with rules help children develop self-regulation, fairness, cooperation, and social competence.

The Importance of Multiple Types of Play

Each type of play contributes to children's development in different ways. Children naturally move among functional, constructive, dramatic, and rule-based play depending on their age, interests, experiences, and the opportunities provided within the environment. Rather than viewing one type of play as superior to another, educators recognize that each supports important aspects of learning and development.

Individual Differences in Play Styles

Children may differ in the aspects of dramatic play that interest them most. Some children are patterners who enjoy organizing materials and constructing or arranging the play environment. They may spend considerable time setting up a restaurant, hospital, house, or store but show less interest in acting out the play that follows. Other children are dramatists who are especially interested in people, roles, storylines, and social interaction. They may use objects primarily as props while developing and sustaining an imaginative story with others (Van Hoorn et al., 2015).

Many children demonstrate characteristics of both styles or vary their approach according to the activity, materials, and social context. These styles should therefore be viewed as preferences rather than fixed categories or measures of children's play ability.

Both forms of participation are meaningful. The child who carefully creates the setting and the child who enthusiastically enacts the story both contribute important ideas and abilities to the play experience. Educators should not assume that a child who enjoys preparing the setting but leaves when the dramatic action begins has failed to engage in play. Creating the environment may be the part of the experience that is most interesting and satisfying to that child.

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8.10: Stages of Social Play

While Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner explained why play is important, and Sara Smilansky described the different types of play children engage in, developmental researcher Mildred Parten (1902–1970) described how children's social participation changes as they mature (Parten, 1932). Through careful observation, Parten identified six stages of social play that reflect increasing levels of interaction with others.

Although these forms of play often become increasingly social as children develop, children move fluidly among them depending on the situation, materials, familiarity with peers, individual temperament, and preferred play style. A patterner may concentrate on arranging materials or constructing the setting, while a dramatist may be drawn more readily into social interaction and a shared storyline. These differences should not be interpreted as evidence that one child is more socially competent than another. No form of play or play style is "better" than another. Each provides valuable opportunities for learning and development.

Unoccupied Play

During unoccupied play, infants appear to make random movements without a specific purpose. Although this behavior may seem unstructured, infants are actively exploring their bodies, movements, and surroundings while beginning to interact with the environment.

Solitary Play

During solitary play, children play independently with little interest in what others are doing. They remain focused on their own activities and learning. Solitary play supports concentration, creativity, and independence.

Onlooker Play

Children engaged in onlooker play watch others play with interest but do not yet join the activity. They observe social interactions, learn classroom expectations, and gather information before participating themselves.

Parallel Play

Parallel play occurs when children play beside one another using similar materials without directly interacting. Although they may not be cooperating, they are aware of one another and often imitate each other's actions. Parallel play is particularly common during the toddler years and serves as an important bridge toward more interactive forms of play.

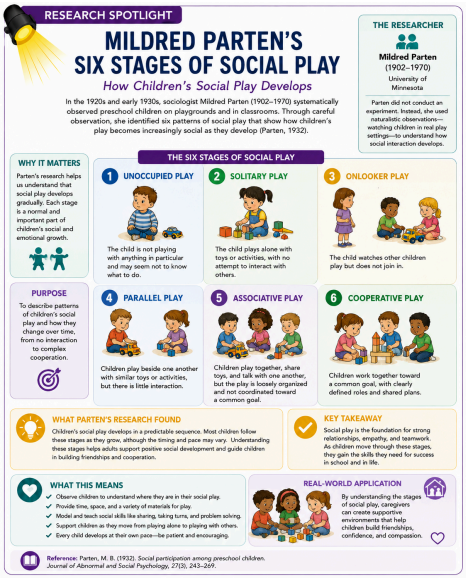
Associative Play

During associative play, children begin interacting with one another while sharing materials, talking, and exchanging ideas. Although each child may still have individual goals, social interaction becomes increasingly important.

Cooperative Play

Cooperative play is the most socially coordinated form of play. Children organize activities together, assume roles, negotiate rules, solve problems collaboratively, and work toward common goals. Cooperative play requires children to apply communication, self-regulation, empathy, perspective taking, and shared responsibility.

As children progress through these stages, play becomes increasingly social and collaborative. These experiences provide countless opportunities to practice communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, leadership, and empathy, skills that lay the foundation for healthy peer relationships and lifelong social competence.



Peer Relationships

As children move beyond their earliest relationships with caregivers, peers become increasingly important partners in social learning. Friendships provide opportunities to apply communication, cooperation, empathy, perspective-taking, and problem-solving skills in ways that are different from adult-child relationships. Through interactions with peers, children learn how to negotiate, compromise, resolve disagreements, and work toward shared goals (Corsaro, 2003).

Healthy peer relationships contribute to children's sense of belonging, self-confidence, and overall well-being. Positive friendships also provide emotional support and help children develop the social competence needed to participate successfully in families, schools, and communities (Denham, 2006; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

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8.11: Friendship Development

Although young children enjoy playing with many peers, true friendships gradually develop over time. Friendship is more than simply playing alongside another child. It is a relationship characterized by mutual affection, trust, shared interests, and a desire to spend time together.

The earliest friendships often emerge during the toddler and preschool years as children begin seeking out preferred playmates. At first, these friendships are frequently based on proximity, shared activities, or common interests. As children's language, self-regulation, perspective-taking, and other social-emotional competencies continue to develop, friendships become increasingly stable, reciprocal, and meaningful (Denham, 2006; Rubin, 2003).

Friendships provide children with opportunities to:

- Develop trust and mutual respect.
- Practice communication and cooperation.
- Learn to share, negotiate, and compromise.
- Resolve disagreements peacefully.
- Offer and receive encouragement and emotional support.
- Practice empathy and perspective taking.
- Build confidence and a sense of belonging.

Healthy friendships contribute to children's emotional well-being and social competence. Through positive friendships, children learn that relationships involve listening, caring, compromising, forgiving, and supporting one another. Children who experience positive friendships often demonstrate greater self-confidence, stronger communication skills, and increased resilience when facing challenges.

Friendship should not be confused with popularity. A child does not need many friends to experience the benefits of friendship. Even one close, supportive friendship can provide important opportunities for social learning, emotional growth, and resilience. In contrast, popularity often reflects how well known or well liked a child is within a group and does not necessarily indicate the presence of close, trusting relationships.

Friendships also provide an important context for practicing the social skills children have been developing throughout this chapter. During play and everyday interactions, friends learn to communicate, cooperate, negotiate disagreements, support one another through successes and disappointments, and apply empathy, self-regulation, and perspective-taking skills in meaningful ways.

As children experience positive friendships, they begin to develop a stronger sense of belonging within their classroom community. Feeling accepted, valued, and connected encourages children to participate more confidently, develop positive self-esteem, and contribute to a caring classroom culture.

Helping Children Make and Maintain Friendships

Children need opportunities to interact with peers, but friendships do not develop solely because children spend time in the same classroom. Although educators cannot create friendships for children, they can establish conditions that make positive peer relationships more likely to develop and guide children in learning how to initiate interactions, enter play, respond to others, sustain play, manage disagreements, and repair relationships afterward (Bilmes, 2004; Ramsey, 1991).

Children vary considerably in how they approach peers. Some children enter play confidently, while others observe from a distance or wait for another child to approach them. Temperament, language development, previous experiences, cultural expectations, social skills, and familiarity with other children can all influence how a child participates. Educators should respect these differences rather than assuming that every child should approach friendship in the same way.

Entering Play (Entrance Strategies)

Children actively construct shared routines, play themes, meanings, and ways of belonging within their peer groups. Because children may become invested in protecting their shared play, gaining entry into an activity already underway can require persistence and social skill (Corsaro, 2003). A child who walks into the block area and immediately begins moving another child's structures may be rejected, even though the child's intention was to join the play. Successfully entering play requires observing what is happening, understanding the other children's ideas, and finding a way to participate without abruptly disrupting the activity (Ramsey, 1991).

Educators can help children learn to:

- Observe the play before entering.
- Move close enough to show interest without interfering.
- Make a comment or ask a question related to the activity.
- Offer a useful material, idea, or role.
- Join by doing something that fits the play already underway.
- Wait and try another strategy when the first attempt is unsuccessful.

For example, an educator might say, "It looks like they are building a veterinarian's office. Watch for a moment and think about what the office might need." The child might then offer a toy animal or ask, "Do you need someone to bring the pets to the doctor?"

Children can also be taught simple language such as:

- "Can I build with you?"
- "What can I be?"
- "Do you need another animal?"
- "Can I help?"
- "I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?"

Rather than entering the interaction for the child, the educator provides enough support for the child to make the attempt independently. This type of scaffolding allows children to accomplish a social task with assistance and gradually assume greater responsibility as their competence develops (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Inviting and Responding to Others

Friendship involves responding to other children's attempts to connect. Educators can help children recognize when a peer is watching, approaching, offering a toy, making a comment, or asking to join. Some children may not yet understand these behaviors as invitations to interact.

Children can learn to invite others by using simple statements: "Would you like to play with me?" "Do you want to help us build?" or "You can be the veterinarian."

Educators can describe what they observe without forcing a particular response:

- "Mateo is watching the train you built. I wonder if he is interested in the train game."
- "Aaliyah brought another bowl to the table. She may have an idea for your restaurant."
- "Jordan asked if there is a role he could play."

Children should be encouraged to include others, but they should not be required to become friends with every child or surrender all control over their play. At times, an activity may have limited space, or children may need time with a preferred companion. Educators can acknowledge these circumstances while preventing patterns of deliberate exclusion. They might help children find another role, expand the activity, plan a later opportunity, or begin a related activity nearby.

Sustaining Friendship

Beginning an interaction is only one part of friendship. Children must also learn how to sustain shared play and respond to another person's ideas. This requires communication, emotional regulation, flexibility, cooperation, and an increasing ability to consider another person's perspective (Denham, 1998; Ramsey, 1991).

Conversation helps children initiate and maintain relationships. Educators can model how to greet a peer, ask a question, make a relevant comment, respond to what another child says, and give the other person an opportunity to speak. Children may need reminders that conversation involves listening and responding as well as sharing their own ideas.

Children maintain positive interactions when they:

- Listen and respond to one another.
- Exchange ideas rather than controlling the entire activity.
- Share materials and negotiate their use.
- Take turns leading and following.
- Show interest in another child's experiences.
- Express affection, appreciation, and concern.
- Adapt when the play changes.
- Use words to express needs and resolve misunderstandings.
- Repair the relationship after hurt feelings or conflict.

Educators can draw attention to these skills as they occur. Statements such as, "You listened to Maya's idea and found a way to use both ideas," or "You noticed that Luis was having trouble and offered to help," make successful friendship behaviors visible without labeling children as "good" or "nice."

Friendships inevitably include disagreements. Children may feel jealous, become frustrated, want the same role, or disagree about how play should proceed. Conflict does not necessarily indicate that a friendship is unhealthy. When children learn to communicate, listen, compromise, and reconnect after disagreements, conflict can strengthen their relationship and social competence. Strategies for helping children resolve peer conflicts are discussed in Chapter 9.

Supporting Children Who Have Difficulty Making Friends

Some children need additional support to establish peer relationships. A child may remain on the edges of play, experience repeated rejection, dominate interactions, communicate aggressively, or have difficulty interpreting social cues. These patterns should not be treated as fixed personality characteristics. They may reflect temperament, limited experience, communication differences, developmental needs, anxiety, previous rejection, or social skills that are still emerging.

Observation helps educators determine what kind of support may be useful. An educator might consider:

- Does the child attempt to approach peers?
- How does the child enter ongoing play?
- How do other children respond?
- Can the child communicate ideas and understand the ideas of others?
- Does the child have difficulty waiting, negotiating, or managing disappointment?
- Are particular activities, group sizes, or peers associated with more successful interactions?
- Do language, sensory, developmental, cultural, or environmental factors affect participation?

Educators can support children by arranging brief, enjoyable interactions with one or two peers around a shared interest. A child who enjoys dinosaurs might be paired with another child to create a dinosaur habitat. A child who is comfortable with art might work with a peer on a collaborative mural. Smaller groups often make it easier for children to communicate, notice social cues, and participate successfully.

This approach is reflected in Pamela Wolfberg's Integrated Play Groups model, which supports children with autism as they participate in shared play with peers. In small, inclusive play groups, an adult helps children recognize one another's interests,

respond to social communication, and participate in mutually engaging play. As children become more comfortable and capable of sustaining the interaction, the adult gradually reduces the support provided. The goal is to create authentic opportunities for social connection, play, and imagination rather than to require a particular interaction or force a friendship (Wolfberg, 2003).

Books, puppets, role-playing, and classroom conversations can also be used to practice inviting someone to play, responding to an invitation, handling rejection, taking turns, and repairing hurt feelings. These skills are most meaningful when children have immediate opportunities to apply them during authentic peer interactions (Bilmes, 2004; DeVries & Zan, 1994).

Educators must not publicly label children as shy, bossy, aggressive, or friendless. In addition, they should avoid assigning a child to be another child's friend. Instead, educators create repeated opportunities for positive interaction, provide guidance when needed, and gradually withdraw support as children become more socially competent. The goal is not to make every child popular or surrounded by many friends. It is to help each child develop the skills and opportunities needed to form mutually enjoyable, caring, and respectful relationships.

Cooperation

Cooperation involves working together toward a common goal. Children learn to cooperate by sharing ideas, dividing responsibilities, negotiating roles, and supporting one another during play and classroom activities.

Cooperation develops gradually. Young children often require adult guidance as they learn to balance their own desires with the needs of others. As children gain experience, they become increasingly capable of collaborating with peers and contributing to group activities.

Turn Taking and Sharing

Turn taking and sharing are essential social skills that develop through repeated opportunities for practice. Young children naturally want immediate access to desired toys or activities, but over time they learn to wait, share materials, and consider the needs of others.

These experiences help children develop patience, fairness, and self-regulation while strengthening positive peer relationships.

Belonging

Every child has a fundamental need to belong. A sense of belonging develops when children feel accepted, valued, respected, and included within their classroom community.

Educators foster belonging by creating welcoming environments, celebrating diversity, encouraging friendships, and ensuring that every child has meaningful opportunities to participate. When children experience belonging, they are more likely to engage confidently in learning, build positive relationships, and develop a strong sense of self.

Social Competence

As children participate in play, build friendships, and learn to cooperate with others, they begin applying many of the social-emotional skills developed throughout early childhood. Attachment, self-regulation, emotional development, empathy, language, perspective taking, and theory of mind all contribute to children's ability to interact successfully with others. Theory of mind helps children understand that other people may have thoughts, feelings, desires, and beliefs that differ from their own, an understanding that becomes increasingly important during play, friendship, and conflict resolution (Wellman, 2014). Together, these experiences help children develop social competence (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Social competence refers to a child's ability to build and maintain positive relationships while interacting effectively and appropriately with others in a variety of social situations. Rather than representing a single skill, social competence reflects the integration of many developmental abilities, including communication, cooperation, self-regulation, empathy, emotional understanding, perspective taking, and problem-solving (Denham, 2006; Kostelnik et al., 2015; Thompson, 2006).

Social competence develops gradually through responsive relationships, meaningful play, supportive guidance, and repeated opportunities to interact with caring adults and peers. Over time, children become increasingly skilled at understanding social

expectations, communicating effectively, cooperating with others, and responding appropriately to the needs of those around them.

Children who demonstrate strong social competence are more likely to:

- Build and maintain positive friendships.
- Communicate effectively with peers and adults.
- Cooperate during group activities.
- Solve social problems constructively.
- Demonstrate self-regulation in challenging situations.
- Show kindness, respect, and responsibility.
- Experience a sense of belonging within their classroom community.

Social competence is not a fixed trait but a developmental process that continues throughout childhood and beyond. Every positive social interaction provides another opportunity for children to strengthen the skills needed to build healthy relationships and participate successfully within their families, schools, and communities.

Early childhood educators play an essential role in fostering social competence by creating safe, welcoming environments where children feel accepted, valued, and respected. Through intentional planning, responsive relationships, meaningful play experiences, and opportunities for collaboration, educators help children develop the confidence and skills needed to become caring, capable, and socially responsible members of their communities.

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8.12: Supporting Social Development in Early Childhood Classrooms

Supporting children's social development requires intentional teaching, responsive relationships, and thoughtfully designed learning environments. Social skills develop naturally through everyday interactions, but they also flourish when educators intentionally model positive relationships and provide opportunities for children to practice new skills (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Educators can support social development by:

- Building warm, trusting relationships with every child.
- Creating inclusive classroom communities where every child feels welcomed, valued, and respected.
- Modeling respectful communication, cooperation, empathy, and kindness.
- Teaching friendship skills such as sharing, taking turns, listening, and helping others.
- Facilitating meaningful play experiences that encourage collaboration and problem-solving.
- Supporting children as they navigate peer conflicts by helping them identify feelings, consider different perspectives, and develop peaceful solutions.
- Encouraging empathy by helping children recognize and respond to the feelings of others.
- Using positive guidance strategies that teach appropriate behavior rather than relying on punishment.
- Celebrating diversity while fostering a strong sense of belonging and community.
- Partnering with families to provide consistent support for children's social development across home and school.

When educators intentionally create emotionally safe, inclusive, and responsive classrooms, children develop the confidence and social competence needed to build healthy relationships throughout their lives.

Conclusion

Social development begins with a baby's first smile and continues throughout life. From early relationships with caregivers to friendships with peers, children gradually learn how to communicate, cooperate, solve problems, and care for others. Play provides the opportunity to practice these skills, while supportive relationships provide the encouragement needed to develop confidence and competence.

Although children are born with unique temperaments and abilities, social competence develops through responsive relationships, meaningful experiences, and intentional guidance from caring adults. By creating classrooms where every child feels safe, valued, and included, early childhood educators help children build the relationships and social skills that will support learning, well-being, and success throughout their lives.

Ultimately, social competence is not simply about getting along with others. It is about developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to build meaningful relationships, contribute to a community, and thrive throughout life.

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8.13: Chapter Vocabulary

Socialization: The process through which children learn the values, behaviors, customs, expectations, and social practices of their families, communities, and cultures.

Observational learning: Learning that occurs by watching another person's behavior and observing the consequences of that behavior.

Reciprocal interactions: Back-and-forth exchanges in which children and caregivers respond to and influence one another through sounds, gestures, facial expressions, words, and actions.

Stages of social play: Parten's description of children's increasingly interactive forms of play, including unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play.

Social competence: The integrated ability to communicate, cooperate, regulate behavior, solve social problems, and build and maintain positive relationships with others.

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8.14: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: Serve and Return/links to an external source:** Explains how responsive, back-and-forth interactions with caring adults strengthen relationships and help build the neural connections that support children's communication and social development.
- **Head Start: The Importance of Play in Early Childhood/links to an external source:** Explores how play supports relationships, communication, problem-solving, emotional development, and learning during infancy and early childhood.
- **Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development: Peer Relations links to an external source:** Provides research-based articles about peer interactions, friendship, social competence, peer acceptance, and difficulties in children's relationships.
- **California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations: Social and Emotional Development links to a pdf:** Describes developmental progressions in children's relationships with adults and peers, social understanding, cooperation, prosocial behavior, and sense of belonging.

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9: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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9.2: Why Conflict Happens

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9.1: Chapter Introduction

9



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 9.1:** Explain how egocentrism, limited language, strong emotions, emerging self-regulation, and developing perspective-taking abilities contribute to conflict among young children.
- **SLO 9.2:** Identify environmental arrangements, positive-guidance practices, and proactive teaching strategies that can prevent unnecessary conflicts.
- **SLO 9.3:** Identify the seven-step conflict-resolution process to help children communicate their perspectives, identify feelings, generate solutions, and resolve disagreements peacefully.
- **SLO 9.4:** Describe how educators can serve as impartial coaches and create a classroom culture that supports empathy, reflective listening, collaborative problem-solving, relationship repair, and increasing independence.

Chapter 9 Short Overview

This chapter examines why conflict is a normal and developmentally appropriate part of children's social-emotional development. It explains how educators can prevent unnecessary conflicts through positive guidance, supportive environments, and proactive teaching. The chapter also presents a seven-step conflict-resolution process that helps children express feelings, understand different perspectives, generate solutions, repair relationships, and gradually solve problems more independently.

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9.2: Why Conflict Happens

Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Few people enjoy dealing with conflict. Whether between adults or young children, disagreements can feel uncomfortable, frustrating, and emotionally draining. As Juliann Garey observes, no matter how much we try to avoid conflict, disagreements are a normal part of life. Left unresolved, conflicts can damage relationships and make future interactions more difficult. However, when approached thoughtfully, conflict becomes an opportunity for learning, growth, and stronger relationships (Garey, 2026).

Even socially competent children experience conflict. In fact, conflict is a normal and healthy part of children's social development. Disagreements over toys, materials, space, friends, or ideas provide valuable opportunities for children to practice communication, perspective taking, emotional regulation, and problem-solving. Rather than viewing conflict as something to eliminate, early childhood educators recognize it as an opportunity to teach lifelong problem-solving, communication, and emotional regulation skills.

One strategy that can be particularly effective is to take the role of a coach rather than a judge. The educator's role is not to decide who is right or wrong, but to guide children through the problem-solving process so that children gradually learn to resolve conflicts independently (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1998).



Conflict is a natural part of early childhood because young children are still developing the social-emotional skills needed to interact successfully with others. Disagreements are not signs that children are "misbehaving." Rather, they often reflect normal developmental processes as children learn to communicate, cooperate, and understand the perspectives of others.

Young children may experience conflict because they:

- Are naturally egocentric and often see situations primarily from their own point of view (Piaget, 1962).

- Have limited language skills for expressing their wants, needs, and feelings.
- Are still developing self-regulation and may act impulsively before thinking through the consequences of their actions.
- Experience strong emotions that can temporarily overwhelm their ability to solve problems calmly.
- Are still learning perspective taking and may not yet understand that other children have thoughts, feelings, and desires that differ from their own (Denham, 2006; Thompson, 2006).

As children mature, they gradually develop the communication, empathy, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills needed to resolve disagreements more independently. Understanding why conflict occurs helps educators respond with empathy rather than frustration. Instead of asking, "How do I stop this behavior?" educators begin asking, "What skill is this child still learning?"

Why Children Need to Learn Conflict Resolution

Young children are not born knowing how to resolve disagreements peacefully. Conflict resolution is a learned skill that develops gradually through patient guidance, modeling, practice, and supportive relationships. Every disagreement provides an opportunity for children to strengthen the social-emotional skills they will use throughout their lives (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1998).

When educators guide children through conflicts rather than simply solving problems for them, children learn to:

- Communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs respectfully.
- Develop empathy by listening to and considering another person's perspective.
- Strengthen self-regulation by managing strong emotions before reacting.
- Practice perspective taking by recognizing that other people may think and feel differently.
- Develop problem-solving skills by generating and evaluating possible solutions.
- Build confidence in their ability to resolve future disagreements independently.

Every successfully resolved conflict also strengthens children's resilience. As children experience disagreements, recover from disappointments, repair relationships, and discover that problems can be solved peacefully, they become increasingly resilient and confident in their ability to navigate future social challenges.

These skills do not develop automatically. Like language, literacy, or motor skills, conflict resolution requires intentional teaching, guided practice, encouragement, and many opportunities to try again. Over time, children become increasingly capable of solving problems independently.



Preventing Conflict Before It Begins

One of the most effective ways to manage conflict is to prevent unnecessary conflicts before they occur. As the old adage reminds us, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Rather than waiting until children become upset, skilled educators intentionally create environments and experiences that promote cooperation, communication, and successful social interactions. Many conflicts can be prevented through thoughtful planning, realistic expectations, and responsive teaching.

Educators can reduce the likelihood of conflict by:

- Arranging the environment to encourage cooperation.
- Providing enough materials so children are not forced to compete unnecessarily.
- Establishing predictable routines and clear expectations.
- Maintaining teacher proximity during activities or in areas that commonly lead to disagreements.
- Modeling appropriate social skills before expecting children to use them independently.
- Teaching skills such as sharing, taking turns, waiting, and using respectful language before conflicts arise.
- Setting developmentally appropriate expectations based on children’s ages and abilities.
- Avoiding shame, comparison, or embarrassment as guidance strategies.
- Responding with patience, empathy, and encouragement while supporting children’s growing independence.

Thoughtful classroom design is one of the simplest and most effective ways to prevent conflict. Clearly defined learning areas, adequate space for movement, and sufficient materials reduce unnecessary competition and support cooperative play. For example, if several children enjoy using Hula Hoops, providing one for each child may be more developmentally appropriate than requiring children to share a single Hula Hoop. Likewise, offering duplicate high-interest toys or multiple art supplies often reduces frustration and allows children to remain actively engaged in play.

Consistent routines provide children with a sense of security and predictability by reducing uncertainty. When children know what to expect throughout the day, they are better able to transition between activities, regulate their behavior, and participate successfully in classroom experiences.

An educator’s physical presence often prevents small disagreements from becoming larger conflicts. By remaining close during activities or in areas where problems commonly arise, teachers can anticipate challenges, offer gentle reminders, and provide guidance before emotions escalate. Often, a calm presence or brief reminder is all that is needed to redirect children’s behavior before a disagreement occurs.

Preventing conflict also involves intentionally teaching social skills before children need to use them. Rather than waiting until a disagreement occurs, educators introduce, model, and provide opportunities to practice skills during calm moments when children are most receptive to learning. Through conversations, role-playing, children’s literature, games, and everyday interactions, children gradually learn to listen, negotiate, ask for help, express emotions respectfully, solve problems collaboratively, and resolve disagreements peacefully. Because these skills develop over time, educators provide many opportunities for children to observe, practice, receive encouragement, and apply them throughout the day (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1998; Wichert, 1989).

Like all areas of development, social skills develop through practice. Children are not expected to master these skills after a single lesson or reminder. They learn gradually through repeated opportunities to observe, practice, make mistakes, receive encouragement, and try again. With each experience, children become more confident and competent in applying these skills in real-life situations. As children become more successful, educators gradually reduce their support while encouraging greater independence.

Educators should also maintain developmentally appropriate expectations rather than adult standards. When adults expect more self-control, patience, or perspective taking than young children are capable of demonstrating, frustration often increases for everyone involved.

Positive guidance is equally important. Educators should avoid using shame, guilt, or comparisons between children. For example, statements such as, *“Everyone, look at how well she is doing,”* may be intended as praise but can leave many children feeling embarrassed or self-conscious when singled out in front of their peers. Instead, educators should encourage each child’s individual progress, provide authentic feedback, and celebrate growth without comparison.

Ultimately, preventing conflict requires patience, empathy, and thoughtful planning. When educators create supportive

environments, teach social skills proactively, and respond with warmth and respect, children gradually learn that disagreements can be managed peacefully. Rather than fearing conflict, they begin to view it as a normal part of relationships and an opportunity to communicate, problem-solve, strengthen friendships, and develop the social competence they will use throughout their lives.

Using Positive Guidance to Prevent Conflict

The language educators use has a powerful influence on children's behavior and their developing self-concept. Positive guidance focuses on positive and clear expectations. Clear, respectful communication helps children understand what is expected of them while preserving their dignity and strengthening relationships.

Tell Children What to Do

Rather than emphasizing unwanted behavior, educators communicate what the children should do instead of what they should not do.

For example, instead of saying, "Don't run," say, "Please use your walking feet." Rather than saying, "Don't yell," say, "Use your quiet voice." Instead of saying, "Don't stand on the swing," say, "Please sit down on the swing."

When young children are told, "Don't..." they often ignore the word *don't* and focus on the action that follows. Positive directions tell children exactly what behavior is expected and are generally more effective because they clearly communicate the desired behavior. As a result, educators should state expectations in a positive form whenever possible and tell children what to do rather than what not to do.

State Rules Positively

Children remember simple, positive rules more easily than long lists of prohibited behaviors.

Examples include:

- Gentle Hands
- Gentle Words
- Listening Ears
- Walking Feet
- Kind Hearts

Positive rules create a classroom climate focused on success rather than mistakes.

Use Visual and Nonverbal Cues

Young children benefit from visual reminders and simple gestures that reinforce verbal directions. Pointing to listening ears, gently placing a finger over the lips, or demonstrating "walking feet" helps children understand expectations without interrupting the flow of the classroom.

Be Consistent

Children feel safe when expectations remain predictable. Consistently enforcing classroom rules helps children understand that expectations are meaningful rather than optional. Consistency builds trust.

Supporting Children When Expectations Are Not Met

Even in supportive classrooms, children occasionally forget or test classroom expectations. Rather than reacting with punishment, educators use guidance strategies that teach children how to make better choices in the future.

Remind the Child of the Rule

Reminding the child of the rule is also called guidance. Begin by calmly reminding the child of the classroom expectation.

“Remember…Gentle Hands.”

Often that is enough.

Explain Natural or Logical Consequences

Help children understand the connection between their choices and the consequences.

“If you continue throwing blocks, the blocks will be put away until you are ready to use them safely.”

Label Feelings

Help children identify emotions. Before children can solve a problem, they often need help calming their bodies and identifying their emotions. Once they feel understood and emotionally regulated, they are better able to think clearly and participate in problem-solving (Garey, 2026).

“I can see you’re frustrated.” Or “You look disappointed.”

Labeling emotions often helps children regain self-control.

Give Children a Do-Over

Children deserve opportunities to try again.

A do-over communicates:

“I believe you can be successful,” rather than, “You already failed.”

Reinforce Positive Choices

Educators should also acknowledge children’s willingness to try using conflict resolution skills, even when their first attempt is unsuccessful. Learning to resolve conflict is a developmental process, and each attempt provides another opportunity for growth. As soon as children demonstrate the desired behavior, acknowledge their success with specific, authentic encouragement.



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9.3: When Conflicts Do Arise

Sometimes the behavior that adults observe is only the surface issue. For example, two children may appear to be arguing over a toy when the real problem is that one child feels excluded, frustrated, or lonely. Helping children identify the underlying problem often leads to more meaningful and lasting solutions (Garey, 2026).

They should be seen as important learning opportunities and not as an interruption to learning. When conflicts arise, help children express their feelings and listen to one another. Ask open-ended questions such as, “What happened?” or “What can we do to fix this?” Allow time for both sides to speak. Do not take sides; instead, guide the process of problem-solving collaboratively. Always remember that your goal is to build partnerships rooted in trust, empathy, and collaboration.

Seven Steps to Conflict Resolution

When a conflict arises, immediately go to the scene. The educator’s calm presence alone communicates that help has arrived. Then proceed as an impartial observer rather than immediately trying to solve the problem or assign blame.

1. Ask, “What happened?”

Give each child an opportunity to share their perspective. Usually, it works well to begin with the child who appears most upset.

Children do not always understand the true source of a conflict. What appears to be a disagreement over a toy, a turn, a friend, or a game may actually reflect deeper feelings of frustration, disappointment, exclusion, jealousy, or hurt. By asking thoughtful, open-ended questions and listening carefully to each child’s perspective, educators can uncover the underlying issue and guide children toward a meaningful solution rather than focusing only on the immediate behavior.

2. Listen reflectively

Repeat back what you heard so each child feels understood and knows they have been heard.

3. Label and clarify feelings

Encourage children to use *I statements* by completing the sentence:

- *I feel _____ when this happens _____ because _____. (Fill in the blanks) I statements are discussed in more detail in Chapter 14.*

Before children can solve a conflict, they often need time to calm their bodies and regain emotional control. When children are overwhelmed by anger, frustration, fear, or disappointment, they are less able to listen, think clearly, and generate appropriate solutions.

As emotions settle, educators help children pause and think about the situation before reacting. Taking a moment to reflect allows children to consider another person’s perspective, identify the issue, and choose more thoughtful solutions.

Educators should first acknowledge children’s feelings, provide support as needed, and wait until emotions have settled before guiding children through the problem-solving process (Garey, 2026).

Encouraging children to identify and express their feelings helps them feel understood and often allows them to move forward. Over time, this process strengthens emotional awareness, empathy, communication skills, and self-regulation.

4. Remind the children of the classroom rules or expectations

Remind children of the classroom rules or expectations in a calm, supportive manner. Revisiting shared classroom expectations, such as the I Care Rules, helps children remember the respectful behaviors they have already practiced and provides a positive

framework for resolving the conflict together.

5. Ask the children to suggest possible solutions

Once children understand the source of the conflict, encourage them to brainstorm possible solutions and choose one together. Whenever possible, allow children to solve the problem themselves while providing support as needed.

6. Help implement a solution

Give possible solutions and help the children if they are unable to reach a solution independently.

7. Redirect and follow up

Sometimes the first solution does not work as expected. When this happens, educators encourage children to revisit the problem, consider alternative solutions, and continue practicing their problem-solving skills. Checking back later helps ensure that the solution is working and that both children feel heard, respected, and successful.

Conflict resolution is a developmental skill that improves through practice. It is a learning process rather than a search for the perfect solution. Rather than expecting children to resolve every disagreement successfully on the first attempt, educators encourage persistence, acknowledge children's efforts, and provide additional guidance as needed (Garey, 2026).

Building a Classroom Culture That Supports Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution extends beyond responding to disagreements as they arise. Effective educators intentionally create classroom environments that teach, model, and support peaceful problem-solving every day.

Using a Peace Table

Some classrooms, particularly at the elementary level, use a peace table (sometimes called a *peace corner* or *peace place*) as a designated space where children can calmly work through disagreements. Located in a quiet area of the classroom, often within view of the teacher, the peace table provides a structured setting where children can talk, listen to one another, and practice the conflict-resolution skills they have learned. Depending on the age of the children, educators may provide conversation prompts, feeling cards, or problem-solving cue cards to guide the discussion (Wichert, 1989).

While preschool children often require adult support to resolve conflicts successfully, the peace table concept can be adapted for younger children. With guidance from a caring educator, children gradually learn to express their feelings, listen to another person's perspective, and work together to find mutually acceptable solutions. Over time, the goal is for children to become increasingly independent in using these skills as they develop greater social competence.

The peace table is only one example of how educators can intentionally create environments that support children's social and emotional development. Whether or not a classroom includes a designated peace table, the broader goal remains the same: creating a classroom culture where children learn that conflicts can be resolved respectfully through communication, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving.

Creating this kind of classroom culture is about more than simply responding to disagreements after they occur. Educators model respectful communication, teach emotional vocabulary, encourage children to express their needs appropriately, and guide them through conflicts rather than solving every problem for them. Children learn not only through their own experiences resolving conflicts but also by observing adults communicate respectfully, solve problems collaboratively, and repair relationships when disagreements occur. Through their daily interactions with children, families, and colleagues, educators demonstrate the respectful communication, empathy, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving skills they hope children will gradually develop themselves.

The following conflict resolution policy from the Bombeck Family Learning Center at the University of Dayton illustrates how one early childhood program intentionally creates a classroom culture where conflict is viewed as a valuable learning opportunity rather than a problem to eliminate (Sciarra, Lynch, Adams, & Dorsey, 2016).

A Sample Conflict Resolution Policy

From the Bombeck Family Learning Center of the University of Dayton

We provide a safe, secure environment where children learn to respectfully resolve conflicts that naturally occur in a childcare setting:

- **Develop** children's vocabulary for expressing feelings, wants, and needs while recognizing the feelings of others.
- **Model** respectful interactions through everyday words and actions, while developing an understanding of how to deal with conflict.
- **Protect** and affirm children's emotional and physical safety by establishing caring, consistent, and developmentally appropriate expectations.
- **Guide** and facilitate children through conflict resolution by asking thoughtful questions while encouraging them to make decisions and generate their own solutions while practicing self-regulation and socially responsible behavior.

Regardless of the specific wording, an effective conflict resolution policy communicates that disagreements are viewed as normal learning opportunities rather than problems to eliminate. Children are supported, guided, and encouraged to develop the communication, empathy, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills they will use throughout their lives.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution is not a skill that children master overnight. Like learning to read, ride a bicycle, or tie their shoes, resolving disagreements respectfully requires time, practice, guidance, and encouragement. Children will make mistakes, become frustrated, and often need adult support to navigate challenging situations. These experiences are a normal and an expected part of learning.

Every conflict provides another opportunity to practice communication, empathy, self-regulation, perspective taking, and problem-solving. With patient guidance and repeated opportunities to try again, children gradually become more confident and capable of resolving disagreements independently. Rather than viewing conflict as a setback, educators recognize it as an essential part of children's social and emotional growth.

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9.4: Chapter Vocabulary

Conflict resolution: The process of identifying and addressing a disagreement through communication, emotional regulation, perspective taking, and collaborative problem-solving.

Positive guidance: A respectful approach that teaches children appropriate behavior by communicating clear expectations, modeling social skills, and helping children learn from their choices.

Reflective listening: Listening carefully and restating what a person has communicated to confirm understanding and help the person feel heard.

I statement: A communication strategy used to express feelings, describe what happened, and explain why the experience was upsetting without blaming or attacking another person.

Peace table: A designated classroom space where children can calm themselves, communicate their perspectives, listen to one another, and work toward mutually acceptable solutions.

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9.5: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **NAEYC: A Three-Step Approach to Help Children Navigate Conflict/links to an external source:** Explains how educators can identify children's emotions, clarify the effects of behavior, and teach more appropriate ways to communicate and respond during conflicts.
- **Head Start: Problem Solving in the Moment/links to an external source:** Demonstrates how educators can coach children through social problems and conflicts while helping them develop increasingly independent problem-solving skills.
- **National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations: Solution Kit, Classroom Edition/links to an external source:** Provides visual cards educators can use to help young children brainstorm and select possible solutions to common classroom conflicts.
- **Child Mind Institute: Teaching Kids How to Deal With Conflict/links to an external source:** Discusses emotional regulation, I statements, identifying underlying problems, brainstorming solutions, and modeling effective conflict-resolution skills.

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10: UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

10.1: Chapter Introduction
10.2: A Framework for Understanding Children’s Behavior
10.3: Five Possible Causes of Behavior
10.4: Chapter Vocabulary
10.5: Extra Internet Resource Links
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10.1: Chapter Introduction

10



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 10.1:** Explain how children's behavior can communicate developmental needs, individual characteristics, responses to the environment, emerging skills, or unmet emotional needs.
- **SLO 10.2:** Differentiate the five possible causes of behavior by identifying relevant clues, patterns, and reflective questions.
- **SLO 10.3:** Analyze children's behavior using a process of elimination and select responsive, developmentally appropriate guidance strategies based on the most likely underlying cause.
- **SLO 10.4:** Describe how observation, environmental modification, intentional teaching, responsive relationships, family partnerships, and professional collaboration can support children's behavior and well-being.

Chapter 10 Short Overview

This chapter presents a reflective framework for understanding what children may be communicating through behavior. It examines five possible causes of behavior: developmental stage, individual differences, environmental influences, an unlearned skill the child is ready to acquire, and an unmet emotional need. Students learn to use observation, reflection, family knowledge, and a process of elimination to select guidance strategies that address underlying causes rather than merely reacting to visible behavior.

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10.2: A Framework for Understanding Children's Behavior



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Every educator will encounter challenging behavior. Some behaviors will be frustrating. Others will be confusing. A few will be heartbreaking. Over time, it becomes tempting to ask, *"How do I stop this behavior?"* But experienced educators should ask a different question first:

> **"Why is this child behaving this way?"**

The answer to that question changes everything. Before we ask what's wrong with this child, we should first consider that we may not yet understand what's happening.

Before deciding how to respond, effective educators pause and work through a thoughtful process of elimination. Rather than assuming a child is simply "misbehaving," they systematically consider several possible explanations for the behavior. By asking a series of reflective questions, educators move beyond reacting to behavior and begin understanding it (WestEd & California Department of Education, 2004). As they eliminate one possibility after another, they narrow the range of explanations and identify the factor, or combination of factors, most likely contributing to the behavior. This process helps them select guidance strategies that address the underlying cause rather than simply reacting to the behavior itself.

Because behavior is complex, more than one factor may contribute to a child's actions. The goal is not to diagnose the child but to better understand the child's needs so that guidance is thoughtful, responsive, and effective (Neugebauer, 2005). Throughout this chapter, we will explore five possible causes of children's behavior.

One of the most common mistakes beginning educators make is focusing only on what a child is doing rather than why the behavior is occurring. Describing a child as "biting," "hitting," or "throwing toys" identifies the behavior, but it does not explain its cause. Behavior is communication (Neugebauer, 2005).

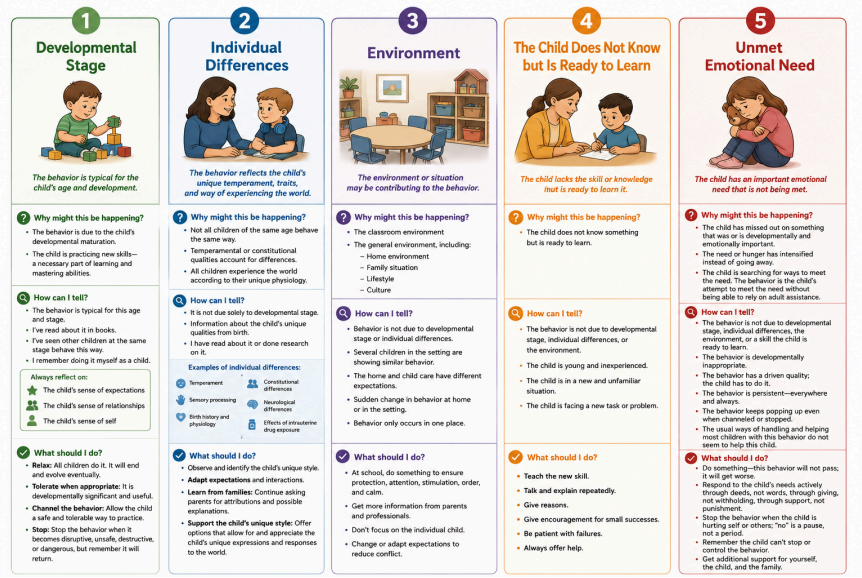
Challenging behavior rarely has a single cause. Children's behavior is influenced by many factors, including their developmental stage, individual characteristics, environment, learning experiences, and emotional needs. When educators understand the underlying cause of behavior, they are better able to respond with empathy, intentionality, and developmentally appropriate guidance rather than frustration or punishment (Neugebauer, 2005).

As you read through this chapter, use the following five questions as a guide. They provide a simple framework for thinking through children's behavior before deciding how to respond.

Ask Yourself

1. Is it developmental?
2. Is it an individual difference?
3. Is it the environment?
4. Is it a skill that hasn't been learned yet?
5. Is it an unmet emotional need?

These five questions form an embedded process of elimination. As one explanation becomes less likely, educators continue asking questions until they identify the cause, or combination of causes, most likely contributing to the child's behavior.



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10.3: Five Possible Causes of Behavior

1. The Developmental Stage

Children's behavior is closely connected to their developmental stage. Behaviors that seem frustrating to adults are often normal expressions of healthy development. Before deciding how to respond, educators should ask, "Is this child trying to meet a developmental need?"
Responding appropriately requires understanding what children are capable of doing at different ages and recognizing that many behaviors reflect normal developmental processes rather than intentional misbehavior.

When educators understand the developmental purpose behind a behavior, they can often redirect the behavior into a more appropriate activity rather than simply trying to stop it.

Why Is This Happening? (Possible cause)

The behavior may reflect the child's developmental stage. As children mature, they naturally spend time practicing newly emerging skills. The behavior may be the child's way of practicing a newly emerging skill. Whether children are climbing, dumping, carrying, repeating words, testing limits, or insisting on doing things independently, they are strengthening new abilities through repetition. Practice is a necessary part of mastery in human development. What may appear to be repetitive, messy, or inefficient is often an important part of the learning process.

What Are the Clues?

The next step is to determine whether the behavior is consistent with normal development. Before assuming a child is intentionally misbehaving, educators should look for evidence that the behavior is typical for the child's age and developmental stage.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is this behavior common for children at this age and developmental stage?**
- Have I learned about this behavior through child development courses, textbooks, or professional training?
- Have I observed other children at this developmental stage behaving in similar ways?
- Can I remember engaging in similar behaviors when I was a child?

The PITC framework also encourages educators to reflect on three additional questions that can deepen their understanding of the child's behavior:

- What does this behavior tell me about the child's sense of expectations?
- What does this behavior tell me about the child's sense of relationships?
- What does this behavior tell me about the child's sense of self?

These questions encourage educators to go beyond identifying the behavior and consider what it may reveal about the child's developing understanding of the world. Children's earliest relationships shape how they view themselves, other people, and what they expect from future interactions. These expectations are formed over time through repeated experiences with caregivers and other important adults.

What does this behavior tell me about the child's sense of expectations?

Children gradually develop expectations based on their previous experiences. If adults have consistently responded with warmth, patience, and reliability, children often expect others to respond in similar ways. Conversely, children who have experienced inconsistent, harsh, or unpredictable care may come to expect rejection, criticism, or disappointment. These expectations influence how children approach new situations and relationships.

What does this behavior tell me about the child's sense of relationships?

Children learn about relationships through their everyday interactions with caregivers. They discover whether adults are trustworthy, whether their needs will be met, and whether they can depend on others for comfort, guidance, and protection. Behavior often reflects what children have learned about relationships rather than simply what they know about rules or expectations.

What does this behavior tell me about the child's sense of self?

Children develop their sense of self through their interactions with caring adults. The way educators respond to children's ideas, questions, efforts, mistakes, and emotions helps shape how children see themselves. Supportive, respectful interactions foster confidence, competence, and a willingness to explore and learn. Repeated criticism, rejection, or indifference can influence how children view their own abilities and worth.

These reflective questions encourage educators to look beyond the behavior itself and consider what the child may be experiencing, learning, or communicating through the behavior.

How Should Educators Respond?

When behavior is developmentally appropriate, the goal is not to eliminate it but to respond in ways that support healthy development while maintaining a safe and respectful learning environment. Educators should consider the following guidance strategies.

Relax. Recognize that many behaviors are a normal part of development. Although they may be inconvenient or frustrating, they are often temporary and will change as children mature.

Tolerate When Appropriate. Some behaviors are developmentally significant and support learning. When they are safe and respectful of others, allowing children to practice these behaviors can promote healthy development.

Channel the Behavior. Rather than simply stopping a developmentally appropriate behavior, look for ways to redirect the child's developmental need into a safe and appropriate activity. When educators understand the purpose behind a behavior, they can often provide an alternative experience that supports the same developmental goal.

Example

An 8-month-old repeatedly throws food from a highchair onto the floor. While adults may view this as messy or intentionally defiant, the child is often exploring an important cognitive concept known as object permanence. As infants begin to understand that objects continue to exist even when they can no longer see them, they naturally enjoy watching objects disappear and then reappear. Throwing food from the highchair allows the child to observe what happens when an object falls out of sight and is retrieved.

Instead of responding with frustration, educators can redirect this developmental need through games that support the same concept. Playing peekaboo, hiding a teddy bear under a blanket, or placing toys beneath a cloth for the child to find all provide opportunities to practice object permanence in ways that are engaging, developmentally appropriate, and less disruptive than throwing food.

Similar strategies can be used with other developmentally appropriate behaviors. A child who enjoys climbing can be directed to safe climbing equipment outdoors, while a child who repeatedly dumps containers can be given opportunities to fill and empty appropriate sensory bins or containers during play.

Stop the Behavior When Necessary. Intervene when a behavior becomes unsafe, destructive, or seriously disruptive. Remember, however, that stopping the behavior does not eliminate the underlying developmental need. The child will likely continue seeking opportunities to practice the emerging skill in more appropriate ways.

2. Individual Differences

Not all children of the same age think, feel, learn, or respond in the same ways. While child development provides a general roadmap of what children are capable of at different ages, it does not predict how every child will behave. Before deciding how to respond, educators should ask, “Could this behavior reflect the child’s unique characteristics rather than a developmental stage?”

Recognizing individual differences requires educators to move beyond age-based expectations and appreciate that every child experiences the world differently. Behaviors that are challenging for one child may not be difficult for another because children differ in temperament, sensory processing, neurological functioning, physiology, and life experiences.

When educators understand a child’s individual characteristics, they are better able to adapt the environment, adjust their expectations, and respond in ways that support each child’s unique strengths and needs.

Why Is This Happening? (Possible cause)

One possible explanation is that the behavior reflects the child’s individual differences rather than developmental stage. Although children follow similar developmental sequences, they do not all develop or respond in the same way. Each child brings a unique combination of temperament, constitutional qualities, physiology, and life experiences that influence how they experience and respond to the world. Constitutional qualities are the inborn physical and biological characteristics that influence how children experience and respond to the world. These may include differences in activity level, sensitivity to sensory input, health, neurological functioning, and other biological factors that are present from birth.

Some children naturally seek movement and excitement, while others prefer quiet, predictable environments. Some are highly sensitive to noise, touch, or changes in routine, while others adapt easily to new experiences. These differences are not signs that something is wrong. They are part of the normal variation found among children.

Understanding these individual differences helps educators recognize that the same classroom environment may be experienced very differently by different children.

What Are the clues?

The next step is to determine whether the behavior reflects the child’s unique characteristics rather than developmental stage alone. While developmental milestones provide a general guide, educators should remember that children of the same age can respond very differently to the same experiences.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is this behavior explained by the child’s developmental stage?**
- Has the child’s family shared information about characteristics that have been present since birth?
- Have I learned through research, professional training, or observation that this behavior may be related to the child’s individual differences?

When considering individual differences, educators should also reflect on several factors that may influence behavior.

Temperament. Does the child’s natural style of interacting with the world help explain the behavior? For example, is the child naturally more cautious, highly active, slow to warm up, or emotionally intense?

Constitutional Differences. Could the behavior be influenced by the child’s inborn biological or physical characteristics?

Sensory Processing. Is the child seeking sensory input, avoiding certain sensations, or becoming overwhelmed by sounds, lights, textures, movement, or touch?

Neurological Differences. Could neurological development or neurodiversity be influencing how the child learns, communicates, regulates emotions, or interacts with others?

Birth History and Physiology. Are there prenatal, birth, or medical factors that may influence the child’s behavior or development?

Executive Functioning. Could differences in executive functioning be influencing the child's behavior? Executive functioning refers to the mental processes that help children regulate their thoughts, emotions, and actions. These skills include attention, working memory, impulse control, flexible thinking, planning, organization, and self-regulation. Children with less developed executive functioning skills may need additional support to manage emotions, follow directions, transition between activities, solve problems, and control their impulses.

Effects of Intrauterine Drug Exposure. When prenatal exposure to alcohol or other substances is known, educators should consider how these prenatal experiences may influence behavior, learning, attention, sensory processing, self-regulation, and executive functioning. Understanding conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders helps educators interpret behavior through a developmental lens and respond with appropriate supports rather than punishment.

These factors rarely provide immediate answers, but they offer important clues that help educators to look beyond the behavior itself and consider the whole child. Understanding individual differences helps educators respond with empathy, flexibility, and appropriate support rather than expecting every child to respond in the same way.

How Should Educators Respond?

When behavior reflects a child's individual differences, the goal is not to change who the child is but to understand how the child experiences the world. Effective educators recognize that children do not all learn, communicate, or respond in the same way. Rather than expecting every child to fit a single approach, educators adapt their interactions and environments to support each child's unique strengths and needs.

Observe and identify the child's unique style. Take time to carefully observe the child's behavior across different situations and settings. Look for patterns in how the child responds to people, activities, transitions, sensory experiences, and changes in routine. Observation provides valuable information about the child's individual characteristics and helps educators make thoughtful decisions rather than relying on assumptions.

Adapt expectations and interactions. Once educators understand a child's individual differences, they can adjust their expectations and interactions accordingly. For example, a child who is slow to warm up may need additional time before joining a new activity, while a highly active child may benefit from more opportunities for movement throughout the day. Adapting expectations does not lower standards; it provides equitable support so that each child can be successful.

Learn from families. Families are experts on their own children. Continue asking parents and caregivers about the child's temperament, interests, sensitivities, routines, strengths, and developmental history. Families can often provide valuable insights and possible explanations that help educators better understand a child's behavior and respond more effectively.

Support the child's unique style. Rather than trying to change who the child is, provide choices and opportunities that honor the child's individual way of experiencing the world. Some children need quiet spaces to recharge, while others seek movement or sensory experiences. By appreciating and supporting individual differences, educators create inclusive learning environments where all children can thrive.

Example

Two 3-year-olds are invited to participate in finger painting. One eagerly plunges both hands into the paint, while the other hesitates and refuses to touch it. Rather than assuming the second child is being uncooperative, the educator recognizes that the child may have sensory sensitivities. Offering a paintbrush, sponge, or gloves allows the child to participate in the activity while respecting their individual needs.

3. The Environment

Children's behavior does not occur in isolation. The environments in which children live, learn, and play have a powerful influence on how they think, feel, and behave. Before deciding how to respond, educators should ask, "Could the environment be contributing to this behavior?"

The environment includes much more than the physical classroom. It also encompasses the emotional climate, daily routines, relationships, family experiences, cultural expectations, and the many settings in which children spend their time. Sometimes a child's behavior is less about the child and more about the conditions surrounding the child.

When educators recognize the influence of the environment, they are better able to make thoughtful changes that reduce stress, increase success, and create conditions that support positive behavior.

Why Is This Happening? (Possible Cause)

One possible explanation is that the child's environment is contributing to the behavior. Environmental influences may be found in the classroom, at home, or within the child's broader community. Changes in routine, family stress, cultural expectations, noise levels, overcrowding, limited opportunities for movement, or inconsistent expectations between home and school can all influence children's behavior.

Sometimes the environment creates barriers that make appropriate behavior difficult. Other times, the environment simply does not match the child's developmental or individual needs. Before assuming the child needs to change, educators should consider whether the environment can be modified to better support the child's success.

What Are the Clues?

The next step is to determine whether something in the child's environment may be contributing to the behavior. Before focusing solely on the child, educators should consider whether the behavior changes across settings or whether other children are responding similarly.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is the behavior explained by more than the child's developmental stage or individual differences?**
- Are several children exhibiting similar behaviors?
- Does the behavior occur only in one setting or environment?
- Does the behavior occur only during specific activities, routines, or times of day?
- Have there been recent changes at home, at school, or in the child's daily routine?
- Do home and school have different expectations that may be confusing the child?

The Classroom Environment. Could noise, crowding, transitions, materials, schedules, or adult expectations be contributing to the behavior?

Behavior Occurs in Only One Place. If a behavior consistently occurs in one setting but not another, the environment may be contributing to the behavior. For example, a child who struggles only during circle time, only on the playground, only at child care, or only at home may be responding to something unique about that particular environment. Identifying where the behavior occurs can help educators determine what environmental factors may be influencing the child's behavior.

The Home Environment. Have there been recent changes in routines, family structure, housing, employment, illness, or other life events that may be affecting the child?

Lifestyle and Daily Experiences. Is the child getting adequate sleep, nutrition, opportunities for active play, and predictable routines?

Culture. Could differences in cultural expectations, communication styles, family practices, or caregiving beliefs be influencing the child's behavior or the educator's interpretation of the behavior?

How Should Educators Respond?

When behavior is influenced by the environment, the goal is not simply to change the child's behavior but to examine whether the environment itself can better support the child's success. Effective educators recognize that many challenging behaviors can be reduced by creating environments that are safe, engaging, predictable, and responsive to children's needs.

Ensure protection, attention, stimulation, order, and calm. Young children thrive in environments that feel physically and emotionally safe. Classrooms should provide opportunities for exploration and learning while also maintaining predictable routines, appropriate supervision, and a calm, organized atmosphere. When children feel secure and engaged, challenging behaviors often decrease naturally.

Gather additional information. Children's behavior is influenced by experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Continue communicating with families to learn about recent changes at home, family routines, health concerns, cultural practices, or stressful life events that may be affecting the child's behavior. When appropriate, collaborate with other professionals who know the child well to develop a more complete understanding of the situation.

Avoid focusing solely on the individual child. When several children are displaying similar behaviors, or when a behavior occurs only in one setting, the environment may be contributing to the problem. Rather than asking, *"What's wrong with this child or these children?"* ask, *"What is this environment communicating to the children?"*.

Modify the Environment. Before expecting children to change their behavior, consider whether the environment can be adjusted to better support success. Small changes to the classroom layout, schedule, materials, or routines often have a significant impact on children's behavior.

Example

Several children consistently run through the same area of the classroom. Rather than repeatedly reminding children to "Use your walking feet," the educator steps back and observes the environment. She notices that the arrangement of the furniture has unintentionally created a long, open pathway that naturally invites children to run.

Instead of focusing solely on correcting the children's behavior, the educator rearranges the classroom by adding low bookshelves, an area rug, and activity centers that break up the open space. The changes naturally encourage children to slow down and walk through the area. By modifying the environment, the educator reduces the behavior without constant reminders or discipline.

This is just one example of how thoughtful environmental changes can influence children's behavior. In Chapter 12, we will explore how classroom design, room arrangement, learning centers, and the physical environment can help prevent challenging behaviors and support children's learning.

Adapt Expectations to Reduce Conflict. Sometimes the environment cannot be changed completely, but expectations can be adjusted to better match children's developmental abilities and individual needs. Providing shorter waiting times, offering choices, reducing unnecessary transitions, or allowing additional time for challenging tasks can help prevent frustration and promote success.

4. The Child Does Not Know but Is Ready to Learn

Children are not born knowing how to solve conflicts, take turns, express their feelings, follow classroom routines, or cooperate with others. Many behaviors occur simply because children have not yet learned the knowledge or skills needed to respond differently. Before deciding how to respond, educators should ask, "Has this child been taught the skill I am expecting?"

Learning takes time, repetition, and guidance. Just because a child is developmentally capable of learning a new skill does not mean the child has already mastered it. Effective educators recognize that many challenging behaviors are opportunities for teaching rather than punishment.

When educators view behavior as a learning opportunity, they shift from asking, "How do I stop this behavior?" to asking, "What skill does this child need to learn?"

Why Is This Happening? (Possible Cause)

One possible explanation is that the child simply does not know what to do but is developmentally ready to learn. The child may be encountering a new situation, an unfamiliar routine, or a problem that requires skills that have not yet been taught.

Children are expected to learn many social, emotional, cognitive, and self-help skills during the early years. Skills such as taking turns, using words to solve conflicts, waiting patiently, following multi-step directions, and recognizing the feelings of others do not develop automatically. They must be modeled, taught, practiced, and reinforced over time.

Rather than assuming a child is refusing to cooperate, educators should consider whether the child has had enough opportunities to learn and practice the expected behavior.

What Are the Clues?

The next step is to determine whether the behavior reflects a lack of knowledge or experience rather than a developmental stage, individual difference, or environmental influence.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is the behavior explained by the child's developmental stage, individual differences, or the environment?**
- Has the child been explicitly taught the expected behavior or skill?
- Is this a new situation, routine, or expectation?
- Is the child inexperienced with this activity or problem?
- Has the child had enough opportunities to practice the skill?
- Would additional modeling, guidance, or encouragement likely improve the behavior?

How Should Educators Respond?

When behavior occurs because a child does not yet know a skill, the educator's role is to teach rather than punish. Instead of assuming the child is being intentionally difficult, effective educators recognize that learning takes time, patience, repetition, and practice. Guidance becomes an opportunity to teach the skills children need to be successful.

Teach the New Skill. Rather than simply telling children what not to do, teach them what to do instead. Children need explicit instruction in social, emotional, communication, and self-help skills. Model the desired behavior, provide opportunities for practice, and offer support as children develop new skills.

Talk and Explain Repeatedly. Young children rarely learn a new skill after hearing it only once. Explain expectations in simple, age-appropriate language, demonstrate the desired behavior, and provide frequent reminders. Consistent repetition helps children gradually understand what is expected.

Give Reasons. Children are more likely to cooperate when they understand the purpose behind a rule or expectation. Instead of saying, "Because I said so," explain why the behavior is important. For example, "We walk inside so everyone stays safe," or "We use gentle hands because hitting hurts our friends."

Encourage Small Successes. Learning new skills is a gradual process. Recognize and celebrate small steps toward success, even when the child has not yet mastered the skill. Positive encouragement builds confidence and motivates children to continue practicing.

Be Patient with Mistakes. Mistakes are a natural part of learning. Rather than expecting immediate success, recognize that children will need many opportunities to practice before a new skill becomes consistent. Responding calmly to mistakes helps children feel safe enough to keep trying.

Always Offer Help. Some children need additional guidance, encouragement, or support while learning a new skill. Offer assistance when needed, provide opportunities to practice together, and gradually reduce support as the child's confidence and independence increase.

Example

A 3-year-old repeatedly grabs toys from other children during free play. Instead of assuming the child is being selfish or defiant, the educator considers whether the child has learned an appropriate way to join play or ask for a turn.

Rather than repeatedly saying, "Don't grab," the educator models the words, "Can I have a turn when you're finished?" and helps the child practice asking peers appropriately. The educator provides reminders, offers encouragement when the child attempts the new skill, and patiently supports the child through repeated opportunities to practice. Over time, grabbing decreases as the child develops a more effective way to communicate needs.

5. Unmet Emotional Need

Some behaviors cannot be fully explained by a child's developmental stage, individual differences, environment, or lack of knowledge. Instead, they may reflect an unmet emotional need. Before deciding how to respond, educators should ask**, "Could this behavior be the child's attempt to meet an emotional need?"**

Children depend on caring relationships to develop a sense of safety, trust, belonging, and emotional security. When important emotional needs are not consistently met, children often communicate those needs through their behavior. Rather than viewing the behavior as a problem to eliminate, educators should consider what the child may be trying to communicate.

Understanding unmet emotional needs helps educators respond with empathy, patience, and relationship-based guidance rather than relying solely on correction or consequences.

Why Is This Happening? (Possible Cause)

One possible explanation is that the child has missed out on something that was, or continues to be, developmentally and emotionally important. Rather than disappearing over time, the unmet need often becomes stronger. The child continues searching for ways to satisfy that need, even when those attempts appear confusing, disruptive, or challenging to adults.

Rather than fading with time, the unmet need often intensifies. Like physical hunger, emotional hunger does not simply disappear when it is ignored. Children continue searching for ways to meet the need, and their behavior often reflects that search.

In many cases, the behavior itself is the child's attempt to meet the unmet need without being able to rely on adult assistance. The child is not necessarily choosing the behavior because it is effective or appropriate. Instead, the behavior represents the child's best effort to obtain comfort, connection, attention, security, or a sense of control.

Children's emotional needs may go unmet for many reasons. Some children have experienced inconsistent caregiving, disrupted attachment relationships, neglect, trauma, chronic stress, or other adverse childhood experiences. Others may have experienced repeated losses, frequent moves, family instability, or prolonged separations from important caregivers. Although some children with unmet emotional needs have experienced trauma or neglect, behavior alone cannot determine the **underlying** cause. Educators should avoid making assumptions and instead focus on providing consistent, caring relationships while following program policies and mandated reporting **requirements** whenever there is reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect. Regardless of the cause, children continue searching for ways to meet these important developmental and emotional needs.

Secure attachment relationships help children develop trust, emotional security, and resilience. When adults consistently respond with warmth, sensitivity, and predictability, children gradually learn that their needs will be met and that the world is a safe place to explore and learn. When these experiences are inconsistent or absent, children's behavior often reflects their continuing search for safety, security, and connection.

Some children attempt to meet these needs through behaviors such as excessive attention seeking, controlling behavior, hoarding food or toys, rocking, repetitive movements, thumb sucking, or other self-soothing behaviors. Rather than asking, *"How do I stop this behavior?"* educators should first ask, *"What emotional need might this child be trying to meet?"*

What Are the Clues?

The next step is to determine whether the behavior reflects an unmet emotional need rather than one of the previous explanations. Before reaching this conclusion, educators should first consider whether the behavior is better explained by the child's developmental stage, individual differences, the environment, or because the child does not yet know the expected skill.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is this behavior explained by the child's developmental stage, individual differences, the environment, or because the child does not yet know the expected skill?**
- Is the behavior developmentally inappropriate for the child's age?
- Does the behavior seem unusually driven or compulsive, as though the child feels compelled to do it?
- Does the behavior occur across settings and with different adults?
- Does the behavior continue even after it has been redirected, channeled, or stopped?

- Have the usual guidance strategies that work with most children had little or no effect?

The following clues may suggest that the child's behavior reflects a deeper emotional need rather than a temporary developmental challenge or a lack of knowledge.

The behavior is developmentally inappropriate. The child is behaving in ways that are not typical for the child's age or developmental level.

The behavior has a driven quality. The child appears compelled to engage in the behavior, even when it results in negative consequences or repeated correction.

The behavior is persistent. Rather than occurring only occasionally or in one setting, the behavior appears across different environments, with different adults, and over an extended period of time.

The behavior keeps returning. Even after the behavior has been redirected, channeled into an appropriate activity, or temporarily stopped, it continues to reappear.

Typical guidance strategies have little effect. The approaches that successfully help most children do not seem to change this child's behavior. Despite consistent guidance and support, the underlying behavior continues.

These clues do not diagnose an emotional problem. Instead, they encourage educators to look more deeply at what the child may be communicating through the behavior and to consider whether an unmet emotional need may be contributing to the child's actions.

How Should Educators Respond?

When behavior reflects an unmet emotional need, traditional guidance strategies alone are often not enough. Rather than expecting the behavior to disappear with time, effective educators recognize that unmet emotional needs require consistent, caring, relationship-based responses. The goal is not simply to stop the behavior but to help meet the underlying need that is driving it.

Take Action. Unlike many developmentally appropriate behaviors that fade as children mature, behaviors that stem from unmet emotional needs often become more intense over time if the underlying need is not addressed. Early, thoughtful intervention can help prevent these patterns from becoming more deeply established.

Respond Through Relationships. Children with unmet emotional needs require more than explanations or repeated reminders. They need caring adults who consistently respond through their actions as well as their words. As the PITC framework reminds us, educators should respond to children's needs **through deeds, not words; through giving, not withholding; through support, not punishment.**

Demonstrate patience, reliability, encouragement, affection when appropriate, and genuine emotional availability. Meeting children's needs through supportive relationships helps build trust, security, and resilience.

This idea may seem counterintuitive at first. When children display challenging behaviors, adults often respond by taking something away, such as a favorite toy, a privilege, an activity, or time with friends. While these approaches may temporarily stop a behavior, they do not meet the underlying emotional need that is driving it.

Trying to meet an unmet emotional need through withholding is like trying to climb out of a hole by continuing to dig. The strategy intended to solve the problem actually makes it deeper. If a child is searching for security, connection, acceptance, or belonging, taking away valued experiences or relationships does not satisfy that need. Instead, the emotional need often intensifies, and the challenging behavior may become even more persistent.

This does not mean that educators should ignore unsafe or inappropriate behavior. Children still need clear limits, consistent expectations, and immediate intervention when someone is at risk of being hurt. However, once the behavior has been stopped, the educator's work is not finished. The next step is to ask, "What emotional need is this child trying to meet, and how can I help meet that need in a healthy, appropriate way?"

Stop Unsafe Behavior, but Continue Supporting the Child. When children are hurting themselves or others, educators must intervene immediately to ensure everyone's safety. Stopping the behavior is essential, but it does not eliminate the unmet

emotional need that is driving it. Once the immediate danger has passed, educators continue the work of helping the child meet that need in healthier, more appropriate ways.

Remember That the Child May Not Be Able to Stop. Children experiencing unmet emotional needs often lack the emotional regulation or internal resources needed to control the behavior on their own. Rather than assuming the child is choosing to misbehave, consider that the behavior may reflect an attempt to cope with overwhelming feelings or unmet needs.

Seek Additional Support. Some emotional needs require support beyond what a single educator can provide. Work collaboratively with families, colleagues, administrators, early intervention specialists, mental health consultants, or other professionals when appropriate. Supporting children with significant emotional needs is most effective when caring adults work together.

Two Examples

Example 1: Hoarding Food

A 4-year-old regularly hides crackers, fruit, and other snack items in pockets or a backpack before leaving the classroom. The educator first considers the possible causes of the behavior. The child is old enough to understand classroom expectations, has demonstrated the ability to follow other routines, and has been taught that food stays at the table. The behavior does not appear to be explained by the child's developmental stage, individual differences, the classroom environment, or a lack of knowledge.

After talking with the family, the educator learns that the child previously experienced food insecurity. Rather than assuming the child is stealing or being dishonest, the educator recognizes that the behavior may reflect an unmet need for security. The child's actions are an attempt to ensure that food will be available later.

Instead of punishing the child or taking the food away, the educator works with the family to develop a supportive plan. The child is consistently reassured that food will always be available at school, snack routines become predictable, and caring adults respond with patience and understanding. Over time, as the child's sense of security grows, the hoarding behavior gradually decreases.

Example 2: A Child Who Constantly Follows the Teacher

A 3-year-old follows the teacher throughout the day, becomes distressed whenever the teacher leaves the room, and repeatedly asks, "Are you coming back?" At first, the educator wonders whether the child simply needs to become more independent. However, after considering the possible causes, the educator determines that the behavior is not explained by the child's developmental stage, individual differences, the classroom environment, or a lack of knowledge.

After learning more about the child's recent experiences, the educator discovers that the child has experienced several changes in caregivers and family routines. Rather than viewing the behavior as clingy or attention-seeking, the educator recognizes that the child may be searching for security, predictability, and a trusting relationship with a caring adult.

Instead of telling the child to "be a big kid" or discouraging the child from seeking reassurance, the educator responds with warmth, consistency, and predictability. The educator lets the child know when he will leave the room and when he will return, follows through on his promises, and gradually encourages short periods of independent play while remaining emotionally available. As the child's trust grows and the classroom becomes a predictable, secure environment, the child's anxiety decreases and confidence begins to grow.

Conclusion

Understanding children's behavior does not excuse inappropriate behavior, but it does help educators respond more effectively. Rather than reacting to what they see on the surface, thoughtful educators look beneath the behavior to understand the child's developmental needs, individual characteristics, environment, learning experiences, circumstances, and emotional needs (Neugebauer, 2005).

By working through the five possible causes of behavior, educators learn to pause before reacting. They ask thoughtful questions, eliminate unlikely explanations, and select guidance strategies that address the underlying cause rather than simply the behavior itself. This reflective process helps educators respond with empathy, teach new skills, make supportive environmental changes,

and build trusting relationships that promote healthy development.

Every behavior tells a story. The educator's responsibility is not simply to stop the behavior, but to understand what the behavior may be communicating.

Ultimately, effective guidance is not about controlling children's behavior. It is about understanding what children are communicating through their behavior and responding in ways that support their growth, learning, and well-being. When educators begin by asking, "Why is this child behaving this way?" they are better prepared to provide guidance that is thoughtful, responsive, and developmentally appropriate.

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10.4: Chapter Vocabulary

Developmental-stage behavior: Behavior that reflects a child's age, developmental abilities, or need to practice a newly emerging skill.

Individual differences: Variations in temperament, sensory processing, physiology, neurodevelopment, executive functioning, and life experiences that influence how children respond to the world.

Environmental influences: Physical, social, emotional, cultural, and situational conditions that can affect children's feelings, actions, and behavior.

The child does not know but is ready to learn: A possible cause of behavior in which a child is developmentally capable of learning an expected skill but has not yet received sufficient teaching, modeling, or practice.

Unmet emotional need: A need for security, connection, trust, acceptance, belonging, comfort, or control that a child may be attempting to communicate or satisfy through behavior.

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10.5: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **WestEd: Program for Infant/Toddler Care/links to an external source:** Provides information about PITC's research-based, relationship-centered approach to understanding infants' and toddlers' development, communication, behavior, and caregiving needs.
- **Head Start: Behavior Has Meaning/links to an external source:** Explains why behavior should be understood as communication and provides strategies for interpreting children's needs, intentions, and emotions.
- **Head Start: Infant and Toddler Behaviors That Can Challenge Adults/links to an external source:** Examines developmental reasons for behaviors adults may find challenging and emphasizes how adults' experiences, cultures, and beliefs influence their interpretations and responses.
- **NAEYC: Building Environments That Encourage Positive Behavior/links to an external source:** Describes how responsive relationships, predictable routines, classroom arrangements, transitions, and environmental supports can encourage positive behavior and reduce difficulties.

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10.6: References

Neugebauer, B. (Ed.). (2005). *Behavior: A beginnings workshop book*. Exchange Press, Inc.

WestEd & California Department of Education. (2004). *The Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers trainer's manual: Module 1: Social-emotional growth and socialization*. California Department of Education.

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11: GUIDANCE

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11.1: Chapter Introduction



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 11.1:** Differentiate guidance from discipline and explain how each can teach responsibility, self-control, and appropriate social behavior without relying on punishment.
- **SLO 11.2:** Discuss the Plan, Practice, Promote framework and other preventive strategies to create supportive environments, teach classroom expectations, and reduce challenging behavior.
- **SLO 11.3:** Identify developmentally appropriate guidance strategies, including modeling, coaching, redirection, choices, encouragement, reinforcement, and natural or logical consequences.
- **SLO 11.4:** Identify objective documentation and the ABC Observation Method to identify behavioral patterns and contribute to collaborative, individualized Behavior Support Plans.

Chapter 11 Short Overview

This chapter presents guidance as an intentional teaching process that helps children develop self-control, responsibility, empathy, communication, and social competence. It examines proactive practices such as Plan, Practice, Promote, supportive environments, positive relationships, classroom expectations, smooth transitions, and developmentally appropriate guidance strategies. The chapter also explains how objective observation, the ABC Observation Method, family collaboration, and individualized Behavior Support Plans can address persistent challenging behavior.

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11.2: What Is Guidance?



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Guidance is one of the most important responsibilities of an early childhood educator. Every day, educators help children learn how to interact with others, express their emotions appropriately, solve problems, follow expectations, and become responsible members of their classroom community. Rather than simply correcting inappropriate behavior, effective guidance teaches children the social and emotional skills they need to be successful throughout life (Fields & Boesser, 1998; Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

As discussed in Chapter 10, young children are not born with the knowledge of how to share, take turns, manage frustration, or solve conflicts peacefully. These skills develop gradually through caring relationships, intentional teaching, practice, and encouragement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; NAEYC, 2020). Guidance recognizes that challenging behavior is often an opportunity for learning rather than a reason for punishment. Every interaction provides an opportunity to teach children more appropriate ways to communicate their needs, regulate their emotions, and interact respectfully with others (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Gartrell, 2017).

Guidance Versus Discipline

Although the terms guidance and discipline are often used interchangeably, they are not the same (Fields & Boesser, 1998; Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Gartrell, 2017).

Guidance is proactive. It focuses on preventing challenging behavior before it occurs by teaching expectations, creating supportive environments, modeling appropriate behavior, and helping children develop the skills they need to make positive choices. Guidance occurs continuously throughout the day and not only when problems arise (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Discipline, on the other hand, is reactive. It occurs after a rule or expectation has been broken and involves responding to the behavior in ways that help children learn from their mistakes. Effective discipline is not about punishment or control. Instead, it is about helping children understand the impact of their actions, repair relationships when appropriate, and learn better ways to respond in the future (Gartrell, 2017; NAEYC, 2020).

In high-quality early childhood programs, guidance and discipline work together. Educators spend far more time preventing challenging behavior through guidance than responding to misbehavior through discipline (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Guidance versus Discipline

Guidance	Discipline
Proactive	Reactive

Teaches expectations	Responds after expectations have not been met
Prevents challenging behavior	Responds to challenging behavior
Teaches social-emotional skills	Helps children learn from mistakes
Focuses on building competence	Focuses on restoring responsibility
Occurs throughout the day	Occurs after expectations have not been met

The Purpose of Guidance

The ultimate purpose of guidance is not to gain children's obedience; it is to help children develop self-control, responsibility, empathy, and the ability to make thoughtful decisions independently. Effective guidance creates classroom communities where children feel safe, respected, and capable of learning from both their successes and their mistakes (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Guidance also supports every area of children's development. When children feel emotionally secure and understand classroom expectations, they are better able to participate in learning experiences, build friendships, solve problems, and develop confidence in their own abilities (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; NAEYC, 2020). Over time, the goal is for children to rely less on adult reminders and increasingly regulate their own behavior, demonstrating the social and emotional skills they have learned through consistent guidance (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

An Example of Guidance

The class is preparing to go outside for recess. Before opening the door, the teacher gathers the children together and says, "Remember, we use walking feet until we reach the playground. Let's practice together." The children walk through the hallway while the teacher notices and praises them for following the expectation by saying, "I see everyone using walking feet. That helps keep us all safe."

This is guidance because the teacher is teaching expectations (reminding them of the rules), practicing the desired behavior, and preventing problems before they occur.

The Purpose of Discipline

The purpose of discipline is not to punish children or force obedience. Instead, discipline is intended to teach children responsibility, self-control, and appropriate ways to behave within a community. Effective discipline helps children understand the connection between their actions and their consequences while providing opportunities to learn, grow, and make better choices in the future. When used appropriately, discipline preserves children's dignity and strengthens relationships rather than creating fear or shame (Gartrell, 2017; NAEYC, 2020).

In early childhood education, discipline should always be instructional rather than punitive. It provides children with guidance after expectations have not been met by helping them reflect on their behavior, repair relationships when appropriate, and practice more appropriate responses. The ultimate goal is for children to internalize positive behaviors so they can make responsible decisions independently, even when adults are not present. Effective discipline is most successful when it is delivered with consistency, empathy, respect, and a genuine commitment to helping children succeed (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

An Example of Discipline

While walking to the playground, one child begins running down the hallway despite the reminder. The teacher calmly stops the child and says, “Remember, our classroom rule is to use walking feet inside. Running in the hallway is not safe because someone could get hurt. Let’s go back and try again using walking feet.”

The child returns to the starting point and practices walking safely with the teacher.

This is discipline because the teacher is responding after the rule has been broken. Rather than punishing the child, the teacher uses the situation as an opportunity to teach, practice the correct behavior, and reinforce the classroom expectation.

Preventing Challenging Behavior

One of the most effective ways to guide children’s behavior is to prevent unnecessary conflicts and challenging behaviors before they occur. Rather than waiting until children become upset or make poor choices, skilled educators intentionally create environments and experiences that encourage success. Through thoughtful planning, positive relationships, engaging activities, reminding the children of the expectations, and developmentally appropriate expectations, teachers can significantly reduce the number of behavior problems that occur throughout the day (Kostelnik et al., 2015; NAEYC, 2020).

Preventing challenging behavior does not mean eliminating every conflict or mistake. Children are still learning and will occasionally make poor choices as they develop new skills. However, when educators create supportive environments and intentionally teach expectations, children are more likely to experience success and less likely to engage in behaviors that interfere with learning or relationships.

Plan, Practice, Promote

An effective guidance plan begins long before challenging behavior occurs. Educators can proactively teach positive behavior by providing repeated opportunities for children to practice new skills, and by acknowledging appropriate behaviors when they occur. Young children learn through repetition, modeling, encouragement, descriptive feedback, and meaningful opportunities to practice new skills (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Educational Productions Inc. (1999) describes a simple yet effective three-step framework for preventing discipline problems: **Plan, Practice, Promote**. Educators first identify the specific positive behaviors they want children to learn. They then provide repeated opportunities for children to practice those behaviors through modeling, rehearsal, and daily routines. Finally, they promote positive behavior by recognizing and acknowledging children’s successful efforts through specific, descriptive feedback.

Plan. Think ahead about the behaviors you want children to learn. Identify a few clear expectations, arrange the environment to support success, anticipate situations that may be difficult, and prepare children before new activities or transitions.

Practice. Young children learn through repetition. They need many opportunities to practice classroom routines, social skills, and behavioral expectations before they are expected to perform them independently. Practice can include role-playing, modeling, games, songs, stories, and repeated daily routines.

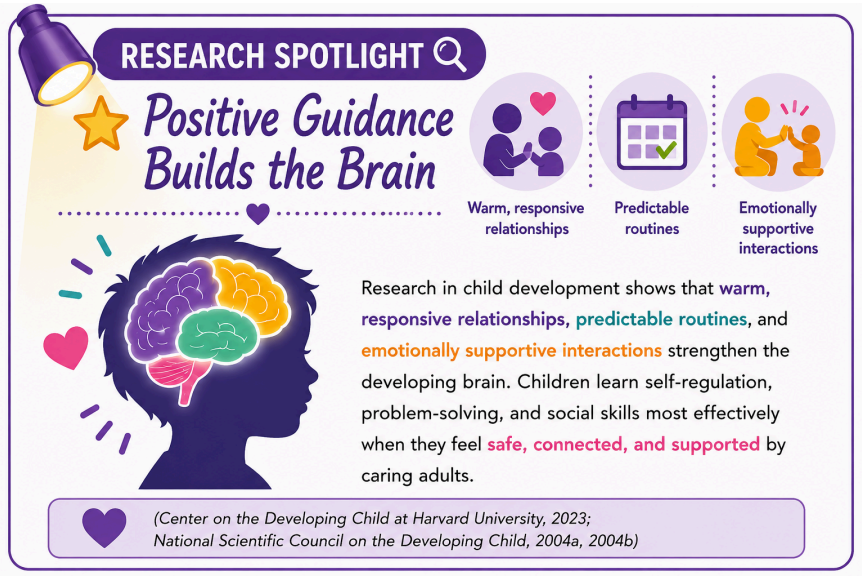
Promote. Notice and acknowledge children’s positive behavior. Specific encouragement helps children understand exactly what they are doing well. Instead of saying, “Good job,” an educator might say, “You waited patiently for your turn,” or “You remembered to use your walking feet in the hallway.” Descriptive feedback helps children understand which behaviors are expected and encourages them to repeat those behaviors (Educational Productions Inc., 1999).

Creating an Environment for Success

The classroom environment plays a powerful role in children’s behavior. Well-designed learning environments reduce frustration, encourage independence, and support positive interactions. Educators can prevent many challenging behaviors by ensuring there is adequate space for movement, clearly defined learning areas, organized and accessible materials, and enough equipment to reduce unnecessary conflict and competition while allowing children to engage successfully in play and learning. (Curtis & Carter, 2015; Dodge et al., 2010). Attractive, welcoming classrooms that are thoughtfully arranged invite children to explore, learn, and cooperate with others.

Building Positive Relationships

Positive guidance begins with trusting relationships. Children are more likely to follow expectations when they feel safe, respected, and emotionally connected to the adults who care for them. Taking time to know each child's personality, interests, strengths, and individual needs helps educators respond with empathy and understanding. Warm, responsive relationships help children develop trust, cooperation, and confidence while providing the foundation for social and emotional learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; NAEYC, 2020).



Keeping Children Engaged

Children who are actively engaged in meaningful learning experiences are less likely to become bored or disruptive. Providing interesting materials, developmentally appropriate activities, engaging learning opportunities, and meaningful choices promotes children's attention, motivation, and positive behavior (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Kostelnik et al., 2015). Educators should provide activities and materials that encourage exploration, movement, creativity, and problem solving. During waiting periods or transition times, simple strategies such as singing songs, blowing bubbles, fingerplays, conversation, or brief movement activities can keep children focused while reducing opportunities for challenging behavior.

Supporting Smooth Transitions

Transitions are often one of the most challenging parts of the day for young children. Moving from one activity to another requires children to stop what they are doing, shift their attention, and adjust to new expectations. Educators can support successful transitions by establishing predictable routines, providing advance warnings, using visual schedules, songs, or other visual supports, and keeping waiting time to a minimum. With repeated practice and consistent routines, children learn what to expect, become more confident and independent, and are less likely to experience frustration or engage in challenging behaviors during transitions (Dodge et al., 2010; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Using Teacher Proximity

Sometimes the simplest guidance strategy is just being nearby. Teacher proximity refers to intentionally positioning yourself close to children who may need additional support or encouragement. A nearby teacher can often prevent conflicts before they escalate through gentle reminders, positive encouragement, eye contact, or quiet redirection. Children are also more likely to remain engaged and follow expectations when they know a caring adult is present and available to help (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003).

Meeting Children's Needs

Children's behavior is influenced by their physical, emotional, and developmental needs. Hunger, fatigue, illness, overstimulation, frustration, or a need for connection can all affect a child's ability to cooperate and regulate behavior. Effective educators consider children's unmet needs and respond with empathy while creating supportive environments that promote healthy development (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2015; Maslow, 1943). By creating nurturing environments and responding to children's individual needs with patience and empathy, educators build the foundation for positive behavior and healthy development.

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11.3: Establishing Classroom Expectations

A well-managed classroom begins with clear, consistent expectations. Children are more successful when they understand what is expected of them and why those expectations are important. Rather than assuming children know how to behave in a group setting, effective educators intentionally teach classroom expectations, provide opportunities for practice, and offer gentle reminders and encouragement throughout the day. Clear expectations create a predictable learning environment where children feel safe, confident, and capable of making positive choices (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Why Children Need Rules

Rules provide children with a sense of safety, structure, and predictability. They help children understand how to behave in ways that protect themselves, respect others, and care for their learning environment. Rather than limiting children's freedom, appropriate classroom rules create the conditions that allow children to explore, play, and learn successfully within a caring community (Gartrell, 2017; NAEYC, 2020).

Young children are still learning how to cooperate, wait, share, solve problems, and manage their emotions. Classroom rules provide a consistent framework that helps children understand what behaviors are expected while supporting the development of self-control and responsibility. Over time, children begin to internalize these expectations and rely less on adult reminders as they become more independent (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Characteristics of Effective Rules

Effective classroom rules are simple, positive, and developmentally appropriate. Rather than creating long lists of "don'ts," educators should focus on a small number of positively stated expectations that children can easily understand and remember. Most early childhood classrooms function well with three to five broad rules that are reinforced consistently throughout the day.

Effective classroom rules should:

- Be stated positively whenever possible.
- Be simple and easy for children to understand.
- Focus on behaviors children can successfully demonstrate.
- Promote safety, kindness, and responsibility.
- Be taught, practiced, and reinforced regularly.
- Be applied consistently and fairly.

For example, as discussed in Chapter 9, instead of saying, "Don't run," a teacher might say, "Use walking feet indoors." Instead of "Don't yell," children can be encouraged to "Use quiet voices inside." Positive wording tells children exactly what they should do rather than focusing on what they should avoid (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Gartrell, 2017).

The "I Care Rules"

One example of a positive classroom rule system is the I Care Rules, introduced in the educational video *Starting Small* (Teaching Tolerance, 1997). Rather than focusing on a long list of specific behaviors, the I Care Rules emphasize kindness, empathy, responsibility, and respect. Because they are broad, positive, and easy to remember, they provide children with a foundation for making thoughtful decisions in a variety of situations.

The Five I Care Rules Are:

1. We listen to each other.
2. Hands are for helping, not hurting.
3. We use I Care language.
4. We care about each other's feelings.

5. We are responsible for what we say and do.

These simple expectations encourage children to think beyond rule compliance and consider how their words and actions affect others. Rather than memorizing numerous classroom rules, children learn a small set of guiding principles that can be applied across many situations. For example, if a conflict arises over sharing materials, children can reflect on whether they are listening to one another, using kind words, considering each other's feelings, and taking responsibility for their actions.

Some educators choose to adopt the I Care Rules exactly as they are presented, while others adapt them to reflect the needs and values of their own classroom community. Whether educators develop classroom expectations collaboratively with children or adopt an existing framework such as the I Care Rules, the ultimate goal remains the same: to create a safe, respectful, and caring learning environment where children can develop self-control, empathy, and responsibility (Teaching Tolerance, 1997; Gartrell, 2017). Together, these guiding principles encourage children to respect themselves, care for others, and contribute positively to the classroom community and environment.

Creating Rules with Children

Whenever developmentally appropriate, children should participate in establishing classroom rules. Although adults are ultimately responsible for creating a safe and respectful learning environment, involving children in the process helps children develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their classroom community. People are naturally more likely to respect and care for things they help create (Daly, 2026). The same principle applies to classroom expectations. When children help develop the rules, they are often more invested in following them and encouraging others to do the same (Gartrell, 2017).

One way to begin the process is by gathering children together for a classroom meeting and asking open-ended questions such as:

- "What can we do to help everyone stay safe?"
- "How can we take care of our classroom?"
- "What helps everyone feel included?"

As children share their ideas, the educator records every suggestion without judgment. This communicates that each child's ideas are valued and worthy of consideration. Interestingly, educators often discover that children generate many of the same expectations that adults would have established themselves. Rules created with children are often more meaningful because children understand how the expectations support the classroom community (Gartrell, 2017; NAEYC, 2020).

After all ideas have been shared, the class can work together to combine similar suggestions, eliminate duplicates, and organize them into a small number of meaningful classroom rules. If there are differing opinions, children can discuss the ideas respectfully and vote on the rules they believe are most important. This collaborative process teaches democratic decision making, active listening, compromise, and problem solving while helping children understand the purpose behind each classroom expectation.

Because young children can remember only a limited number of expectations, classroom rules should be kept simple and concise. Most early childhood classrooms function well with approximately three to five broad expectations that are reinforced consistently throughout the day (Kostelnik et al., 2015). Again, rules should be stated positively whenever possible so they communicate what children should do rather than what they should avoid.

Once the rules have been finalized, children can work together to create a classroom rules poster by illustrating each expectation with drawings, photographs, or other visual representations. The class can even decide together where the poster should be displayed. Displaying the rules prominently serves as an ongoing visual reminder of the classroom agreements while reinforcing children's sense of ownership. Rather than viewing the rules as something imposed by the teacher, children begin to see them as agreements that everyone helped create and shares responsibility for following.

Visual reminders such as classroom rule posters, picture schedules, transition cards, center signs, sign language, and photographs of children demonstrating expected behaviors help reinforce classroom expectations throughout the day. These supports are particularly beneficial for young children who are still developing language skills, children who are English language learners, and children who benefit from visual cues. Rather than relying solely on repeated verbal reminders, educators can simply refer children to the visual supports, encouraging greater independence and helping children remember classroom routines and expectations on their own (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

When classroom expectations have been established collaboratively, educators spend less time enforcing the rules and more time providing gentle reminders of the agreements the classroom community has already made together. This approach encourages children to accept greater responsibility for their own behavior while fostering a classroom culture built on cooperation, respect, and shared responsibility (Educational Productions Inc., 1999).

Classroom Meetings

Regular classroom meetings provide opportunities to introduce new expectations, review classroom rules, celebrate successes, and solve problems together. These meetings encourage children to express their ideas, listen respectfully to others, and participate in decisions that affect their classroom community. Classroom meetings also reinforce the idea that everyone shares responsibility for creating a safe, caring, and respectful learning environment.

Educators can use classroom meetings to practice social skills, discuss common classroom challenges, read books related to behavior expectations, role-play solutions to everyday problems, and acknowledge children's positive contributions. These conversations help children develop responsibility while strengthening the classroom community (Gartrell, 2017).



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11.4: Positive Guidance Strategies

Children learn appropriate behavior through patient teaching, encouragement, and repeated opportunities to practice new skills. Rather than relying on punishment or repeated correction, effective educators intentionally use positive guidance strategies that teach children what to do while strengthening their confidence, independence, and social competence. These strategies help children develop self-control, solve problems, and build positive relationships with others (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Modeling Appropriate Behavior

Children learn by watching the adults around them. Educators model respectful communication, kindness, problem solving, emotional regulation, and cooperation throughout the day. When teachers consistently demonstrate the behaviors they expect from children, they provide powerful examples for children to imitate. Modeling is especially effective because young children often learn more from what adults do than from what they say (Bandura, 1977; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Coaching Children Through Challenges

Guidance often involves coaching rather than correcting. Instead of solving problems for children, educators provide support, ask questions, offer suggestions, and encourage children to think through situations independently.

For example, rather than immediately telling children how to solve a disagreement, an educator might ask:

- “What happened?”
- “How do you think your friend is feeling?”
- “What could we do to solve this problem?”

Coaching helps children develop confidence while gradually building problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Redirection

Redirection is one of the most effective guidance strategies for young children. When children begin engaging in inappropriate behavior, educators calmly redirect their attention toward a more appropriate activity or behavior before the situation escalates. Redirection recognizes that young children are still developing self-control and often respond well when adults help them focus on acceptable alternatives rather than simply telling them to stop.

Examples include:

- Redirecting throwing blocks to throwing beanbags outside.
- Redirecting climbing on shelves to climbing on outdoor equipment.
- Redirecting drawing on walls to drawing on paper.

Redirection is most effective when it is calm, respectful, and offered before children become frustrated (Gartrell, 2017).

Giving Children Appropriate Choices

Offering children appropriate choices is another effective guidance strategy that promotes independence while reducing unnecessary power struggles. Rather than simply telling children what they must do, educators provide two or more acceptable options that allow children to exercise control within appropriate limits. Giving choices helps children develop decision-making skills, fosters a sense of competence, and increases their willingness to cooperate because they feel respected and included in the decision-making process.

The choices offered should always be acceptable to the educator and appropriate for the child's age and developmental level. Rather than asking open-ended questions that may invite unrealistic responses, educators provide limited choices that guide children toward successful outcomes.

Examples include:

- "Would you like to clean up the blocks first or the puzzles first?"
- "Would you like to use the blue marker or the green marker?"
- "Would you like to hold my hand or walk beside me?"
- "Would you like to read this book or that book during story time?"
- "Would you like to put on your jacket by yourself, or would you like me to help you?"

Offering appropriate choices helps children feel capable and respected while teaching responsibility and independence. However, choices should not be offered when safety is involved or when there is no real choice. For example, instead of asking, "Do you want to ride in your car seat?" an educator might say, "Would you like to climb into your car seat by yourself, or would you like me to help you?" The expectation remains the same, but the child is given an opportunity to exercise appropriate control within clear boundaries (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement increases the likelihood that desirable behaviors will occur again by following them with meaningful positive consequences. In early childhood classrooms, reinforcement often includes praise, recognition, privileges, or opportunities to continue engaging in enjoyable activities.

Positive reinforcement is most effective when it is immediate, sincere, and connected to specific behaviors rather than general approval (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Encouragement

Although praise and encouragement are sometimes used interchangeably, they are not exactly the same. Encouragement focuses on children's effort, persistence, improvement, and growing competence rather than simply the final outcome. While praise often communicates an adult's approval, encouragement helps children recognize their own progress and develop confidence in their abilities. Over time, encouragement fosters intrinsic motivation because children learn to value their own effort and accomplishments rather than relying solely on external approval (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Encouragement is most effective when it is sincere, specific, and descriptive. Rather than offering general comments such as "Good job," educators describe what they observed and the positive impact of the child's actions. This helps children understand exactly what they did well and why it was important.

For example, an educator might say:

- "You kept trying even when that puzzle was difficult."
- "You remembered to ask for a turn instead of grabbing the toy."
- "You worked together to clean up the block area."
- "You noticed your friend was sad and asked if they were okay."

These comments recognize children's effort, persistence, kindness, and problem-solving rather than assigning labels such as "good" or "smart." Over time, encouragement helps children develop confidence, resilience, and a willingness to continue learning from both success and mistakes.

Instead of...	**Try...**

“Good job!”	“You worked really hard on that.”
“You’re so smart.”	“You didn’t give up until you figured it out.”
“You’re a nice girl.”	“You helped your friend when they needed you.”
“Perfect!”	“You noticed your mistake and fixed it yourself.”

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences occur without adult intervention. They are the direct, naturally occurring results of a child’s actions. When the situation is safe, allowing children to experience natural consequences can be a powerful learning opportunity because the consequence is directly connected to the behavior.

For example:

- A child refuses to wear a coat and feels cold.
- A child forgets to water a plant, and the plant begins to wilt.
- A child leaves a favorite toy outside, and it becomes wet after it rains.
- A child leaves markers without their lids on, and they dry out.

Educators should allow natural consequences only when they do not place children at risk of physical or emotional harm. The adult’s role is to support children’s learning by helping them reflect on what happened and consider how they might make different choices in the future.

Logical Consequences

Logical consequences are respectful, instructional responses that help children understand the relationship between their behavior and its impact on themselves and others. Unlike natural consequences, which occur without adult intervention, logical consequences are intentionally designed by educators when a natural consequence would be unsafe, inappropriate, or insufficient to support learning. Rather than creating fear or embarrassment, logical consequences are directly connected to the behavior and help children develop responsibility, problem-solving skills, and self-control while preserving their dignity (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Examples include:

- A child who spills paint helps clean up the spill.
- A child throws sand, so the teacher asks the child to leave the sandbox until they are ready to use the sand safely.
- A child intentionally dumps puzzle pieces on the floor, so they help pick them up before choosing another activity.
- A child draws on the table, so they help clean the table before returning to art.
- A child knocks over another child’s block structure, so they help rebuild it if the other child agrees.

Logical consequences should always be respectful, reasonable, connected to the behavior, and as opportunities for learning rather than punishment (Dreikurs & Grey, 1968). They are most effective when delivered calmly and paired with guidance that helps children understand what they can do differently next time (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

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11.5: Understanding and Responding to Aggressive Behavior

Aggressive behavior is one of the most challenging situations early childhood educators encounter. Hitting, biting, kicking, pushing, throwing objects, and yelling can be upsetting for everyone involved. However, it is important to remember that aggression is a behavior, not a personality trait. Children are not “aggressive children.” Rather, they are children who sometimes use aggressive behaviors because they have not yet developed more appropriate ways to communicate their needs, express their emotions, or solve problems.

Most aggressive behavior is not rooted in a desire to harm others. Instead, it often reflects a child’s limited language skills, immature emotional regulation, frustration, fear, fatigue, or inability to solve a problem successfully. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 10, young children are still developing self-regulation and co-regulation skills. Guidance provides educators with opportunities to teach children safer, more effective ways to express themselves while preserving their dignity and strengthening relationships (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

The primary goal is not simply to stop aggressive behavior in the moment. The goal is to help children learn the social and emotional skills they need to respond differently in the future.

Assertiveness Versus Aggression

One important goal of guidance is helping children move beyond passive or aggressive responses and develop assertive communication and prosocial behaviors. Passive behavior occurs when children consistently give in to others, avoid expressing their own needs or feelings, or allow others to make decisions for them. Aggressive behavior attempts to meet one’s own needs at the expense of others through intimidation, force, or hurtful words and actions. Assertive behavior allows children to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs respectfully while also respecting the rights of others. Prosocial behavior goes one step further by intentionally promoting the well-being of others through empathy, cooperation, sharing, kindness, helping, and problem solving.

Children should not be taught to simply “be nice” if that means ignoring their own needs or allowing others to mistreat them. Instead, educators can teach children to communicate confidently, solve problems respectfully, and consider both their own needs and the needs of others.

The goal of guidance is not simply to eliminate aggressive behavior. Rather, it is to help children develop assertive communication skills while also fostering prosocial behaviors that strengthen friendships, support classroom communities, and contribute to children’s long-term social and emotional competence (Kostelnik et al., 2015; Denham, 2006).

Passive, Aggressive, Assertive, and Prosocial Behaviors Table 11.1

Passive	Aggressive	Assertive	Prosocial
Gives in to others	Attempts to control or hurt others	Expresses needs respectfully	Expresses needs respectfully while considering the needs of others
Avoids conflict	Escalates conflict	Addresses conflict calmly and respectfully	Works cooperatively to solve problems
Remains silent or withdraws	Uses hurtful words or actions	Uses respectful words to communicate feelings and needs	Listens, communicates, and seeks solutions that benefit everyone

Allows others to make decisions	Demands, threatens, or intimidates	Expresses opinions appropriately	Demonstrates empathy, shares, compromises, and accepts responsibility

Educators play an important role in helping children move beyond passive or aggressive responses by modeling assertive communication, empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving skills throughout the day. As children observe and practice these skills, they learn to express their own needs respectfully while also considering the needs and feelings of others. Over time, these experiences help children develop the prosocial behaviors that strengthen friendships, support positive classroom communities, and contribute to lifelong social and emotional competence.

Types of Aggression

Aggressive behavior can take many forms. Understanding the type of aggression a child is displaying helps educators determine the most appropriate response.

Physical aggression involves behaviors intended to cause physical harm, such as hitting, kicking, biting, pushing, pinching, or throwing objects.

Verbal aggression includes yelling, threatening, teasing, insulting, or using hurtful language toward others.

Relational aggression involves harming relationships through behaviors such as excluding others, spreading rumors, or encouraging peers not to play with another child. Although more common among older children, early forms of relational aggression may appear during the preschool years.

Reactive aggression occurs when children respond impulsively to frustration, fear, disappointment, or perceived threats. These children often have difficulty regulating their emotions and may react before thinking.

Instrumental aggression occurs when aggression is used to obtain something the child wants, such as a toy, a turn, or an adult's attention.

Because different types of aggression have different causes, educators should focus on understanding why the behavior occurred before deciding how to respond (Gartrell, 2017). See Chapter 10 for more information about the underlying causes of behavior.

Appropriate Educator Responses

When aggressive behavior occurs, the educator's first responsibility is to ensure everyone's safety. Responses should be calm, respectful, and instructional rather than emotional or punitive.

Effective responses include:

- Immediately stop the aggressive behavior.
- Ensure all children are safe.
- Comfort any child who has been hurt.
- Remain calm and avoid raising your voice.
- Briefly state the classroom expectation.
- Help children identify and express their feelings.
- Teach or model a more appropriate response.
- Help children repair relationships when appropriate.
- Continue observing for patterns that may indicate unmet needs or recurring triggers.

Educators should avoid lengthy lectures and should never use public embarrassment as a guidance strategy. Children who are emotionally overwhelmed are rarely able to process extensive explanations in the moment. Brief guidance followed by opportunities to practice more appropriate behaviors is often much more effective (Educational Productions Inc., 1999; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

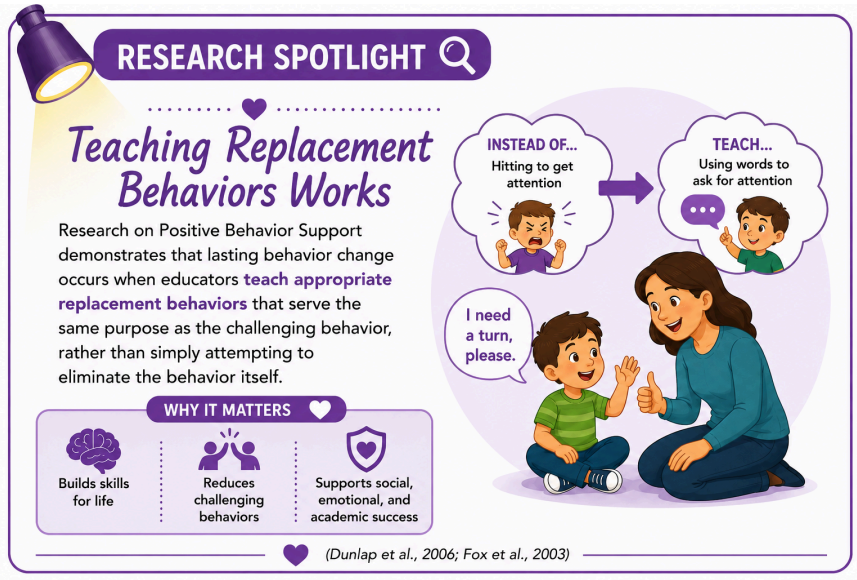
Teaching Alternatives to Aggression

Children are more likely to replace aggressive behaviors when they are explicitly taught appropriate alternatives. Simply telling children what not to do is rarely enough. Instead, educators should teach and model the specific skills children need to handle difficult situations successfully.

Children can learn to:

- Use words to express their feelings.
- Ask for a turn instead of grabbing.
- Say, “Stop, I don’t like that.”
- Ask an adult for help.
- Take deep breaths to calm down.
- Walk away from frustrating situations.
- Use problem-solving strategies with peers.
- Practice calming techniques learned through co-regulation.

Like all social-emotional skills, these behaviors require repeated modeling, practice, encouragement, and support. Every conflict provides another opportunity for children to strengthen their ability to communicate, regulate emotions, and solve problems peacefully.



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11.6: Using Observation as a Guidance Tool

Every behavior has a purpose. Before educators can effectively respond to challenging behavior, they must first understand why it is occurring. Rather than making assumptions or reacting immediately, skilled educators take time to observe carefully and gather information. Observation helps educators look beyond the behavior itself to identify the needs, emotions, environmental factors, or skill deficits that may be contributing to the child's actions (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Observe Before Intervening

Although educators must intervene immediately when a child's behavior threatens safety, not every challenging behavior requires an immediate solution. Taking time to observe allows educators to gather valuable information before deciding how to respond.

Effective observation involves looking for patterns rather than isolated incidents. Educators might ask themselves:

- When does the behavior occur?
- Where does it usually happen?
- Who is present?
- What happens immediately before the behavior?
- What happens immediately afterward?
- Is the child hungry, tired, frustrated, or overwhelmed?
- Does the behavior occur during specific routines or transitions?

These observations often reveal patterns that are not immediately obvious and help educators identify the underlying causes of challenging behavior.

The ABC Observation Method

One of the most useful tools for understanding behavior is the **ABC Observation Method**. ABC stands for:

- **Antecedent**: What happened immediately before the behavior?
- **Behavior**: What exactly did the child do?
- **Consequence**: What happened immediately after the behavior?

Recording these three pieces of information helps educators identify patterns over time and develop more effective guidance strategies.

Antecedent	Behavior
Teacher announces it will be time to clean up in 5-minutes.	Child throws blocks across the room.

Looking at a single ABC observation may not provide enough information to understand the behavior. However, when educators collect several observations over days or weeks, important patterns often emerge. For example, the child may consistently become upset during transitions, when asked to stop a preferred activity, or when the classroom becomes noisy. These patterns help educators determine whether changes in the environment, schedule, teaching strategies, or adult responses might reduce the challenging behavior.

Looking for Patterns

Observation is not about finding fault with the child. It is about understanding the interaction between the child and the environment. Once educators identify patterns, they can make thoughtful adjustments that better support children's success.

Questions to consider include:

- Is the behavior occurring at the same time each day?
- Does it happen during specific activities or routines?
- Are particular peers or adults involved?
- Does the behavior seem related to fatigue, hunger, frustration, or sensory overload?
- Does the child need additional support learning a particular social or emotional skill?

Rather than asking how to stop the behavior, educators should ask what skills the child needs to learn and how the environment can better support success. This problem-solving approach reflects the philosophy of positive guidance by focusing on teaching, prevention, and building children's competence rather than simply correcting mistakes (Gartrell, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Objective Documentation

Effective guidance begins with accurate observation. Before educators can make thoughtful decisions about supporting a child's behavior, they must first document what they actually see and hear. Objective documentation records facts without adding personal opinions, assumptions, or judgments. These observations provide valuable information for identifying patterns, evaluating the effectiveness of guidance strategies, communicating with families, and collaborating with other professionals (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

One of the greatest challenges for new educators is learning to distinguish between objective observations and subjective interpretations. Objective observations describe observable behaviors that anyone present could see or hear. Subjective interpretations include opinions, labels, or assumptions about why a child behaved in a particular way.

Objective Observation	**S**
"Jaden cried for four minutes after his mother left."	"J
"Ava pushed another child while reaching for a truck."	"A
"Mateo played alone during outdoor play for 15 minutes."	"M
"Sophia threw the puzzle pieces onto the floor after being asked to clean up."	"S

Objective documentation allows educators to focus on observable facts rather than personal interpretations. These records are more useful when communicating with families, consulting with specialists, or developing individualized support plans because they provide an accurate picture of what actually occurred.

Using Observation to Guide Teaching

Observation should always serve a purpose. Rather than collecting information simply to describe children's behavior, educators use observations to make thoughtful decisions about how to better support children's learning and development. Careful

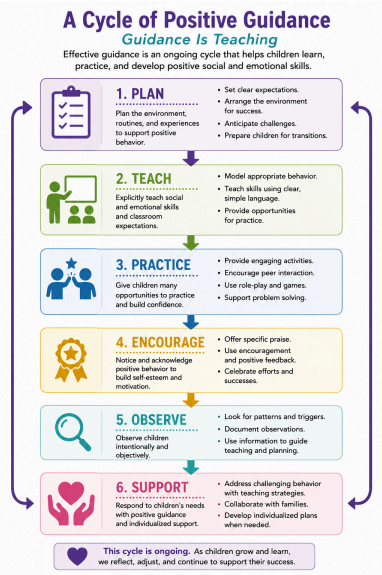
observation helps educators determine whether classroom practices are meeting children's needs and whether changes in teaching strategies or the environment may improve children's success.

Observation may lead educators to:

- Modify the classroom environment to reduce frustration or conflict.
- Teach new social-emotional or self-help skills.
- Adjust expectations to better match children's developmental abilities.
- Provide additional modeling, coaching, or guided practice.
- Collaborate with families to better understand children's experiences across settings.
- Determine whether additional assessment or individualized support may be appropriate.

Observation also helps educators evaluate the effectiveness of their guidance strategies. If a child's behavior improves after changes are made to the environment or teaching approach, the observations provide evidence that those strategies are working. If the behavior continues despite thoughtful intervention, additional supports may be needed.

Professional educators continually observe, reflect, adjust, and evaluate. This ongoing cycle of observation and reflection helps create responsive learning environments where guidance is individualized to meet the unique needs of every child.



Behavior Support Plans

Most children respond successfully to positive guidance, consistent expectations, and supportive relationships. Occasionally, however, a child may continue to display persistent or challenging behaviors that interfere with learning, relationships, or participation in the classroom. When this occurs, educators may develop an individualized Behavior Support Plan (BSP).

A BSP is a proactive, individualized plan designed to help children learn new skills while reducing challenging behaviors. Rather than focusing on punishment, a BSP identifies positive strategies that teach replacement behaviors, prevent challenging situations, and support children's success across daily routines. The ultimate goal is to understand the child's strengths and needs while creating consistent supports that help the child participate successfully in the classroom community.

Effective BSPs are collaborative. Educators work closely with families, administrators, specialists, and other professionals to identify and develop realistic goals and consistent strategies. When appropriate, the child should also participate in the planning process. Families provide valuable information about children's strengths, interests, routines, and successful strategies used at home. This collaborative approach helps ensure that children receive consistent support across environments. Because every child is unique, no two BSPs are exactly alike.

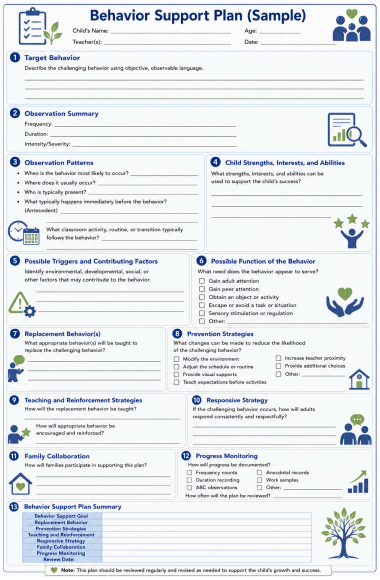
Although formats vary among programs and agencies, most Behavior Support Plans include the following components:

- A clear description of the target behavior.
- Information gathered through observation and documentation.
- Identification of the child's strengths, interests, and abilities.
- Identification of possible triggers and contributing environmental factors.
- Clearly defined replacement behaviors to be taught.
- Prevention strategies that reduce the likelihood of challenging behavior.
- Family collaboration and communication.
- Positive guidance, teaching, and reinforcement strategies that encourage success.
- A plan for responding consistently and respectfully if the behavior occurs.
- Ongoing data collection, progress monitoring, and regular review of the plan to evaluate its effectiveness and make revisions as needed.

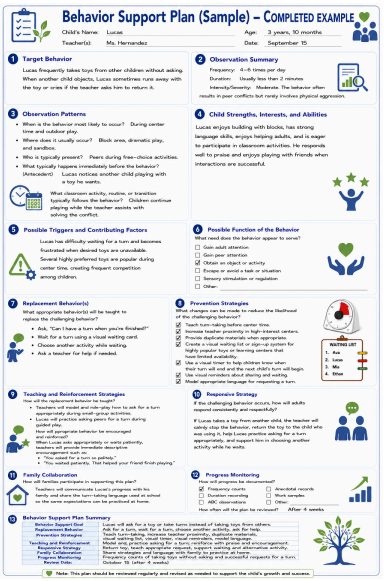
Behavior Support Plans are living documents. As children learn new skills and make progress, the plan should be reviewed regularly and adjusted to reflect their changing strengths and needs. The ultimate goal is always to increase children's independence, confidence, and successful participation in the classroom rather than simply eliminate challenging behaviors.

The sample BSP shown below illustrates one approach to organizing this information. Although programs may use different formats, the overall goal remains the same: to support children by teaching new skills, building on their strengths, and creating environments where they can be successful.

Behavior Support Plan (Sample)



Completed Behavior Support Plan (Example)



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11.7: Creating a Classroom Guidance Plan

A well-managed classroom does not happen by accident. Positive classroom communities are intentionally designed through thoughtful planning, consistent expectations, supportive relationships, and developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Rather than waiting for challenging behaviors to occur, effective educators create comprehensive guidance plans that promote children's social and emotional development while reducing the likelihood of conflict.

A classroom guidance plan serves as a roadmap for creating a positive learning environment. It identifies the routines, expectations, teaching strategies, and responses that educators will use consistently throughout the year. When all members of the teaching team share a common approach to guidance, children experience predictable expectations, consistent support, and greater opportunities for success. Every classroom guidance plan should reflect the unique needs of the children, families, and community it serves.

Although no two plans will look exactly alike, effective guidance plans typically include the following components:

- A philosophy of positive guidance.
- Classroom expectations or "I Care Rules."
- Strategies for building positive relationships with children and families.
- Classroom routines and transition procedures.
- Environmental arrangements that promote independence and cooperation.
- Prevention strategies for reducing challenging behavior.
- Positive guidance strategies, including modeling, coaching, redirection, encouragement, and logical consequences.
- Plans for teaching social-emotional skills throughout the day.
- Procedures for documenting observations and communicating with families.
- A process for developing individualized Behavior Support Plans when additional support is needed.

A classroom guidance plan should be viewed as a living document rather than a set of fixed rules. As children grow, classroom dynamics change, and new challenges arise, educators should regularly reflect on what is working, identify areas for improvement, and revise their plans as needed. Ongoing reflection helps ensure that guidance practices remain responsive, equitable, and developmentally appropriate.

Ultimately, the most effective guidance plans are grounded in respect, empathy, and the belief that every child is capable of learning positive social behaviors. When educators intentionally teach these skills, children develop the confidence, self-control, empathy, and problem-solving abilities that will support them throughout school and life.

Developing Your Classroom Guidance Plan

Imagine you are preparing to welcome a new group of preschool children into your classroom. Using the information presented in this chapter, develop a classroom guidance plan that reflects your philosophy of positive guidance and describes how you will create a safe, respectful, and supportive learning environment.

Your guidance plan should include the following components:

1. Your philosophy of positive guidance.
2. Three to five classroom expectations or "I Care Rules."
3. Strategies for building positive relationships with children and families.
4. Routines and transition strategies.
5. Environmental arrangements that support positive behavior.
6. Positive guidance strategies you will use to teach social skills.
7. How you will respond to challenging behaviors.
8. How you will communicate with families.
9. How you will document observations and determine when additional support is needed.

Conclude your plan by reflecting on the following question:

> **How does your classroom guidance plan help children develop self-control, responsibility, empathy, and the social-emotional skills needed for lifelong success?**

Conclusion

Guidance is far more than responding to challenging behavior. It is the intentional process of teaching children the social, emotional, and behavioral skills they need to become responsible, caring, and capable members of their classroom community. Effective guidance begins with prevention, continues through positive relationships and supportive teaching, and, when necessary, includes individualized supports that help every child succeed.

Throughout this chapter, guidance has been presented as a proactive approach rather than a reactive one. Educators establish clear expectations, create engaging learning environments, teach social skills, observe children's progress, collaborate with families, and respond to challenges with empathy and respect. Rather than asking children to simply "behave," effective educators teach them the skills they need to make positive choices independently.

No single guidance strategy works for every child or every situation. Instead, successful educators build a comprehensive guidance plan that combines thoughtful planning, developmentally appropriate expectations, positive relationships, and ongoing reflection. When guidance is viewed as teaching rather than punishment, every interaction becomes an opportunity to help children develop confidence, self-control, responsibility, and respect for others.

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11.8: Chapter Vocabulary

Guidance: A proactive, instructional process that teaches children the social, emotional, and behavioral skills needed to make increasingly responsible choices.

Discipline: A respectful, instructional response used after an expectation has not been met to help children understand their actions, repair harm, and practice more appropriate behavior.

Redirection: A guidance strategy that shifts a child's attention or behavior toward a safe, acceptable, and developmentally appropriate alternative.

ABC Observation Method: A method of documenting the antecedent, behavior, and consequence associated with an incident to identify patterns and possible influences on behavior.

Behavior Support Plan (BSP): A proactive, individualized plan that identifies a child's strengths, behavioral patterns, possible triggers, prevention strategies, replacement skills, adult responses, and methods for monitoring progress.

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11.9: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **NAEYC: Instead of Discipline, Use Guidance/links to an external source:** Explains why guidance should teach children positive lessons from their mistakes while preserving their dignity and supporting their social-emotional development.
- **Head Start: Stating Behavioral Expectations/links to an external source:** Demonstrates how educators can positively state, teach, practice, and acknowledge classroom expectations to prevent challenging behavior.
- **National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations: Practical Strategies/links to an external source:** Provides classroom resources for teaching expectations, social-emotional skills, friendship skills, emotional regulation, and problem-solving.
- **National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations: Behavior-Intervention Resources/links to an external source:** Offers observation tools, routine-analysis forms, planning templates, and other resources for developing individualized positive Behavior Support Plans.

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12: CREATING EMOTIONALLY SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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12.1: Chapter Introduction





Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 12.1:** Explain how the environment functions as the “third teacher” by influencing children’s emotional security, behavior, independence, relationships, engagement, and learning.
- **SLO 12.2:** Design emotionally supportive indoor and outdoor environments that foster belonging, emotional regulation, meaningful contribution, exploration, cooperation, and positive behavior.
- **SLO 12.3:** Apply developmentally appropriate strategies for creating balanced schedules, predictable routines, smooth transitions, accessible materials, and inviting learning centers.
- **SLO 12.4:** Describe how the Least Restrictive Environment, Universal Design for Learning, sensory supports, and Environmental Rating Scales contribute to inclusive and responsive early childhood environments.

Chapter 12 Short Overview

This chapter examines how the physical environment, emotional climate, classroom materials, daily schedule, and educator interactions function as active partners in children's learning and development. It explores emotionally supportive classrooms, belonging, calming spaces, predictable routines, transitions, learning centers, outdoor environments, and environmental guidance. The chapter also emphasizes inclusive design, sensory supports, Universal Design for Learning, the Least Restrictive Environment, and the use of Environmental Rating Scales for continuous quality improvement.

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12.2: The Environment as the “Third Teacher”



Let’s Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

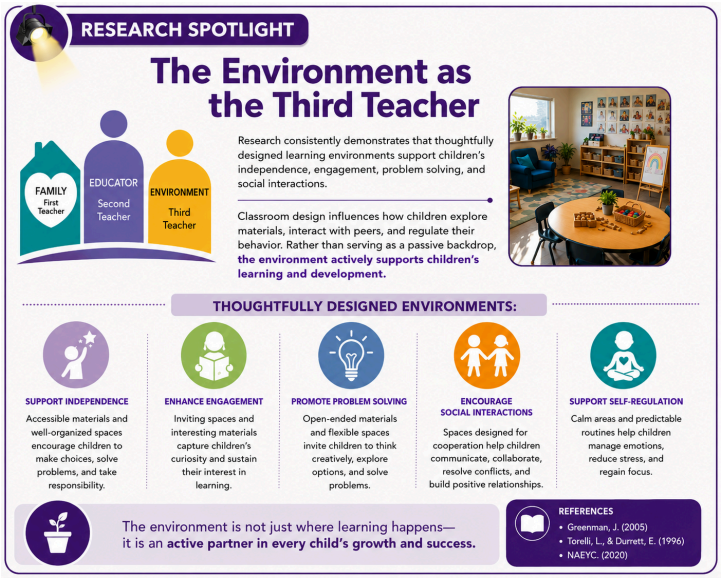
Long before children begin participating in planned activities, the classroom environment begins teaching. The arrangement of the room, the placement of materials, the daily schedule, and the emotional climate all influence how children think, feel, behave, learn, and interact with others. A thoughtfully designed environment encourages curiosity, independence, cooperation, and positive social interactions, while a poorly designed environment can contribute to frustration, conflict, and challenging behaviors.

Early childhood educators often refer to the environment as the “third teacher.” In this philosophy, the first teacher is the family, the second teacher is the educator, and the third teacher is the learning environment itself. Every aspect of the classroom communicates expectations and influences children’s learning. Clearly defined learning centers invite exploration, accessible materials encourage independence, cozy spaces provide opportunities for relaxation and self-regulation, and predictable routines help children feel safe and secure.

The concept of the environment as the third teacher originated with the Reggio Emilia approach in northern Italy, where classrooms are intentionally designed to promote exploration, collaboration, creativity, and meaningful relationships (Gandini, 2012). While not every early childhood program follows the Reggio Emilia philosophy, educators across many approaches recognize that thoughtfully designed environments play an essential role in children’s development and learning.

The environment also serves as a powerful guidance tool. Many challenging behaviors can be prevented before they occur simply by arranging the classroom to support children’s success. Clearly defined pathways reduce running. Adequate materials reduce competition. Predictable routines reduce anxiety. Quiet spaces support emotional regulation. Rather than relying solely on adult intervention, educators can intentionally design environments that promote cooperation, independence, and positive behavior.

Thoughtful environments support every area of development. Children who feel physically and emotionally safe are more willing to explore, solve problems, build relationships, and take appropriate risks during play (Lally, Torres, Phelps, 2015; NAEYC, 2022). Well-designed classrooms also encourage language development, cognitive growth, creativity, physical development, and social-emotional competence by providing inviting spaces that meet children’s developmental needs (Greenman, 2005; Torelli & Durrett, 1996; NAEYC, 2020).



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12.3: Designing Emotionally Supportive Classrooms

An emotionally supportive classroom is one where children feel physically safe, emotionally secure, valued, and connected. It is a place where children trust the adults who care for them, feel confident exploring and learning, and know they are accepted as important members of the classroom community.

Sister Margaret Brenfleck, a Catholic educator, emphasized the importance of creating communities in which individuals feel both valued and connected. This concept can be summarized as:

> **Feeling Valued + Feeling Connected = A Sense of Community**

Children who feel valued know that their ideas, efforts, cultures, and unique qualities are respected and appreciated. Connection means regular, warm interaction in which one feels listened to. Children who feel connected experience warm, caring relationships with teachers and peers and recognize that they are accepted and supported within the classroom community. Together, these experiences foster trust, confidence, empathy, and active participation in classroom life.

When children feel emotionally safe, they are more willing to explore, solve problems, build friendships, express their ideas, and take appropriate risks during play and learning. In contrast, environments that are unpredictable, chaotic, or unwelcoming can increase stress, anxiety, and challenging behaviors (Hyson, 2004; Denham, 2006).

Creating an emotionally supportive environment involves much more than decorating a classroom. Every aspect of the environment sends messages to children about whether they are welcomed, respected, and capable. The arrangement of furniture, the availability of materials, the daily schedule, the teacher's interactions, and even the classroom atmosphere all influence children's emotional well-being. Thoughtfully designed classrooms encourage children to explore independently, interact positively with others, and develop confidence in their own abilities.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging grows when children know they are welcomed, accepted, and valued as important members of the classroom community. While emotional safety provides the foundation, educators intentionally foster belonging through everyday interactions, relationships, and classroom practices that help every child feel included.

Photographs of children and their families, displays of children's work, culturally responsive books and materials, and representations of diverse families and abilities communicate that every child is respected and appreciated. Morning meetings, shared classroom responsibilities, collaborative problem-solving, and opportunities for children to make meaningful choices strengthen children's sense of belonging while fostering empathy, cooperation, and respect for others. When children experience genuine acceptance, they are more likely to develop positive relationships and contribute to a caring classroom community (Bierman et al., 2008).

Becoming a Contributing Member of the Classroom Community

Belonging deepens when children experience themselves not only as welcomed members of the classroom but also as people whose ideas, efforts, and actions matter to the group. Becoming a contributing member of a classroom community means learning to participate in shared routines, care for common spaces and materials, cooperate with others, and help shape classroom life. Contribution is not the same as unquestioning compliance. It develops when children have authentic opportunities to exercise agency, assume responsibility, and see that their participation benefits others.

Children contribute in many developmentally appropriate ways. They may return materials to a shelf, water a plant, help prepare the table for snack, welcome a classmate, share an idea during a group meeting, assist a peer, add to a collaborative project, or participate in solving a classroom problem. These everyday experiences strengthen responsibility, cooperation, empathy, self-efficacy, and an understanding that communities depend on the participation of their members.

The California Infant–Toddler Learning and Development Foundations (ITLDF) describe the early development of these capacities within the Social and Emotional Development and Approaches to Learning domains. Infants initially participate in reciprocal interactions and shared activities with responsive adults and gradually become more interested in and engaged with other children. From 23 through 36 months, toddlers increasingly engage in simple cooperative play with peers around a shared goal or activity, such as building together, exchanging materials, or participating in complementary play. These early experiences with collaborative effort provide a foundation for later cooperation, responsibility, and participation in the classroom community (California Department of Social Services, 2025).

The California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF) continue this developmental progression in children's interactions and cooperation with peers. At the Early level, generally ages three to four and a half, children participate in shared activities and occasionally cooperate with peers with adult support. At the Later level, generally ages four to five and a half, children interact and cooperate with peers more actively and intentionally during daily learning and play activities (California Department of Education, 2024).

Educators foster contribution by providing meaningful classroom responsibilities, inviting children's ideas when making plans or solving problems, and creating projects that require shared effort. Responsibilities should be real, manageable, and rotated so that all children have opportunities to participate. Instead of praising a child only for being a "good helper," an educator can describe the effect of the child's action: "You carried the basket while Maya gathered the vegetables. Working together helped the group finish the job." Such feedback helps children recognize the connection between their actions and the well-being of the community.

Opportunities to contribute must be equitable, inclusive, and responsive to children's cultures, languages, abilities, temperaments, and communication styles. Educators should recognize that contribution may be expressed through speech, demonstration, movement, assistive communication, or participation with a trusted peer. Adults should provide adaptations and support without taking over. When every child has a meaningful role, the classroom communicates that contribution takes many forms and that each member is valued.

Spaces That Support Emotional Regulation

Young children are still learning to recognize and manage their emotions. An emotionally supportive classroom provides opportunities for children to calm their bodies, regain self-control, and return to learning successfully. Rather than expecting children to regulate their emotions independently without support, educators intentionally design environments that promote self-regulation.

Every classroom should include opportunities for children to regulate their emotions in healthy ways. As discussed in Chapter 11, many early childhood programs include a Peace Corner or other calming space where children can voluntarily go to relax, regroup, and practice self-regulation. Cozy reading areas, comfortable seating, soft lighting, calming muted colors or pastel colors (such as blues, greens, soft pinks, and earth tones), non-toxic plants, natural materials, and carefully selected sensory materials create inviting spaces that help children slow down, reduce stress, and regain emotional balance before rejoining classroom activities. These spaces communicate that all children occasionally need time to relax, reflect, and regulate their emotions. Some educational approaches, such as Waldorf education, intentionally incorporate pastel colors, natural materials, and soft lighting to create peaceful environments that support children's emotional well-being (Edmunds, 2004; Nicol & Taplin, 2012). Regardless of the specific design approach, thoughtfully designed calming spaces provide children with a safe place to restore emotional balance before returning to play and learning.

Natural elements can also contribute to a calming environment. Soft lighting, plants, nature displays, aquariums, sensory bottles, gentle sounds, and other soothing features help many children reduce stress and regain focus. While not every child responds to the same sensory experiences, thoughtfully designed environments offer a variety of options that support individual differences and emotional well-being (Hyson, 2004).

The Power of Teacher Presence

Although the physical environment is important, the emotional climate is ultimately shaped by the adults within it. A teacher's tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and responsiveness communicate safety and acceptance every day. Calm, patient educators help children regulate their own emotions through co-regulation, while harsh or unpredictable reactions can increase stress and interfere with learning. Warm, responsive interactions communicate unconditional positive regard, helping children understand that mistakes are opportunities for learning rather than reasons for embarrassment or rejection (Gottman, Katz, &

Hooven, 1997).

Emotionally supportive classrooms do more than reduce challenging behaviors. They create environments where children develop resilience, confidence, empathy, and healthy relationships. When children feel safe, connected, and valued, they are free to explore, create, solve problems, and develop the social-emotional skills that form the foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (Hyson, 2004; Denham, 2006).

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12.4: Predictable Routines and Daily Schedules

Young children thrive in environments that are organized, predictable, and consistent. Daily routines provide a framework that helps children understand what to expect, reducing anxiety while promoting emotional security, trust, independence, and self-confidence. When children know what comes next, they spend less energy trying to understand the day's events and more energy exploring, learning, and interacting with others.

A well-planned daily schedule supports children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development by providing a balance between active and quiet experiences, individual and group activities, indoor and outdoor play, and teacher-directed and child-initiated learning. Consistent routines also help children develop important self-help skills such as washing hands, putting away materials, cleaning up, dressing independently, and caring for their belongings. As these routines become familiar, children require less adult direction and become increasingly independent (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Smooth transitions supported with visual schedules, songs, fingerplays, advance warnings, and simple reminders help children move successfully from one activity to another while supporting emotional regulation. Responsive educators recognize when children need additional support during transitions and provide comfort, encouragement, or redirection as needed.

The Importance of Transitions

Although routines provide stability, transitions can be one of the most challenging parts of the day. Moving from one activity to another requires children to stop what they are doing, shift their attention, and adjust to new expectations. These changes can be especially difficult when children are deeply engaged in play or have not yet finished an activity.

Educators can make transitions smoother by planning ahead and providing children with opportunities to prepare for upcoming changes. Familiar transition cues, such as songs, fingerplays, or visual reminders, help children recognize what comes next and make transitions more predictable and enjoyable. Thoughtful transition practices reduce frustration, increase cooperation, and help children develop flexibility while supporting the overall flow of the day. Practical strategies for supporting successful transitions are described later in this chapter.

Balancing the Daily Schedule

An effective daily schedule provides a healthy balance of experiences that match young children's developmental needs. Long periods of sitting and waiting often lead to restlessness, while overly busy schedules filled with constant transitions can become overwhelming. Instead, educators intentionally alternate between active and quiet experiences, provide extended periods for uninterrupted play, and build flexibility into the schedule to accommodate children's interests and needs.

Children also benefit from having adequate time to explore materials, solve problems, and complete projects without feeling rushed. Rather than controlling every moment of the day, educators recognize that meaningful learning often occurs when children have sufficient time to become deeply engaged in play, exploration, and problem-solving. For this reason, many early childhood educators recommend providing extended periods of uninterrupted play whenever possible (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2015).

Schedules Should Support Children—Not the Other Way Around

While routines provide consistency, effective educators recognize that schedules should remain flexible enough to respond to children's needs. An infant who is tired should not be required to stay awake simply because it is not yet nap time. A preschool class deeply engaged in a science investigation may benefit from extending the activity rather than stopping abruptly because the clock says it is time to move on.

Developmentally appropriate schedules provide structure without becoming rigid. The goal is to create a predictable rhythm that supports children's well-being while allowing educators to respond thoughtfully to teachable moments and individual differences (NAEYC, 2020).

Twelve Strategies for Successful Transitions

Transitions occur many times throughout the day and can either support or disrupt children's learning. Thoughtfully planned transitions help children move smoothly from one activity to another while reducing frustration, confusion, and challenging behaviors. The following strategies can help make transitions more successful:

1. **Plan transitions carefully.** Think through each transition in advance so children know what is expected and where they are going.
2. **Allow children time to finish activities whenever possible.** Children who can complete or thoughtfully pause their work are less likely to become frustrated during transitions.
3. **Avoid rushing transitions.** Allow children to move at a comfortable pace whenever possible while maintaining the flow of the day.
4. **Give clear, simple directions.** Use concise, age-appropriate language that tells children exactly what to do.
5. **Warn children before transitions.** Give advance notice, such as a five-minute warning, so children have time to complete or pause their activities.
6. **Use visual schedules.** Pictures, charts, or other visual cues help children anticipate what comes next and reduce anxiety during transitions.
7. **Organize pathways for movement.** Arrange the classroom so children can move safely and efficiently between activity areas, reducing congestion and confusion.
8. **Minimize waiting.** Long periods of waiting often lead to boredom and challenging behavior. Keep transitions brief and purposeful.
9. **Move children in small groups when appropriate.** Transitioning a few children at a time can reduce crowding, minimize waiting, and make transitions calmer and more manageable.
10. **Keep children actively engaged while waiting.** Fingerplays, songs, movement activities, simple games, or conversations help children remain engaged during unavoidable wait times and make transitions more enjoyable.
11. **Watch for children who need additional support.** Some children may become confused, overwhelmed, or hesitant during transitions. Responsive educators observe children's cues and provide reassurance, encouragement, redirection, or individualized assistance when needed.
12. **Offer encouragement and positive feedback.** Acknowledge children's cooperation and flexibility to build confidence and reinforce successful transition skills.

Successful transitions are not simply moments between activities. They are valuable learning opportunities that help children develop self-regulation, independence, flexibility, patience, and cooperation while contributing to a calm, predictable classroom environment.

Predictable routines and smooth transitions create a sense of security that allows children to engage confidently in classroom experiences. Equally important is the design of the classroom itself. The arrangement of learning centers, the organization of materials, and the availability of meaningful choices all influence how children explore, interact, and learn throughout the day.

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12.5: Creating Inviting Learning Centers

Well-designed learning centers are the heart of an effective early childhood classroom. Learning centers provide children with opportunities to explore, create, solve problems, and interact with others through hands-on experiences. Rather than relying primarily on teacher-directed instruction, learning centers encourage children to make choices, follow their interests, and construct knowledge through active exploration.

Materials should be attractive, organized, accessible, safe, and developmentally appropriate. Children are more likely to use and care for materials that are displayed neatly, stored in clearly labeled containers, and placed within easy reach. Thoughtfully designed learning centers encourage exploration, independence, and responsibility while helping children participate successfully in classroom activities (Kostelnik et al., 2015; Dodge et al., 2010).

Learning centers should also be clearly defined. Shelving, rugs, furniture, or other physical boundaries help children understand where activities begin and end while reducing unnecessary running, interruptions, and distractions. Well-defined spaces encourage children to remain engaged in their chosen activities while supporting cooperative play and positive social interactions. Quiet activities, such as reading and writing, should be separated from noisier activities such as blocks, dramatic play, or music whenever possible.

Children benefit from having opportunities to choose among a variety of learning experiences throughout the day. Open-ended materials that can be used in many different ways encourage creativity, imagination, problem solving, and collaboration. Materials such as blocks, loose parts (open-ended objects such as shells, pinecones, corks, fabric pieces, stones, cardboard tubes, and other objects that children can combine and use in many different ways), art supplies, dramatic play props, natural objects, and sensory materials invite exploration because there is no single “right” way to use them. In contrast, materials with only one intended outcome may have educational value but often provide fewer opportunities for creative thinking and social interaction.

Materials Should Be Accessible

Children are more likely to become independent when they can reach materials without relying on adults. Shelves should be low enough for children to see and retrieve materials safely, and frequently used items should be stored within easy reach. Materials should also be organized logically so children know where to find them and where to return them after use. Open shelves, picture labels, color-coded bins, and consistent storage locations help children locate, select, use, and return materials independently. Accessible materials also support executive functioning by encouraging children to plan their activities, make choices, solve problems, and complete tasks independently. Rather than asking an adult for every item they need, children gradually learn to manage their own learning experiences (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). When children can independently access materials and navigate the classroom successfully, they are less likely to become frustrated and more likely to engage confidently in learning.

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12.6: Designing the Environment to Promote Positive Behavior

One of the most effective guidance strategies does not involve giving directions or correcting children's behavior. Instead, it begins by thoughtfully designing the learning environment. The arrangement of space, furniture, pathways, learning centers, and materials influences how children interact, make choices, solve problems, and regulate their behavior throughout the day.

Well-designed classrooms encourage independence while reducing many of the situations that commonly lead to frustration and conflict. Clearly defined learning centers, organized materials, accessible storage, and adequate space for movement help children understand classroom expectations without constant adult reminders. When children can move easily throughout the room, locate materials independently, and engage comfortably in activities, they are more likely to remain focused, cooperate with others, and take responsibility for their environment (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Rather than assuming that challenging behavior is solely the result of a child's actions, effective educators also examine whether the environment is contributing to the problem. Sometimes simple changes to the classroom layout, materials, or daily routines can significantly reduce challenging behaviors before they occur.

Is the Environment Contributing to the Problem?

When challenging behaviors occur repeatedly, educators should first ask whether the physical environment is supporting children's success. Before assuming the problem lies with the child, it is important to consider whether changes to the classroom environment could reduce frustration, increase engagement, and prevent challenging behaviors. The following questions can help identify environmental factors that may be contributing to common classroom challenges.

Do children seem to run or push in the classroom?

Large, open spaces without clear boundaries often invite running. Creating well-defined learning centers with shelves, rugs, furniture, or other dividers helps establish natural pathways and encourages children to move more calmly throughout the classroom. Cozy spaces also help reduce overstimulation while encouraging quieter interactions.

Do children frequently fight over toys or materials?

Competition often occurs when highly desirable materials are limited or children are expected to wait for long periods. Whenever possible, provide duplicate materials, use visual timers or waiting lists for popular items, and prepare activities in advance to minimize unnecessary waiting. Teaching children how to take turns is generally more effective than simply telling them to "share."

Do children wander around the classroom without choosing activities?

Children who wander may be overwhelmed by clutter, unsure of their choices, or simply bored. Organized learning centers, clearly displayed materials, and a variety of engaging activities encourage children to make purposeful choices. Educators can also observe children's interests and adjust classroom materials to reflect those interests whenever possible. Wandering is not always a behavior problem. Sometimes it indicates that children need additional support in making choices or that the available activities are not sufficiently engaging.

Are children easily distracted?

Undefined spaces often allow children to see and hear everything happening throughout the classroom. Shelves, rugs, curtains, and furniture can help define learning centers, reduce distractions, and create environments where children are better able to concentrate on their chosen activities. Separating active learning centers from quieter areas also helps maintain an appropriate noise level.

Do children handle materials roughly or resist cleaning up?

Children are more likely to care for materials when they are organized, attractive, complete, and displayed respectfully. Clearly labeled shelves with pictures or words help children return materials independently. Educators also model how to care for classroom materials while explaining why treating materials with respect benefits everyone in the classroom community.

The Environment Is Part of Guidance

Thoughtful classroom design is one of the most powerful forms of positive guidance. Rather than waiting for challenging behaviors to occur, skilled educators intentionally arrange the environment to promote cooperation, independence, self-control, and successful social interactions. Small adjustments to the physical environment often prevent many behavior challenges before adult intervention becomes necessary.

Experienced educators understand that changing the environment is often easier than changing children's behavior. Small adjustments to classroom design, materials, schedules, or routines frequently prevent problems before they occur and allow children to be more successful. Instead of asking, *"How can I change this child's behavior?"* educators also ask, *"How can I change the environment to better support this child's success?"* This shift in thinking encourages educators to view the environment as an active partner in guidance rather than simply the setting in which guidance occurs.

The more intentionally educators prepare the environment, the less time they spend managing behavior and the more time they can devote to building relationships, supporting learning, and enjoying children.



Rotating Materials to Maintain Interest

Children's interests change throughout the year. Rotating classroom materials keeps learning centers fresh while preventing children from becoming overwhelmed by too many choices. Rather than displaying every available toy or activity, educators intentionally select materials that reflect children's developmental abilities, current interests, classroom themes, and emerging skills.

Observation plays an important role in deciding when materials should be added, removed, or modified. If children consistently ignore a learning center, educators should consider whether the materials remain interesting, challenging, and developmentally appropriate.

Materials Reflect Children's Lives

Classroom materials should reflect the diversity of the children, families, and communities they serve. Books, dramatic play props,

dolls, puzzles, photographs, music, and art materials should represent a variety of cultures, languages, family structures, abilities, and life experiences. When children see themselves and others positively represented, they develop a stronger sense of belonging, respect, and appreciation for diversity (NAEYC, 2020).

Thoughtfully selected materials communicate important messages about who belongs, what is valued, and how children learn. Every item placed in a classroom should have a purpose, inviting children to explore, discover, create, and grow with increasing independence.

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12.7: Outdoor Learning Environments

The outdoor classroom is a natural extension of the indoor learning environment. It provides children with opportunities to explore, investigate, create, and learn in ways that are difficult or impossible to replicate indoors. Outdoor environments support every area of development while encouraging curiosity, independence, problem solving, and a lifelong appreciation for nature.

Unlike many indoor activities, outdoor play allows children to move freely, take appropriate physical risks, and engage in large-muscle activities such as running, climbing, balancing, jumping, digging, and riding wheeled toys. These experiences strengthen physical development while also supporting confidence, perseverance, and self-regulation (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2020).

Outdoor Environments Support the Whole Child

Well-designed outdoor learning environments promote development across all developmental domains.

- **Physical Development:** climbing, balancing, running, throwing, digging, and strengthening both gross and fine motor skills.
- **Cognitive Development:** observing nature, solving problems, experimenting, building, measuring, and investigating cause-and-effect relationships.
- **Language Development:** describing observations, asking questions, sharing discoveries, and engaging in meaningful conversations.
- **Social-Emotional Development:** cooperating with peers, negotiating rules, taking turns, building confidence, and developing resilience.
- **Creative Development:** dramatic play, music, art, construction, and imaginative exploration using natural materials.

Because outdoor learning naturally integrates multiple developmental domains, it provides rich opportunities for authentic, hands-on learning.

Nature as a Learning Material

Natural environments offer endless opportunities for exploration. Sticks, leaves, pinecones, rocks, flowers, seeds, shells, logs, water, sand, and other natural materials encourage children to observe, compare, classify, count, build, and create. Unlike many commercial toys, natural materials are open-ended and invite creativity because there is no single correct way to use them (Greenman, 2005; Curtis & Carter, 2015).

Gardens, butterfly habitats, bird feeders, weather stations, compost bins, and outdoor art areas further extend children's opportunities to investigate scientific concepts while developing responsibility for the natural world. These experiences also help children develop environmental awareness and respect for living things.

Risk and Challenge

Outdoor environments provide children with opportunities to experience appropriate risk while developing sound judgment and confidence. Climbing over logs, balancing on stepping stones, navigating uneven terrain, and exploring natural spaces allow children to assess challenges, solve problems, and build resilience. Rather than eliminating all risk, educators carefully supervise children while providing experiences that are both challenging and developmentally appropriate.

Nature and Emotional Well-Being

Nature has a remarkable ability to support children's physical health, emotional well-being, and overall development. Time spent outdoors provides opportunities to explore, observe, create, and relax while reducing stress and encouraging curiosity. Whether children are watching butterflies, listening to birds, digging in the soil, climbing a tree, or simply lying on the grass looking at clouds, nature offers experiences that calm the mind while stimulating learning.

Research suggests that regular contact with nature supports children's emotional regulation, attention, creativity, and resilience. Natural environments often provide a slower pace, fewer distractions, and a greater sense of calm than highly structured indoor settings. These experiences help many children feel more relaxed, focused, and emotionally balanced while encouraging a lifelong appreciation for the natural world (Louv, 2008; Greenman, 2005).

Unlike many commercial toys, nature does not have a single correct way to be explored. Children can observe insects, collect leaves, compare rocks, smell flowers, listen to birds, build with sticks, or investigate puddles after a rainstorm. These open-ended experiences naturally encourage curiosity, creativity, problem solving, and scientific thinking while allowing children to learn at their own pace. Natural environments also invite moments of quiet observation. Sitting beneath a tree, watching clouds drift across the sky, listening to the wind move through the leaves, or observing birds at a feeder encourages mindfulness and helps many children slow down and become more aware of the world around them.

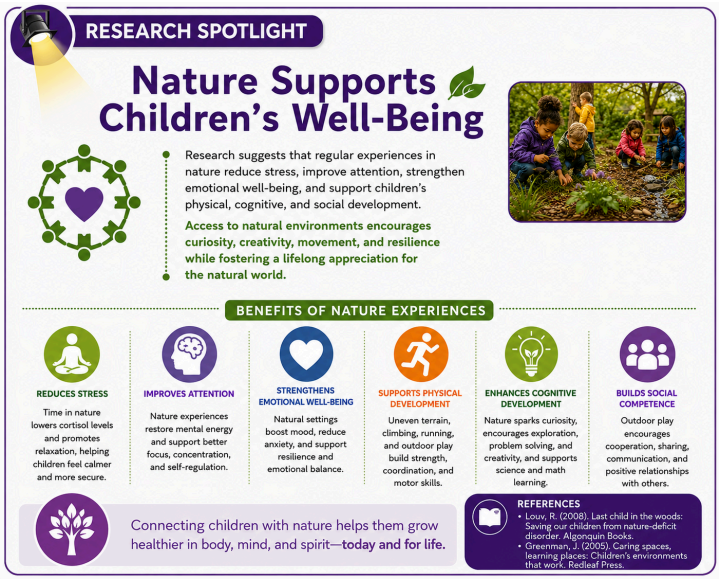
Educators can intentionally incorporate nature into children's daily experiences by planting gardens, caring for classroom plants, creating butterfly or pollinator gardens, collecting natural materials for classroom investigations, or simply spending regular time outdoors. Even small additions such as flowers, trees, natural light, or views of nature can create more welcoming and emotionally supportive learning environments.

Bringing Nature Indoors

Although outdoor experiences are invaluable, educators can also bring elements of nature into the classroom. Non-toxic plants, natural wood furniture, rocks, shells, pinecones, leaves, flowers, branches, and other natural materials create inviting learning environments while extending children's opportunities for exploration. Windows that provide natural light and views of the outdoors also help connect children with the natural world throughout the day.

Thoughtfully incorporating nature into both indoor and outdoor environments reinforces the idea that the natural world is an important part of children's daily learning experiences rather than something they encounter only during occasional outdoor play.

Nature offers far more than opportunities for recreation. It nurtures children's physical health, emotional well-being, curiosity, creativity, and sense of wonder. By intentionally incorporating natural elements into early childhood environments, educators create peaceful, engaging spaces where children can develop meaningful connections with both the natural world and one another.



Outdoor Classrooms Are More Than Playgrounds

Effective outdoor classrooms include more than swings and climbing equipment. They provide a variety of learning areas that invite exploration, creativity, and collaboration.

Examples include:

- Gardens and nature study areas
- Sand and water exploration
- Outdoor block and construction areas
- Dramatic play spaces
- Outdoor art and music areas
- Reading or storytelling spaces
- Science investigation stations
- Quiet observation areas
- Areas for active movement
- Shaded outdoor areas and gathering spaces

Just as indoor classrooms are intentionally organized to support learning, outdoor environments should also be thoughtfully designed to encourage discovery, independence, and meaningful play (Torelli & Durrett, 1996).

Every Day Is an Outdoor Learning Day

Outdoor learning should be viewed as an essential part of the curriculum rather than simply a break from classroom activities. Whenever weather and safety conditions permit, children benefit from spending time outdoors in every season. Observing seasonal changes and wildlife, planting gardens, collecting natural materials, and experiencing different types of weather help children develop scientific thinking while fostering curiosity and a lasting connection to the natural world.

Well-designed outdoor environments should also provide comfortable places for children to rest, observe, and participate in quieter activities. Trees, shade structures, umbrellas, or covered play areas help protect children from excessive sun exposure while allowing outdoor learning to continue during warm weather. Comfortable seating, access to drinking water, and opportunities to move between sunny and shaded areas further support children's health, well-being, and enjoyment of the outdoor environment.

Thoughtfully designed outdoor environments encourage children to explore, wonder, create, and discover. Like indoor classrooms, outdoor spaces become powerful teachers that nurture children's physical health, emotional well-being, social competence, and love of learning.

Traditional Playground Features	**Expanded Outdoor Learning Opportunities**
Swings	Butterfly garden or pollinator garden
Slide	Nature trail
Climbing structure	Logs, stumps, balance beams, and obstacle course
Bare ground or paved area	Outdoor art and music areas
Grass	Grassy play area, outdoor gathering space for games, stories, ar
Sandbox	Sand investigation area

Water table	Water exploration area
Tricycles and wheel toys	Marked riding paths and traffic signs
Outdoor play equipment	Outdoor block and construction area
Picnic tables	Outdoor classroom activities (Snack, story time, circle time, etc.
Open play area	Vegetable and flower gardens and digging area
Outdoor tables	Bring indoor learning activities outdoors
Shade structures	Shade trees and shaded gathering spaces

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12.8: Inclusive Environments for All Children

High-quality early childhood environments are designed to welcome and support every child. Inclusive classrooms recognize that children develop at different rates, learn in different ways, and bring unique strengths, abilities, interests, languages, cultures, and life experiences to the classroom. Rather than expecting children to adapt to the environment, skilled educators thoughtfully design environments that accommodate individual differences and promote successful participation for all children (DEC, 2014; NAEYC, 2020).

The Least Restrictive Environment

The principle of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is a cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). LRE requires that children with disabilities receive their education alongside their typically developing peers to the greatest extent appropriate. Removal from the regular educational environment should occur only when a child's needs cannot be adequately met through appropriate supports and services within the general education setting (IDEA, 2004).

In early childhood programs, the Least Restrictive Environment reflects the belief that children benefit from learning, playing, and building relationships together. Inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for children of all abilities to participate in meaningful activities while receiving the individualized supports they need to be successful. These supports may include adapted materials, assistive technology, environmental modifications, specialized instruction, or the assistance of related service providers. The goal is not simply physical placement in the classroom but meaningful participation, belonging, and access to learning.

Universal Design for Learning

Providing children with the Least Restrictive Environment is more than simply placing them in the same classroom as their peers. Successful inclusion requires thoughtful planning so that all children can participate meaningfully in classroom activities. One approach that supports inclusive learning environments is Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Universal Design for Learning is based on the idea that learning environments should be intentionally designed to meet the needs of all learners from the beginning, rather than making accommodations only after barriers are identified. In early childhood settings, this may include providing multiple ways for children to access materials, participate in activities, communicate their ideas, and demonstrate what they have learned (CAST, 2024). Although Universal Design for Learning was developed to reduce barriers for learners with diverse needs, its principles improve learning opportunities for all children by providing multiple ways to engage, learn, and demonstrate understanding.

When educators intentionally design flexible, welcoming environments, fewer barriers exist for children with disabilities, dual language learners, and children with varying developmental abilities. At the same time, all children benefit from increased opportunities to explore, participate, and succeed.

Accessibility Promotes Independence

An inclusive environment allows children to move throughout the classroom safely and independently. Pathways should be wide enough to accommodate mobility devices, furniture should be child-sized and appropriately arranged, and frequently used materials should be placed within easy reach. Picture labels, visual schedules, adaptive equipment, and clearly organized learning centers support children's growing independence while reducing frustration for all learners. Accessibility benefits every child, not only those with identified disabilities. Thoughtfully designed environments enable all children to participate more fully, make independent choices, and experience success throughout the day.

Representation Matters

Children develop a stronger sense of belonging when they see themselves reflected in their environment. Books, photographs, dramatic play materials, dolls, puzzles, artwork, and music should represent diverse cultures, languages, family structures, abilities, and communities. Classrooms should communicate that every child and family is welcomed, respected, and valued.

Inclusive environments also celebrate diversity through authentic materials rather than stereotypes. Children benefit from seeing people of different ages, cultures, abilities, and family structures participating in everyday activities, helping them develop empathy, respect, and appreciation for human differences (NAEYC, 2020).

Flexible Learning Environments

Children learn in many different ways. Some children enjoy working quietly by themselves, while others prefer collaborative activities. Some benefit from movement while learning, whereas others concentrate best in quieter spaces. Flexible classrooms provide a variety of seating options, learning spaces, and instructional materials that allow children to engage in ways that best support their individual strengths and needs.

Offering choices also promotes inclusion. Providing multiple ways to participate in activities encourages children to experience success while honoring their individual learning styles and developmental abilities. This flexibility is especially important for children with sensory processing differences, who may require additional environmental supports to fully participate in classroom activities.

Supporting Children with Sensory Processing Differences

Children experience and respond to sensory information in different ways. Some children may become overwhelmed by loud noises, bright lights, crowded spaces, or strong smells, while others seek additional movement, touch, or sensory experiences. Thoughtfully designed environments can reduce sensory overload while providing children with opportunities to regulate their bodies and remain engaged in learning.

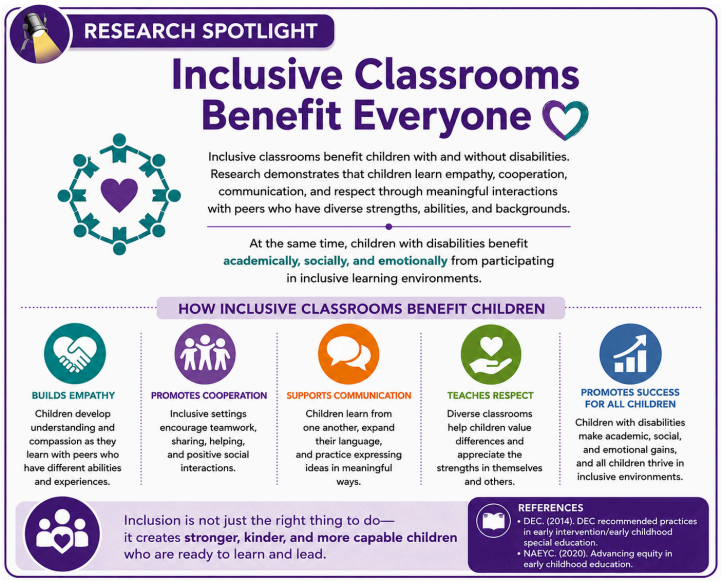
Educators can support children with varying sensory needs by minimizing unnecessary visual clutter, reducing excessive noise, providing soft lighting when possible, creating quiet retreat spaces, and offering a variety of sensory materials that children may choose to use. Flexible seating, fidget tools, weighted lap pads, noise-reducing headphones, and movement opportunities may also help some children participate more successfully in classroom activities.

Designing sensory-supportive environments benefits all children, not just those with identified sensory processing differences, by creating calm, organized spaces that promote attention, self-regulation, and emotional well-being.

Inclusion Benefits Everyone

Inclusive classrooms enrich learning for every child. Children learn empathy, cooperation, problem-solving, and respect by interacting with peers who have different abilities, backgrounds, and experiences. Thoughtfully designed environments foster a sense of belonging where every child has opportunities to learn, contribute, and participate as a valued member of the classroom community.

Creating inclusive environments is not simply about meeting legal requirements. It reflects a commitment to equity, dignity, and the belief that every child deserves opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive in an environment where they feel safe, respected, and supported.



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12.9: Troubleshooting Environmental Challenges

Even thoughtfully designed classrooms occasionally present challenges. Children's interests change, enrollment fluctuates, new materials are introduced, and classroom dynamics evolve throughout the year. Rather than viewing these situations as failures, effective educators recognize them as opportunities to observe, reflect, and make adjustments that better support children's learning and development.

When environmental challenges arise, educators should begin by carefully observing children's behavior and asking reflective questions about the classroom environment. Is the space organized in a way that encourages independence? Are learning centers inviting and engaging? Do children have enough room to move comfortably? Are materials accessible, complete, and developmentally appropriate? Are transitions smooth and predictable? Often, relatively small changes to the environment can significantly improve children's engagement while reducing frustration and challenging behaviors.

Observation remains one of the most valuable tools for improving classroom environments. By watching how children use materials, interact with peers, move throughout the classroom, and respond to different learning experiences, educators gain valuable information about what is working well and what may need to be adjusted. Effective educators continuously refine the environment based on children's interests, developmental needs, and emerging abilities rather than assuming that one classroom arrangement will meet children's needs throughout the year.

Designing effective environments is an ongoing process of observation, reflection, and improvement. As children's needs change, the environment should continue to evolve, providing new opportunities for exploration, independence, creativity, and meaningful learning.

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12.10: Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS-3, ITERS-3, SACERS-U, FCCERS-3)

High-quality learning environments are supported not only by professional judgment but also by research-based assessment tools that help educators evaluate classroom quality. Environmental Rating Scales provide structured methods for examining how well learning environments support children's health, safety, learning, relationships, and overall development. Rather than serving as simple checklists, these tools encourage educators to reflect on how classroom environments influence children's daily experiences.

Several Environmental Rating Scales are widely used in early childhood programs.

- **Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3)** (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2022) evaluates environments for children from birth to 36 months.
- **Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3) (**Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2022) assesses preschool classrooms serving children approximately 3 to 5 years of age.
- **School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition (SACERS-U) (**Harms, Jacobs, & White, 2025) evaluates before- and after-school programs serving school-age children.
- **Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (FCCERS-3)** (Harms, Jacobs, & White, 2024) assesses the quality of family child care homes.

Although each instrument is designed for a different setting, they share common goals. They examine classroom organization, health and safety practices, interactions, learning activities, routines, accessibility of materials, and opportunities for children's independence and engagement.

Environmental Rating Scales are intended to support continuous quality improvement rather than simply evaluate programs. Educators can use these tools to identify strengths, recognize opportunities for growth, and guide ongoing improvements to classroom environments. When used thoughtfully, they encourage reflection and help ensure that environments remain developmentally appropriate, inclusive, engaging, and responsive to children's changing needs.

Ultimately, no assessment tool can replace thoughtful observation or responsive teaching. However, Environmental Rating Scales provide valuable frameworks that help educators create environments where all children can learn, explore, and thrive.

Conclusion

The best classroom environments are never truly finished. They continue to grow and change alongside the children who learn within them. The environment is far more than the place where learning occurs. It is an active partner in children's growth, exploration, relationships, and well-being. Thoughtfully designed environments inspire curiosity, foster independence, and support positive behavior. Most importantly, they communicate a powerful message to every child: "*You belong here.*"

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12.11: Chapter Vocabulary

Environment as the third teacher: The concept that the physical space, materials, organization, schedule, and emotional climate actively influence children's development, behavior, relationships, and learning.

Sense of belonging: The feeling of being welcomed, accepted, connected, respected, and valued as an important member of a classroom community.

Calming space: A comfortable, supportive area where children can voluntarily relax, regulate their emotions, regain control, and prepare to return to classroom activities.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): The legal principle that children with disabilities should learn alongside children without disabilities to the greatest extent appropriate while receiving the supports needed for meaningful participation.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A framework for designing flexible learning environments that provide multiple ways for children to engage, access information, participate, communicate, and demonstrate learning.

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12.12: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **NAEYC: Building Environments That Encourage Positive Behavior/links to an external source:** Explains how classroom organization, schedules, routines, relationships, materials, and transitions can promote independence and prevent challenging behavior.
- **Head Start: The Importance of Schedules and Routines/links to an external source:** Describes how consistent schedules and predictable routines help children feel secure, develop independence, and participate successfully in daily activities.
- **CAST: Universal Design for Learning Guidelines 3.0/links to an external source:** Provides a framework for reducing barriers and designing equitable learning experiences that support children with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and ways of learning.
- **Environment Rating Scales/links to an external source:** Provides information about ECERS-3, ITERS-3, FCCERS-3, and SACERS-U and explains how the scales assess the quality of early childhood and school-age learning environments.

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13: PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

13.1: Chapter Introduction

13.2: Why Family Partnerships Matter

13.3: Respecting Families and Culture

13.4: Communicating Effectively with Families

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13.1: Chapter Introduction





Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 13.1:** Explain how trusting partnerships between families and educators support children's security, belonging, social-emotional development, and success across home and school environments.
- **SLO 13.2:** Demonstrate cultural humility and culturally responsive, anti-bias practices when interacting with families from diverse backgrounds.
- **SLO 13.3:** Apply respectful, reciprocal, and strengths-based communication strategies when sharing observations, conducting conferences, and establishing shared goals with families.
- **SLO 13.4:** Use active listening, objective documentation, collaborative problem-solving, and professional ethics when navigating differences or discussing developmental and behavioral concerns.

Chapter 13 Short Overview

This chapter examines how respectful, reciprocal partnerships between families and educators create continuity between home and school and strengthen children's social and emotional development. It explores trust, cultural humility, culturally responsive and anti-bias practices, effective two-way communication, and collaborative goal setting. The chapter also provides strategies for navigating differences, discussing concerns sensitively, maintaining confidentiality, and solving problems with families.

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13.2: Why Family Partnerships Matter



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Throughout this book, we have explored how children's social and emotional development is shaped by relationships with responsive adults. While early childhood educators play an important role in supporting this development, families remain children's first and most important teachers and the primary source of children's socialization (Berns, 2022). Partnerships that honor families' knowledge, experiences, and perspectives help children feel secure, understood, and supported.

This chapter explores strategies for building trusting relationships with families, communicating effectively, navigating differences respectfully, and collaborating to support children's social and emotional well-being.

Children thrive when the important adults in their lives work together. Positive partnerships between families and educators create continuity between home and school, helping children experience consistent expectations, routines, and emotional support. This consistency provides children with a greater sense of security and belonging while strengthening their social and emotional development.

These partnerships also strengthen the connections between children's home and school environments. As discussed in Chapter 6, Bronfenbrenner described these interactions as part of the child's *mesosystem*, recognizing that strong relationships between families and educators create a more supportive environment for children's development (Berns, 2022).

Family partnerships also help educators better understand each child as an individual. Families provide valuable insights into their child's temperament, interests, strengths, routines, cultural traditions, and life experiences. This information enables educators to build meaningful relationships, plan developmentally appropriate experiences, and respond to children's individual needs with greater sensitivity and effectiveness.

Families benefit from these partnerships as well. Open communication helps families understand what their children are learning, celebrate developmental progress, and work collaboratively with educators when challenges arise. When concerns are addressed through mutual respect and shared problem solving, families and educators become partners working toward the same goal: supporting the child's healthy development.

Strong partnerships are built on trust, respect, communication, and a shared commitment to children's well-being. Although families and educators may not always agree on every issue, maintaining a collaborative relationship allows them to work together in ways that promote children's success both at home and in the classroom (NAEYC, 2020).

Building Trust with Families

Trust is the foundation of every successful partnership between families and educators. Families are placing what is most precious to them in the care of another person. Developing trust takes time and grows through everyday interactions that demonstrate respect, honesty, reliability, and genuine concern for each child's well-being (NAEYC, 2020).

Trust begins with creating a welcoming environment where every family feels valued and respected. Greeting families warmly, learning the correct pronunciation of names, listening attentively, and showing interest in children's lives communicate that families belong and are important members of the classroom community (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2020; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015). Small, consistent acts of kindness often have a greater impact on building trust than occasional large gestures.

Building trust also requires educators to communicate openly and consistently. Families appreciate hearing about their child's

successes, friendships, discoveries, and joyful moments, not only about concerns or challenging behaviors. Sharing positive observations helps families recognize their child's growth and reassures them that educators truly know and value their child (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007a).

Trust grows when educators demonstrate respect for each family's culture, language, traditions, and child-rearing practices. Rather than making assumptions or judgments, educators seek to understand each family's perspectives and experiences. Asking thoughtful questions, listening with curiosity, and remaining open to different viewpoints strengthen relationships and foster mutual respect (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010; NAEYC, 2020).

Reliability is another important component of trust. Families learn to trust educators whose words match their actions. Following through on commitments, maintaining confidentiality, communicating honestly, and addressing concerns promptly demonstrate professionalism and integrity. Even when difficult conversations become necessary, trusting relationships make it easier for families and educators to work together toward positive solutions (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010).

Building trust is an ongoing process rather than a single event. Each respectful conversation, shared celebration, and collaborative decision strengthens the partnership between families and educators (York, 2016). Over time, these relationships create a supportive community where children experience the security of knowing that the important adults in their lives are working together to help them succeed (NAEYC, 2020).

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13.3: Respecting Families and Culture

Every family brings unique strengths, traditions, beliefs, and experiences that shape a child's social and emotional development (Derman-Sparks, Edwards, & Goins, 2020). Culture influences how families communicate, celebrate milestones, express emotions, solve problems, and care for young children (Peace Corps, 2008). Developing respectful partnerships begins with recognizing that there is no single "right" way to raise a child. Instead, educators strive to understand each family's values and work collaboratively to support children in ways that honor their home experiences (York, 2016; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020).

Culture is not inherited biologically (Berns, 2022). Rather, it is learned through everyday interactions with family members and the communities in which children grow and develop (York, 2016). A child born into one culture can be lovingly adopted into another and will naturally learn the traditions, beliefs, customs, and ways of interacting practiced by the family who raises them. As one educator beautifully expressed, *"One foot, many ways to dance."* Although every child begins life with the same capacity to learn, each family teaches its own unique ways of understanding and participating in the world.

Families are the experts on their own children (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010). They understand their child's temperament, personality, routines, interests, fears, communication style, and cultural traditions better than anyone else. Educators need to recognize this expertise and approach families with curiosity rather than assumptions. Instead of telling families what they should do, effective educators ask thoughtful questions, listen carefully, and work together to find solutions that support the child's development.

Cultural Humility

Building respectful relationships with families begins with cultural humility. Cultural humility is the ongoing practice of recognizing that we can never become experts on another person's culture. Instead, we remain open to learning from families, reflecting on our own beliefs and biases, and approaching every interaction with respect and curiosity (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; NAEYC, 2020).

Cultural competence and cultural humility are closely related but are not identical. Cultural competence involves developing the knowledge and skills needed to work effectively with families from diverse backgrounds. Cultural humility goes one step further by recognizing that every family is unique and that learning is an ongoing process (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015). Rather than assuming we already understand a family's experiences, cultural humility encourages educators to listen first, ask respectful questions, and remain open to new perspectives. Understanding the beliefs and values that underlie family practices allows educators to respond with greater empathy and effectiveness (Peace Corps, 2008).

Culturally Responsive Practice

Culturally responsive educators intentionally build bridges between children's home lives and their experiences in the classroom. Caregiving routines, teaching strategies, classroom environments, and curriculum should reflect and respect the cultures of the children and families being served. This includes learning about family routines, comforting practices, celebrations, communication styles, and expectations so that children experience continuity between home and school (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015; York, 2016; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; NAEYC, 2020).

Being culturally responsive also means recognizing that families may have different perspectives about sleeping, feeding, discipline, independence, emotional expression, and family roles. Rather than viewing these differences as problems to be corrected, educators seek to understand the values that shape them and work collaboratively with families whenever possible (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010).

Avoiding the Tourist Approach

Respecting culture involves much more than celebrating holidays, tasting foods from different countries, or displaying multicultural decorations. This superficial approach is sometimes referred to as the tourist approach because it presents culture as something that is briefly visited rather than genuinely understood (York, 2016; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Hall, 2008).

Authentic cultural responsiveness goes much deeper. It includes learning about families' everyday lives, values, beliefs,

communication styles, caregiving practices, and lived experiences. Educators avoid making assumptions or relying on stereotypes. Instead, they recognize that every family is unique, even among families who share similar cultural backgrounds (Hall, 2008).

Looking Beneath the Surface

Culture is often compared to an iceberg. Like an iceberg, some aspects of culture are easy to see, while many of the most influential aspects remain hidden beneath the surface (Peace Corps, 2008).

Visible aspects of culture include clothing, food, music, celebrations, traditions, and other observable customs (Peace Corps, 2008). These are often the first things educators notice.

Less visible aspects of culture include values, beliefs about child rearing, concepts of fairness, views of authority, communication styles, expectations for children's behavior, ideas about independence, religious beliefs, and family roles. Although these characteristics are less obvious, they often have a much greater influence on family decisions and interactions.

Understanding the deeper aspects of culture helps educators move beyond stereotypes and develop meaningful relationships with families based on respect and understanding (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020).

Figure 13.1. Understanding Culture beneath the Surface



The Understanding Culture beneath the Surface image was created by the author using AI.

Anti-Bias Practice

Creating culturally responsive classrooms also includes adopting an anti-bias approach (York, 2016). Anti-bias education encourages children to appreciate human diversity, treat others with kindness and respect, and recognize unfairness when it occurs. Educators model inclusive language, provide classroom materials that reflect diverse families and abilities, challenge stereotypes when they arise, and help children develop empathy for others.

For example, a child might say, "Boys cannot be nurses." Rather than ignoring the comment or simply saying that it is incorrect, the educator could respond, "Anyone can become a nurse if they complete the education and training. Nurses are people who help care for others." The educator might then share a book or photograph featuring a male nurse and invite children to discuss the many different jobs people can do. This response gently challenges the stereotype while helping children develop a more inclusive understanding of others.

An anti-bias approach benefits every child by creating a classroom community where differences are viewed as strengths rather

than barriers and where every child and family experiences a genuine sense of belonging (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Hall, 2008).

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13.4: Communicating Effectively with Families

Respectful partnerships are built through ongoing communication. Effective communication is more than simply exchanging information. It involves building relationships, developing trust, sharing observations, and working together to support children's learning and development.

Effective communication should be reciprocal. Educators share information while also inviting families to discuss their observations, experiences, concerns, and insights. Listening before offering advice or suggesting solutions communicates respect for families' expertise and helps educators avoid assumptions or recommendations that may not fit a family's culture, routines, or circumstances (Dombro et al., 2020). Because communication is shaped by culture, educators must also recognize that families may differ in how they express ideas, ask questions, interpret messages, or respond to concerns (Peace Corps, 2008). When families feel heard, understood, and respected, they are more likely to become active partners in their child's education.

Daily Communication

Positive communication begins with everyday interactions. Greeting families warmly at arrival and departure, smiling, making eye contact, and taking a few moments to ask about a family's day communicate that they are valued members of the classroom community. Although these conversations may last only a few minutes, they help establish trust and create opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop over time.

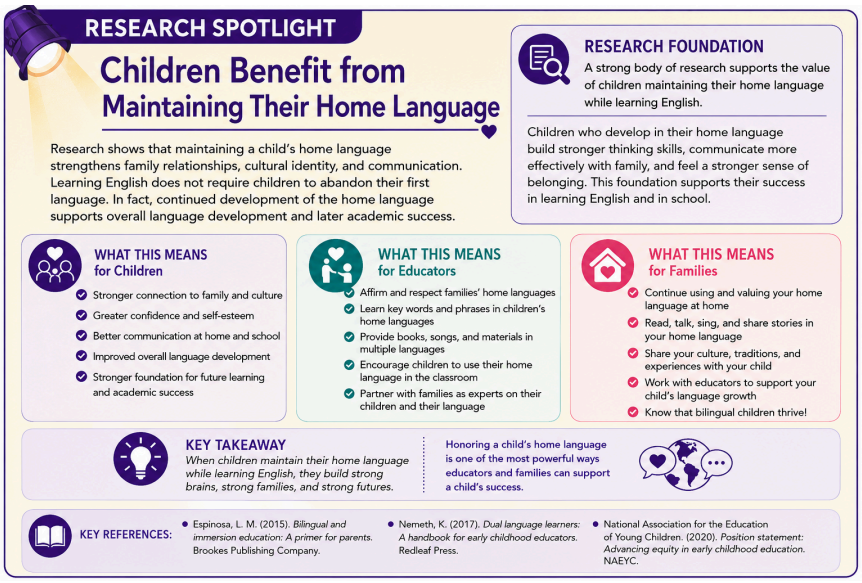
Daily communication may occur in many forms, including face-to-face conversations, written notes, daily reports, communication notebooks, text messages, classroom apps, or secure online platforms. Regardless of the method, communication should be timely, respectful, and focused on building positive relationships. Families appreciate receiving regular updates about their child's experiences, routines, and accomplishments rather than hearing from educators only when concerns arise.

Respecting Home Language

A family's home language is an important part of its culture, identity, and relationships. Language carries family stories, traditions, values, and emotional connections from one generation to the next. When educators respect and encourage children's home languages while supporting English language development, children are better able to maintain strong family relationships and develop positive cultural identities (Espinosa, 2015; York, 2016; Derman-Sparks et al., 2020).

Respecting home language does not require educators to speak every language represented in the classroom. Small efforts can make a meaningful difference. Learning to correctly pronounce children's and family members' names, greeting families in their home language whenever possible, translating important written materials, using interpreters or translation devices when needed, and incorporating multilingual books, labels, songs, and classroom materials communicate that every family is welcome and respected (Nemeth, 2017; NAEYC, 2020; York, 2016).

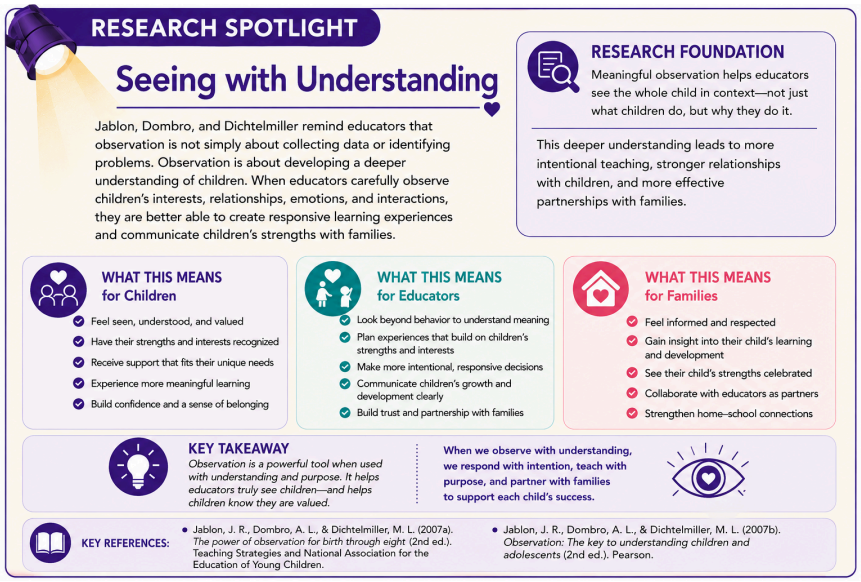
Educators should also reassure families that learning English does not require children to give up their home language. Research consistently demonstrates that maintaining a child's first language supports cognitive development, strengthens family relationships, and provides a strong foundation for learning additional languages. Families should be encouraged to continue speaking, reading, singing, and telling stories in the language they know best (Espinosa, 2015; Nemeth, 2017; NAEYC, 2020; York, 2016).



Sharing Observations

One of the most valuable forms of communication is sharing observations about children's everyday experiences. Effective observations go beyond simply reporting what happened. They help families understand how children are growing socially, emotionally, and developmentally. For example, rather than saying, "Emma had a good day today," an educator might share, "Emma noticed that another child was feeling sad and brought her a favorite stuffed animal to help her feel better." Specific examples make children's developing social and emotional skills visible to families (Curtis & Carter, 2013; Jablon et al., 2007a).

Educators can share observations in many ways, including brief conversations, photographs, anecdotal notes, portfolios with work samples, newsletters, or digital communication platforms. These authentic glimpses into children's daily experiences strengthen family partnerships and recognize children's accomplishments (Dombro et al., 2020; **Koralek,** Nemeth, & Ramsey, 2019; NAEYC, 2020).



Celebrating Children's Strengths

Celebrating children's strengths as well as addressing their needs supports children's social and emotional development. Families should regularly hear about their child's accomplishments, emerging skills, acts of kindness, creativity, and persistence. This

reassures families that educators truly know, appreciate, and value their child (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

Strengths-based communication intentionally recognizes children's efforts, progress, and unique abilities. This recognition helps children develop greater confidence, competence, and a positive sense of identity. Viewing children through a lens of possibility rather than deficit creates partnerships built on hope, trust, and a shared commitment to children's growth (Curtis & Carter, 2013; NAEYC, 2020).

Family Conferences

Family conferences provide opportunities for more in-depth conversations about children's development. Rather than functioning as one-way reports, effective conferences are collaborative discussions in which educators and families exchange information, recognize progress, identify goals, and work together to support the child's continued growth (Koralek et al., 2019; NAEYC, 2020). Beginning the conference by highlighting children's strengths helps establish a positive, collaborative tone before discussing areas of concern (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

Successful conferences begin with preparation. Educators gather observations, work samples, developmental assessments, and examples of children's strengths before meeting with families. During the conference, educators listen as much as they speak, invite families to share their observations, and encourage questions throughout the conversation. Together, families and educators can identify strategies that support children's learning both at home and in the classroom (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

Newsletters and Digital Communication

Newsletters, classroom websites, secure communication apps, emails, and digital portfolios help families stay connected to classroom life. These tools provide opportunities to share upcoming events, classroom activities, photographs, curriculum information, developmental information, and ideas for extending learning at home (Koralek et al., 2019; NAEYC, 2020).

When using digital communication, educators must always maintain confidentiality and follow program policies regarding photographs, videos, and electronic communication. Families should understand how information will be shared and have opportunities to provide consent when photographs or digital media are used (NAEYC, 2020).

Technology should enhance, not replace, personal relationships. Digital communication is most effective when it complements regular personal interactions rather than replacing them. Face-to-face conversations remain one of the most meaningful ways to build trust and maintain strong partnerships with families (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

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13.5: Collaborating to Support Children's Social and Emotional Development

The most effective partnerships occur when families and educators approach their relationship as a team. Children may behave differently at home and at school, so sharing observations from both settings can provide a more complete understanding of their experiences. Working toward common goals also creates greater consistency across environments, helping children feel safe, supported, and understood (Koralek et al., 2019).

Successful collaboration begins with recognizing that both families and educators bring valuable knowledge to the relationship. Families know their child's history, personality, routines, interests, and experiences outside of school. Educators contribute their understanding of child development, classroom environments, and children's classroom interactions with peers. Each sees a different part of the child's life. When these perspectives are shared, everyone develops a richer understanding of the child's strengths, needs, and development. This more complete understanding allows adults to provide responsive support that promotes healthy social and emotional development (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

Supporting Emotional Regulation Together

As discussed in Chapter 4, learning to regulate emotions is a gradual process that develops through supportive relationships with caring adults. Children are more likely to develop healthy self-regulation skills when families and educators work toward common goals and provide consistent messages about emotions and behavior (Dombro et al., 2020).

For example, if a child is learning to identify emotions using feeling words, educators can encourage families to use similar language at home. If deep breathing, a calming corner, sensory tools, or visual supports help a child regain emotional control at school, families may choose to adapt these strategies for use at home.

Consistency does not require families and educators to respond identically in every situation. Home and school naturally have different routines, expectations, and responsibilities. Instead, consistency involves making meaningful connections between settings while respecting each family's values, routines, and parenting practices. Even small connections help children transfer emerging skills from one setting to another and reassure them that the important adults in their lives are working together. This shared support strengthens children's confidence, emotional security, and sense of belonging (Koralek et al., 2019).

Sharing Strategies and Establishing Shared Goals

Families and educators each discover strategies that help individual children succeed. Sharing these ideas creates opportunities for everyone to learn, allows adults to draw upon one another's knowledge, and expands the support available to the child.

For example, a family may explain that their child responds well to visual schedules or enjoys helping with household responsibilities. An educator might notice that the child manages transitions more successfully when given advance notice or offered limited choices. By sharing these observations, families and educators can identify strategies that may be helpful across settings.

Collaboration can also reveal patterns that may not be visible in a single environment. A child who appears anxious during transitions at school may also struggle with changes in routine at home. Recognizing these patterns allows families and educators to develop responsive strategies based on a more complete understanding of the child (Dombro et al., 2020).

Using this shared understanding, families and educators can establish goals that are realistic, developmentally appropriate, and meaningful for the child. Rather than focusing only on reducing challenging behaviors, goals should emphasize building skills such as expressing emotions with words, waiting for a turn, asking for help, or solving problems with peers. As children grow and develop, these goals should be revisited and adjusted together. Regular communication allows families and educators to celebrate progress, discuss new challenges, and continue supporting the child's social and emotional development as partners (Koralek et al., 2019).



Collaboration Form Sample: Figure 13.2



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13.6: Conversation Starters - Opening the Door to Collaborative Conversations

Conversations about a child's development or behavior can feel uncomfortable for both educators and families. It is natural to feel nervous when discussing concerns, especially if emotions are involved or perspectives differ. One way to reduce defensiveness and encourage collaboration is to use door openers. Door openers are open-ended statements and questions that invite families to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. These conversation starters communicate respect, curiosity, and a willingness to listen. Rather than directing the conversation or offering immediate solutions, they encourage families to become active partners in understanding concerns and identifying solutions together (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

Examples of Door Openers:

Inviting families to share

- "What would you like me to know?"
- "Would you like to talk about…?"
- "Where would you like to begin?"

Exploring observations

- "Have you noticed recently that _____ is happening?"
- "I have recently noticed that…"
- "What do you think about…?"
- "Interesting. Tell me more."

Showing empathy

- "It sounds like you have really thought this through."
- "What is this like for you?"
- "Can you tell me how you are feeling about…?"

Planning together

- "What do you want to do next?"
- "I would like to know how you feel about this."
- "How can we work together to support your child?"

Avoid Saying…

- "Why did you…?"
- "You need to…"
- "You should…"
- "That's not what we do here."

Instead, use questions and statements that invite collaboration and keep the focus on working together to support the child. These door openers can be especially helpful when educators and families have different perspectives or when concerns about a child's development or behavior need to be discussed.

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13.7: Navigating Differences with Families

Even the strongest partnerships occasionally encounter differences in opinions, expectations, or approaches to caring for children. Families and educators come from diverse backgrounds and bring unique values, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives to their relationships with children. Differences should not be viewed as signs of failure or conflict. Instead, they provide opportunities to learn from one another, strengthen communication, and develop collaborative solutions that support children's well-being.

Successfully navigating differences requires educators to approach families with openness, curiosity, and respect. Rather than assuming that one approach is "right" and another is "wrong," effective educators seek to understand the values, beliefs, and experiences that shape each family's decisions. Behaviors that initially seem unfamiliar or confusing often reflect deeply held cultural values rather than inappropriate parenting practices (Peace Corps, 2008). Even when educators and families ultimately disagree, taking time to understand one another's perspectives creates the foundation for respectful dialogue and collaborative problem solving. Effective educators seek first to understand why families make the choices they do before deciding how to respond (WestEd, 2010).

Understanding Family Values

Every family has its own beliefs about raising children. These beliefs influence routines, discipline, sleeping arrangements, feeding practices, emotional expression, independence, family roles, and expectations for children's behavior. Many of these values are deeply rooted in family traditions, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and personal experiences.

When families make decisions that differ from an educator's own preferences, it is important to pause before making judgments. Asking questions such as, *"Can you tell me more about how your family approaches this?"* or *"I'd like to understand what works well for your child at home,"* demonstrates respect and invites meaningful conversation.

Understanding family values does not require educators to abandon professional standards or developmentally appropriate practices. Rather, it encourages educators to seek common ground whenever possible while maintaining their responsibility to support children's health, safety, and development.

Protective Urges

Early childhood educators naturally develop strong emotional connections with the children in their care. Because young children are vulnerable and depend upon adults for protection, educators often experience powerful feelings that motivate them to keep children safe, comforted, and successful. The Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC) describes these emotional reactions as *protective urges* (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010).

Protective urges are a normal and valuable part of caring for young children. They remind educators that children deserve nurturing relationships and responsive care. However, protective urges can sometimes influence how educators respond to families whose choices differ from their own beliefs or experiences.

For example, an educator may feel frustrated when a family responds differently to a child's behavior than the educator would choose. Before reacting, it is helpful to recognize that these emotional responses often arise from a genuine desire to protect the child. Acknowledging protective urges allows educators to respond thoughtfully rather than emotionally (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010).

Recognizing protective urges does not mean ignoring concerns about a child's well-being. Instead, it encourages educators to balance compassion for children with respect for families while remaining guided by professional ethics, developmentally appropriate practice, and legal responsibilities.

Looking Inward First

Before addressing differences with families, educators benefit from reflecting on their own thoughts and feelings. Every educator brings personal experiences, cultural values, family traditions, and beliefs about children into the classroom. These experiences

influence how situations are interpreted and how concerns are communicated.

Reflective practice begins by asking honest questions:

- Why am I feeling concerned about this situation?
- Is my reaction based on a developmental or safety concern or on my personal preferences?
- Could cultural values or family traditions explain what I am observing?
- Have I taken time to understand the family's perspective?
- How can I approach this conversation with curiosity rather than judgment?

Taking time for self-reflection helps educators distinguish between issues that involve children's health, safety, or development and those that simply reflect different, but equally valid, family practices (NAEYC, 2020). However, when observations raise reasonable suspicion of possible abuse or neglect, educators must follow the mandated-reporting requirements discussed in Chapter 5.

Engaging in Respectful Dialogue

When differences arise, respectful dialogue helps preserve trust while encouraging collaborative problem solving. Effective conversations begin with listening rather than persuading. Families want to know that their thoughts and experiences are valued before recommendations are offered.

Educators can support respectful dialogue by:

- Asking open-ended questions.
- Listening without interrupting.
- Acknowledging the family's feelings and concerns.
- Sharing observations rather than assumptions.
- Using objective, nonjudgmental language.
- Focusing on the child's needs rather than assigning blame.
- Working together to identify solutions.

Many disagreements are resolved when both parties feel heard and respected. However, finding common ground does not require complete agreement. Strong partnerships are built on mutual respect, open communication, and a shared commitment to helping children thrive. By approaching differences with humility, empathy, and professionalism, educators and families can develop solutions that honor family values while supporting children's healthy social and emotional development (NAEYC, 2020). When agreement is not possible, respectful communication preserves trust and keeps the child's well-being at the center of the conversation (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010; NAEYC, 2020).

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13.8: Having Difficult Conversations

At times, educators and families need to discuss concerns about a child's development, behavior, health, or learning. These conversations can feel uncomfortable for everyone involved, especially when emotions are involved or perspectives differ. However, when approached with preparation, empathy, and respect, difficult conversations can strengthen partnerships rather than damage them (Peace Corps, 2008).

The purpose of a difficult conversation is not to convince families that the educator is right. It is to share observations, understand the family's perspective, and work together to support the child. The communication practices discussed earlier in this chapter, including listening carefully, recognizing children's strengths, sharing objective observations, and working toward shared goals, are especially important during sensitive conversations (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010; NAEYC, 2020).

Prepare Before the Conversation

Successful conversations begin long before families arrive for a meeting. Educators should gather objective observations, documentation, work samples, or assessment information that clearly illustrates the concern. Information should describe patterns rather than isolated incidents and distinguish observable behavior from interpretation. Educators should also reflect on their own emotions, expectations, and possible biases before meeting with the family (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010).

Choose an Appropriate Setting

Sensitive conversations require adequate time and privacy. Concerns should not be discussed hurriedly during arrival or dismissal when children and other families are present. Instead, educators should arrange a meeting in a quiet, comfortable location where everyone has sufficient time to speak, listen, and ask questions.

A welcoming environment communicates respect and encourages collaborative problem solving. Sitting beside families rather than across a desk, minimizing distractions, and allowing sufficient time for questions helps create a more relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

Listening Before Advising

One of the most important skills educators can develop is the ability to listen before offering advice. Families want to feel heard, respected, and understood. Before suggesting solutions, educators should invite families to share their observations, experiences, and concerns (Dombro et al., 2020). Taking time to understand the beliefs that influence a family's decisions helps prevent misunderstandings and supports more respectful conversations (Peace Corps, 2008).

Families bring important knowledge about their child's experiences, routines, strengths, and behaviors outside the classroom. Beginning the conversation with open-ended questions invites families to share this knowledge.

Educators can use questions such as:

- "What have you noticed at home?"
- "Have you observed anything similar?"
- "What strategies seem to work well for your child?"
- "Is there anything you would like me to understand about this situation?"

These questions acknowledge the family's expertise and may reveal information that changes or expands the educator's understanding of the concern (California Department of Education & WestEd, 2010; Peace Corps, 2008).

Listening carefully invites families into collaborative problem solving, helps them feel heard and respected, and enables educators to avoid assumptions or recommendations that may not fit the family's culture, routines, or circumstances (WestEd, 2010). When families feel genuinely heard, they are more likely to participate actively in developing solutions and implementing shared

strategies. Collaboration then becomes a partnership rather than a series of recommendations (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019).

Pay Attention to Tone of Voice

Families often remember how educators made them feel as much as they remember the words that were spoken. A calm, respectful tone of voice communicates empathy, professionalism, and genuine concern. Speaking slowly, avoiding educational jargon, using person-first or family-preferred language, and acknowledging family emotions help preserve trust throughout the conversation.

Educators should allow families time to process information and respond, while avoiding becoming defensive if perspectives differ. Even when discussing difficult topics, educators should continue to recognize the child's strengths. Doing so communicates that the child is known and viewed as a whole person, not simply as a concern that needs to be addressed (Dombro et al., 2020; Koralek et al., 2019). Beginning and ending the conversation with positive observations remind families that their child is valued, capable, and appreciated.

Describe Concerns Objectively

When discussing concerns, educators should describe what they have observed rather than offering conclusions or labels. Objective observations focus on specific behaviors that can be seen and heard rather than interpretations or assumptions. Educators should use objective and specific language. For example, instead of saying, "Liam has difficulty controlling his emotions," an educator might say, "During the past two weeks, I observed Liam cry for approximately 5 to 10 minutes on four occasions after he reached for a toy another child was using and could not use it immediately." Objective descriptions provide a shared starting point for discussion without assigning labels or blame (Jablon et al., 2007a).

Address Developmental Concerns with Sensitivity

When developmental concerns arise, families may experience a range of emotions, including surprise, sadness, fear, denial, or relief. Educators should acknowledge these emotions while emphasizing that the purpose of the conversation is to support the child's success.

Rather than diagnosing children or predicting future outcomes, educators share what they have observed, explain why the behaviors may warrant additional attention, and discuss possible next steps. When appropriate, families can be provided with information about developmental screening, early intervention services, or other community resources.

Negotiate Solutions Together

The most productive conversations end with a collaborative plan rather than a list of recommendations. Families and educators should identify realistic goals, discuss strategies that can be used both at home and at school, and decide how they will communicate about the child's progress.

Not every strategy will work for every family. Effective solutions respect family values, cultural practices, available resources, and daily routines while continuing to support the child's development. Working together reinforces the message that everyone shares the same goal: helping the child succeed.

Follow Up

A single conversation rarely resolves every concern. Strong partnerships continue through ongoing communication, shared observations, and regular follow-up. Checking in with families, celebrating progress, and adjusting strategies as needed demonstrates that educators remain committed to working together over time.

Although difficult conversations may never feel easy, approaching them with empathy, preparation, and respect strengthens relationships and builds trust. Families are more likely to engage in collaborative problem solving when they know educators genuinely care about their child and value their perspectives (NAEYC, 2020; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015).

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13.9: Understanding, Competence, and Honesty

Early childhood educators are expected to develop knowledge about child development, family engagement, cultural responsiveness, and effective teaching practices. However, no educator has all the answers. Every child, family, and situation is unique, and there will be times when educators encounter questions or challenges beyond their own experience.

Professional competence includes recognizing the limits of one's knowledge and being willing to continue learning throughout a career. Honest communication builds trust with families. Rather than pretending to know an answer, educators can acknowledge when additional information is needed and commit to finding accurate, reliable resources. Families appreciate honesty, and admitting uncertainty demonstrates professionalism rather than weakness (NAEYC, 2020).

Professional growth also involves reflecting on practice, seeking feedback, participating in professional development, and remaining open to new ideas. As research continues to expand, so does our understanding of children's development and learning. Effective educators continue learning alongside the children and families they serve (Curtis & Carter, 2013).

Maintaining professional competence also means recognizing when additional support may benefit a child or family. Educators play an important role in identifying concerns and sharing observations, but they do not diagnose developmental delays or provide medical, psychological, or therapeutic services. Instead, they collaborate with families and appropriate professionals while remaining within the scope of their own professional responsibilities (NAEYC, 2020).

The Three Foundations of Trust Figure 13.3



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13.10: Seeking Support While Maintaining Confidentiality

Supporting children and families is a shared responsibility. When questions or concerns arise, educators should seek guidance from supervisors, mentors, special education professionals, mental health consultants, or other members of the educational team as appropriate. Seeking assistance demonstrates professionalism and a commitment to providing the best possible support for children and families.

At the same time, educators have an ethical responsibility to protect children's and families' privacy. Information about a child or family should be shared only with individuals who have a legitimate educational need to know and in accordance with program policies and applicable laws. Conversations about children should never occur in public spaces where they may be overheard or with individuals who are not directly involved in supporting the child (NAEYC, 2020).

Confidentiality extends to written documentation, electronic communication, photographs, and digital records. Educators should follow program policies regarding the storage and sharing of confidential information and obtain appropriate permissions before sharing photographs or other identifying information with families or the public.

Maintaining confidentiality does not prevent educators from seeking guidance. Rather, it means sharing information thoughtfully, respectfully, and only with those who are professionally involved in supporting the child. Protecting confidentiality strengthens trust and demonstrates respect for every child and family.

Conclusion

Strong family partnerships are built one relationship at a time. They develop through everyday conversations, mutual respect, shared observations, active listening, and a genuine commitment to working together in the best interest of children. Although families and educators may occasionally experience differences in perspectives or expectations, these moments provide opportunities to strengthen trust through respectful communication and collaborative problem solving.

Families remain children's first and most influential teachers, while educators bring professional knowledge of child development and learning. Together, families and educators create a consistent network of support that helps children develop confidence, resilience, empathy, emotional regulation, and a strong sense of belonging.

Every interaction with a family matters. A warm greeting, a thoughtful observation, a respectful conversation, or a moment of shared celebration contributes to a partnership that supports children's healthy social and emotional development. When educators approach families with curiosity, humility, honesty, and compassion, they create relationships that benefit not only children but also the entire learning community.

When families and educators work together, children receive one of life's greatest gifts: the confidence of knowing that the important adults in their lives are united in helping them learn, grow, and thrive.

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13.11: Chapter Vocabulary

Family partnership: A respectful, collaborative relationship in which families and educators share information, expertise, decision-making, and responsibility for supporting a child.

Cultural humility: The ongoing practice of reflecting on one's own beliefs and biases while remaining open to learning from each family's unique culture, values, and experiences.

Culturally responsive practice: An approach that respects families' cultures, languages, traditions, and caregiving practices and incorporates them meaningfully into the learning environment.

Reciprocal communication: A two-way exchange in which educators and families both share information, listen to one another, and contribute their knowledge and perspectives.

Strengths-based communication: Communication that recognizes and builds upon a child's abilities, interests, relationships, progress, and family resources while addressing areas in which support may be needed.

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13.12: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Head Start: Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework /links to an external source:** Provides a research-based framework for developing collaborative relationships that support positive outcomes for children, families, and early childhood programs.
- **NAEYC: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections/links to an external source:** Explains how educators can recognize families as experts on their children and develop respectful, reciprocal relationships as part of developmentally appropriate practice.
- **California Department of Education: Family Partnerships and Culture/links to a pdf:** Offers guidance and reflective activities that help early childhood educators understand culture, examine their assumptions, and build culturally responsive partnerships with families.
- **ZERO TO THREE: Family Partnerships and Engagement in Early Childhood Systems/links to an external source:** Describes meaningful, culturally respectful family engagement and its importance for children's development, family well-being, and positive family-child relationships.

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14: THE TEACHER'S ROLE AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

14.1: Chapter Introduction

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14.1: Chapter Introduction



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 14.1:** Explain how educators' emotional intelligence, self-awareness, emotional triggers, modeling, and emotional tone influence children and the classroom environment.
- **SLO 14.2:** Apply relationship-based practices, co-regulation, intentional teaching, relationship repair, and the WAGER framework to support children's social competence and sense of belonging.
- **SLO 14.3:** Describe the levels of the Social Support Pyramid and select appropriate universal, targeted, or individualized supports based on children's needs.
- **SLO 14.4:** Differentiate ongoing authentic assessment from developmental screening and use observations, documentation, and assessment results to plan responsive social-emotional supports.

Chapter 14 Short Overview

This chapter examines how educators' emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and responses influence children's emotional security, behavior, and social development. It explores relationship-based teaching, co-regulation, the Social Support Pyramid, intentional instruction, relationship repair, professional boundaries, and the WAGER framework. The chapter also explains how observation, authentic assessment, the DRDP, and developmental screening help educators individualize support for children.

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14.2: The Teacher's Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

To nurture children's emotional well-being, teachers must first understand their own. Emotional intelligence, the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions while responding effectively to the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995). It is a cornerstone of effective teaching. In early childhood education, every interaction between teacher and child becomes an opportunity to model emotional regulation, empathy, and respect. Through these warm, responsive relationships, children gradually learn to recognize the feelings and perspectives of others, laying the foundation for empathy, cooperation, and moral understanding (Damon, 1988).

1. Understanding Emotional Triggers and "Shark Music"

Teaching young children requires patience, flexibility, and self-reflection. Even experienced educators encounter moments of frustration, exhaustion, or stress. Teachers who develop self-awareness recognize these emotional triggers and learn to pause before reacting.

The Circle of Security framework (Cooper, Hoffman, Powell, & Marvin, 1999) uses the term "shark music" to describe the internal alarm system that can be activated when a child's behavior triggers our fears, anxieties, or unresolved experiences. Just as suspenseful music in a movie signals that danger may be approaching, shark music refers to the uncomfortable emotions that arise when we perceive a situation as threatening, even when no actual danger exists.

For example, a child's defiance may trigger feelings of anger or inadequacy, while a child's distress may activate anxiety or a strong desire to rescue. In these moments, educators may be responding not only to the child's behavior, but also to their own past experiences, assumptions, or emotional vulnerabilities.

Recognizing our shark music allows us to pause, reflect, and choose responsiveness over reactivity. Rather than acting impulsively, educators can ask themselves: What is the child trying to communicate? What emotions have been activated in me? How can I respond in a way that preserves the relationship while supporting the child's growth?

When adults manage their emotions constructively, children learn that big feelings can be handled safely and calmly (Hyson, 2004). When educators learn to recognize and manage their own emotional reactions, they are better able to remain calm, emotionally available, and responsive. This self-awareness strengthens relationships, helps create the sense of safety, and builds trust that supports children's social and emotional development.

2. Modeling Empathy and Compassion

Children learn empathy through consistent, caring relationships. Teachers who respond with warmth and understanding, even in challenging moments, help children internalize empathy as a way of being. For example, acknowledging a child's disappointment instead of dismissing it communicates, "Your feelings matter." Compassionate responses build trust and demonstrate that emotional safety is part of the learning environment (Denham, 2006).

3. Reflective Practice and Continuous Growth

Self-awareness grows through reflection. Reflective teachers regularly ask themselves:

- How did my tone affect that interaction?
- What might this child be feeling right now?
- How can I respond in a way that builds connection rather than control?

Reflection transforms experience into insight. Whether through journaling, peer discussion, or supervision, reflective practice encourages educators to view challenges as opportunities for growth. Over time, this mindset cultivates resilience, empathy, and a stronger professional identity (Schön, 1983).

4. Emotional Intelligence as Ethical Practice

Emotionally intelligent educators create classrooms rooted in respect and compassion. Their awareness of self and others supports ethical decision-making, positive guidance, and inclusive practices. When teachers model emotional honesty and humility, they teach children that mistakes are part of learning and that relationships are repaired through kindness and accountability.

As Goleman (1995) reminds us, emotional intelligence can be learned and strengthened throughout life. When educators commit to understanding their own emotions, they bring calm, authenticity, and humanity into the classroom. In doing so, they don't just teach emotional intelligence; they embody it.

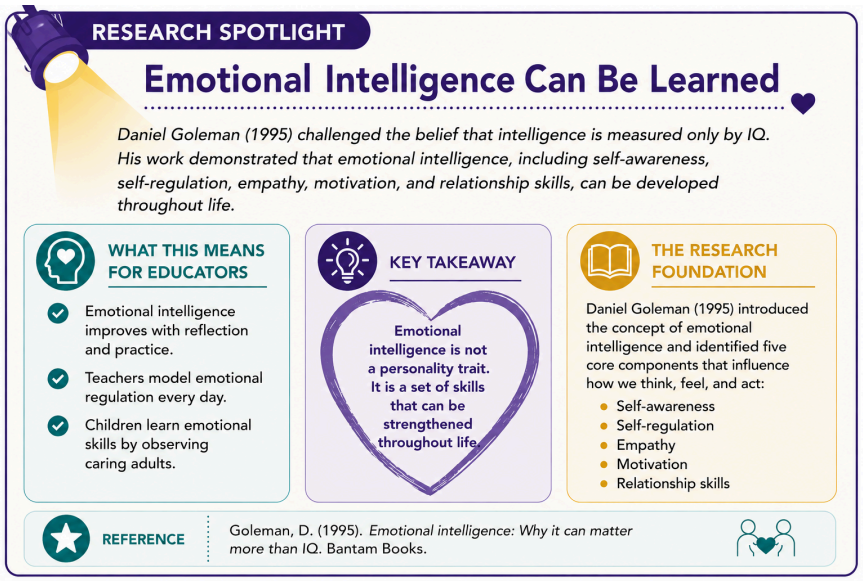
Emotional intelligence is valuable not only in interactions with children but also in relationships with colleagues, families, and community partners. Educators who develop emotional intelligence are often more effective communicators, collaborators, and leaders.

Emotionally intelligent leaders:

- Listen actively and respectfully.
- Manage conflict constructively.
- Demonstrate empathy and understanding.
- Build trust within teams.
- Support positive workplace relationships.
- Make thoughtful and ethical decisions (Goleman, 1995).

Whether serving as a classroom teacher, mentor, lead teacher, site supervisor, or program director, emotional intelligence influences the climate of the entire learning community. Leaders who regulate their emotions and communicate with empathy create environments where others feel valued, respected, and supported.

As educators grow professionally, emotional intelligence becomes increasingly important. The ability to understand oneself, build healthy relationships, and respond thoughtfully to challenges is not only a teaching skill; it is a leadership skill.



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14.3: Emotional Contagion - Children Borrow Our Emotions

Young children are highly sensitive to the emotional states of the adults around them. They watch facial expressions, listen to tone of voice, and pay attention to body language long before they fully understand spoken language. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as emotional contagion, occurs when emotions are transmitted from one person to another through social interaction. In many ways, emotions can spread through a classroom much like a ripple spreads across a pond.

Children often look to trusted adults to determine whether a situation is safe, frightening, exciting, or stressful. When educators remain calm during challenging situations, children are more likely to feel secure and regulate their own emotions. Conversely, when adults become visibly anxious, angry, or overwhelmed, children may absorb and mirror those emotions.

Before children can borrow our calm, they often borrow our anxiety.

This reality highlights the importance of emotional self-awareness. Educators who recognize and manage their own emotional states are better equipped to create classrooms characterized by safety, trust, and emotional stability. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to model healthy emotional regulation and demonstrate that difficult feelings can be managed constructively.



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14.4: Mirror Neurons - Children Borrow Our Emotions

While emotional contagion describes what we observe in relationships, mirror neuron research offers one possible explanation for why learning through observation is so powerful. Long before children can fully explain their thoughts or feelings, they are already learning through the relationships and experiences they share with trusted adults.

Mirror neurons were first identified in the early 1990s when researchers studying macaque monkeys noticed that certain brain cells became active not only when a monkey grasped a peanut, but also when it watched a researcher reach for another peanut. This unexpected discovery prompted researchers to investigate whether similar neural systems help humans learn through observation, imitation, and social interaction (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004).

Research on mirror neurons may help explain why learning through observation is so powerful. Mirror neurons are specialized brain cells that become active both when a person performs an action and when they observe someone else performing that same action. Scientists believe mirror neurons may play an important role in imitation, empathy, and social learning, although research continues to explore exactly how they contribute to these complex processes (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004).

For early childhood educators, this research reinforces an important principle: our everyday interactions are powerful teaching tools. Children notice far more than our words. They observe our facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and the ways we respond to both joyful and stressful situations. When educators respond to frustration with patience, solve problems respectfully, comfort a child with empathy, or remain calm during challenging situations, children observe these behaviors and gradually begin to make them their own. Likewise, when adults respond with anger, sarcasm, or impatience, children may also imitate those emotional responses.

Mirror neurons do not suggest that children simply copy every behavior they see. Rather, they remind us that learning occurs within relationships. Children develop social and emotional skills through repeated experiences with caring adults who consistently model kindness, emotional regulation, cooperation, and respect. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to teach, not only through words, but through actions.

This understanding reinforces one of the central themes of this textbook: children learn who they are through the adults who care for them. Our calm presence, thoughtful responses, and compassionate relationships help children develop the emotional skills, empathy, and resilience they will carry throughout their lives. In many ways, educators teach emotional intelligence simply by living it.

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14.5: Responding Rather Than Reacting

Teaching young children can be emotionally demanding. Children may cry, argue, refuse directions, or display challenging behaviors that trigger frustration in adults. In these moments, emotionally intelligent educators learn to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

A reaction is often immediate and driven by emotion. A response involves pausing, reflecting, and choosing an action that supports both the child and the relationship.

Emotionally intelligent educators develop the habit of creating a brief pause between a child's behavior and their own response. During this pause, they ask themselves questions such as:

- What is the child trying to communicate?
- What might the child be feeling right now?
- What response will teach rather than punish?
- How can I preserve the relationship while addressing the behavior?

This reflective pause allows educators to move from control to connection. Instead of focusing solely on stopping a behavior, they focus on understanding the need behind the behavior and teaching more appropriate ways to communicate that need.

Over time, children internalize these calm and thoughtful responses, gradually developing the ability to pause and regulate their own emotions

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14.6: The Role of Educators in Supporting Social Competence

Early childhood educators play a central role in nurturing children's social and emotional growth. Through daily interactions, teachers model empathy, patience, and respect, which creates safe, predictable relationships that form the foundation for social competence (Denham, 2006; Hyson, 2004). Because young children learn through observation and imitation, the educator's emotional tone and responses become very powerful teaching tools.

Effective educators intentionally design environments that encourage cooperation, communication, and problem-solving. This should be seen as an important part of the curriculum and not as an interruption to the curriculum. This means educators should create opportunities for children to practice social skills during play, group projects, routines, and throughout the day. Simple strategies, such as greeting each child by name, labeling emotions, and narrating positive peer interactions, help children learn the language of feelings and relationships (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Many everyday communication strategies can help educators strengthen children's self-esteem while building warm, responsive relationships. Some examples include:

Skills for Promoting Children's Self-Esteem through Verbal Communication (Kostelnik, Soderman, Phipps Whiren, Rupiper, & Murphy Gregory, 2015):

- Greet children as they arrive.
- Use children's names.
- Invite children to interact with you.
- Speak politely to children.
- Listen attentively.
- Provide verbal encouragement to children as they refine and expand their skills.
- Use nonjudgemental vocabulary and tone.
- Point out to children the positive effects their actions have on others.
- Focus on some positive aspect of children's efforts to do something, not simply the product they achieve.
- Be honest in your praise and offer children authentic feedback.
- Invite children to elaborate on what they are saying.
- Use brief silence to invite conversation.
- Wait for children to answer. (Silently count to 10)

These simple communication strategies help children feel respected, competent, and emotionally safe while strengthening the trusting relationships that support healthy social and emotional development.

Equally important is the educator's role in co-regulation: supporting children in managing strong emotions before they can do so independently. When a teacher calmly helps a child breathe, offers comfort, or guides problem-solving after conflict, that experience teaches self-regulation through connection, not control (Hyson, 2004). These daily moments accumulate into a powerful message: "You are safe, your feelings are valid, and you can learn to handle them."

Educators who view behavior as communication rather than misbehavior foster trust and emotional safety. They use guidance strategies rooted in empathy and reflection. They are redirecting rather than punishing, and they are coaching rather than controlling. Over time, these types of approaches cultivate classrooms where kindness, cooperation, and inclusion are at the center and becomes the norm.

By modeling emotional intelligence and reflective practice, early educators help children build the relational skills that will serve them throughout life. In this way, teaching social competence is not an "extra." It is the heart of high-quality early childhood education (Denham, 2006; Hyson, 2004).

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14.7: A Pyramid of Support for Social-Emotional Development

Supporting children's social and emotional development requires more than responding to challenging behavior when it occurs. Effective educators create a foundation of relationships, environments, and teaching practices that help children develop social competence, emotional regulation, and positive behavior over time. One useful framework for understanding this process is the Social Support Pyramid, developed by Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain (2003).

The Social Support Pyramid illustrates a continuum of support in which the needs of all children are addressed through strong relationships and supportive environments, while additional teaching and individualized interventions are provided for children who require extra support. The model emphasizes prevention, connection, and intentional teaching rather than punishment or control.

Positive Relationships: The Foundation

At the base of the pyramid are positive relationships. Relationships form the foundation of all social-emotional learning. Children learn best when they feel safe, valued, and connected to caring adults. Warm, responsive relationships foster trust, emotional security, and a sense of belonging. When educators consistently demonstrate empathy, patience, and respect, children are more likely to develop confidence, cooperation, and emotional resilience.

Positive relationships include:

- Warm and responsive interactions
- Consistent emotional support
- Trust and attachment
- Respectful communication
- Meaningful connections with children and families

Without positive relationships, the higher levels of the pyramid become much more difficult to achieve.

Supportive Environments: Creating Conditions for Success

The second level of the pyramid focuses on creating supportive environments. Classroom environments can either support or hinder children's social-emotional development. Thoughtful classroom design, predictable routines, clear expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation help children feel secure and successful.

Supportive environments include:

- Consistent daily routines
- Emotionally safe classroom spaces
- Visual schedules and supports
- Clear expectations and boundaries
- Opportunities for choice and independence

When children know what to expect, they are better able to regulate their emotions and engage positively with others.

Teaching and Coaching Social-Emotional Skills

The third level emphasizes intentional teaching and coaching. Social competence is not something children simply "pick up." Like literacy and math, social-emotional skills must be taught, modeled, practiced, and reinforced.

Educators teach social-emotional skills by:

- Modeling emotional intelligence
- Teaching emotional vocabulary
- Coaching children through conflicts
- Encouraging empathy and perspective-taking
- Teaching problem-solving strategies
- Supporting self-regulation

These teaching moments often occur naturally during play, routines, and daily interactions.

Intensive Individualized Interventions

At the top of the pyramid are intensive individualized interventions. While the majority of children benefit from the first three levels of support, some children require additional individualized strategies. These supports are designed to address significant social-emotional, behavioral, or developmental challenges.

Individualized interventions may include:

- Functional behavior assessments
- Individual behavior support plans
- Collaboration with families
- Consultation with specialists
- Targeted social-emotional instruction
- Referral for additional services when appropriate

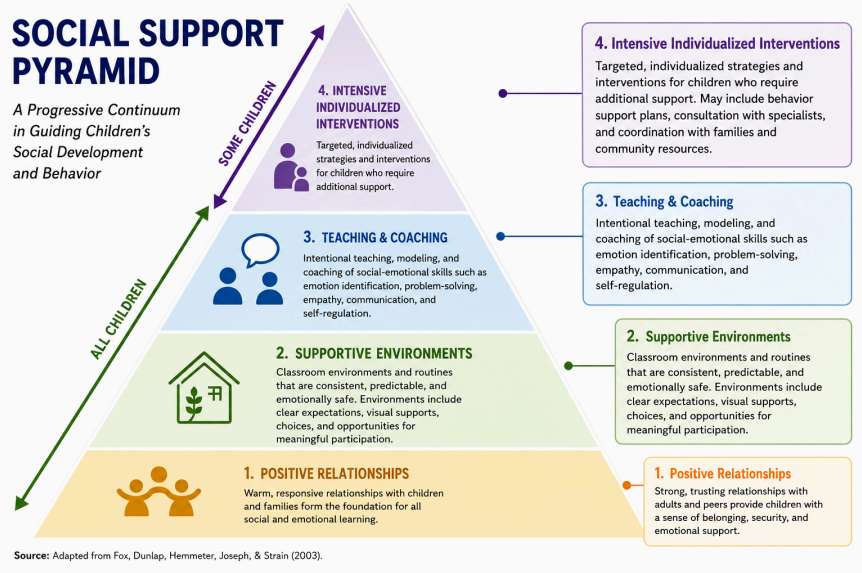
Importantly, individualized interventions are built upon the lower levels of the pyramid rather than replacing them.

Why the Pyramid Matters

One of the most important messages of the Social Support Pyramid is that social-emotional development is everyone's responsibility. Rather than focusing solely on correcting challenging behavior, educators work proactively to build relationships, create supportive environments, and teach social-emotional skills. When these foundational supports are in place, most children thrive, and those who need additional support can be identified and helped more effectively.

The pyramid also reminds educators that behavior is communication. Challenging behaviors are often signals that a child needs additional support, instruction, or connection rather than punishment. By strengthening the foundation of relationships and support, educators can help all children develop the skills necessary for social competence and emotional well-being.

Social Support Pyramid: A Progressive Continuum in Guiding Children's Social Development and Behavior (adapted from Fox et al., 2003): Figure 13.2



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14.8: Fostering Social Competence Through Intentional Teaching

Social competence does not develop by chance, it grows through intentional, relationship-based teaching that values connection over compliance. Educators play a crucial role in creating the emotional climate where children feel safe to take social risks, make mistakes, and learn from them. Intentional teaching means observing children closely, recognizing teachable moments, and responding with strategies that promote understanding, empathy, and self-control (Denham, 2006; Hyson, 2004).

Educators can foster social competence through a variety of intentional practices that promote emotional awareness, empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation, including the following:

1. Modeling Emotional Intelligence

Children learn far more from what adults "**do**" than from what they "**say**." When teachers handle frustration calmly, apologize when appropriate, and speak respectfully to others, they model emotional regulation and empathy in real time. A teacher who takes a deep breath before addressing conflict shows that strong emotions can be managed constructively. Modeling these behaviors helps children internalize calm problem-solving as a normal response to challenges (Hyson, 2004).

2. Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching involves helping children recognize, name, and manage their emotions. When an educator acknowledges a child's feelings, "I can see you're upset that your tower fell. That's frustrating!" the child feels seen and supported. This connection helps reduce emotional intensity and builds the child's vocabulary for self-expression. Gottman et al. (1997) describe this as the foundation of emotional intelligence: children who understand their feelings can regulate them more effectively and empathize with others.

3. Using Effective Praise and Encouragement

Praise is most effective when it is intentional, specific, and focused on supporting children's developing competence rather than simply evaluating performance. Thoughtful encouragement helps children recognize positive behaviors, develop self-confidence, and strengthen healthy relationships. Rather than relying on tangible rewards, educators can use meaningful interactions, authentic feedback, and positive attention to reinforce behaviors that promote cooperation, kindness, and persistence.

Effective praise is characterized by three important qualities:

1. Be Specific

Specific praise helps children understand exactly which behavior is being reinforced. Rather than saying, "Good job," educators can identify the behavior by saying, "You used walking feet all the way to the table," or "You shared one of your trucks with Janice. Look how happy that made her." By identifying the specific behavior, children are more likely to repeat it.

2. Be Positive

Whenever possible, praise should focus on the desired behavior rather than reminding children about inappropriate behavior. For example, instead of saying, "I'm glad you stopped hitting," an educator might say, "I noticed you asked for a turn. Great job using your words." This keeps the emphasis on successful social skills.

3. Be Selective

Not every behavior requires praise. Selective praise helps encouragement remain meaningful and supports children's

development of intrinsic motivation. Overusing praise may reduce its impact or encourage children to depend on adult approval rather than developing their own sense of accomplishment.

Positive attention extends beyond words. A smile, eye contact, a high-five, a thumbs-up, a wink, or spending a few extra moments engaged in conversation can communicate approval just as effectively as verbal praise. These authentic interactions strengthen relationships while helping children develop confidence, emotional security, and a sense of belonging.

4. Using “I” Statements to Communicate Feelings

One practical strategy for helping children develop emotional literacy and social competence is teaching them to use “I” statements. An I statement helps children identify their feelings, communicate their needs, and express themselves in respectful ways. Rather than blaming or criticizing others, children learn to take ownership of their emotions and communicate them clearly.

Sometimes simply naming a feeling is enough to help a child feel understood and begin to calm down. When children have the language to express emotions, they are less likely to rely on challenging behaviors to communicate their needs.

Because children’s language develops gradually, I statements can be introduced in stages.

Around Age Two: Naming Feelings

Young children begin by identifying and labeling emotions.

> **I feel _____.**

Examples:

- I feel happy.
- I feel sad.
- I feel angry.
- I feel scared.

Learning to label emotions is an important first step in developing self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Around Age Three: Connecting Feelings to Experiences

As language skills develop, children can begin connecting emotions to specific events.

> **I feel _____ when _____.**

Examples:

- I feel happy when you play with me.
- I feel sad when my mommy leaves.
- I feel angry when someone takes my toy.

Connecting feelings to experiences helps children understand that emotions have causes and can be communicated to others.

Around Age Four: Explaining Why

Older preschoolers can begin expressing both their feelings and the reasons behind them.

> **I feel _____ when _____, because _____.**

Examples:

- I feel happy when you sit with me because I like spending time together.
- I feel angry when my tower is knocked down because I worked hard on it.
- I feel sad when my friend will not play with me because I feel left out.

Understanding the reasons behind emotions helps children develop perspective-taking, problem-solving skills, and empathy.

Educators can model I statements throughout the day by verbalizing their own feelings in calm and respectful ways. Statements such as, “I feel frustrated when materials are left on the floor because someone could trip,” demonstrate how emotions can be expressed without blame or criticism. Over time, children learn that feelings are normal, manageable, and appropriate to communicate through words. Teaching children to use I statements promotes emotional awareness, self-regulation, conflict resolution, and healthy relationships, which are skills that form the foundation of social and emotional competence.

5. Supporting Co-Regulation

As discussed previously in Chapter 4, before children can self-regulate, they rely on adults for co-regulation. This means borrowing the educator’s calm presence to stabilize their own emotions. Gentle guidance such as sitting beside a child, using a soft tone, or offering a choice, such as “Would you like to build again or read a book together?” communicates safety and control. These interactions strengthen neural pathways for self-regulation and trust (Denham, 2006).

6. Embedding Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into Play and Daily Routines

Play offers the perfect context for practicing cooperation, negotiation, and empathy. Through role play, group projects, and shared problem-solving, children test social boundaries in safe, supported ways. Teachers can scaffold these moments by commenting on positive interactions, such as “You’re both working together to build the bridge!” This type of statement helps to reinforce social learning by encouraging teamwork. Integrating SEL into routines like greetings, snack time, and clean-up helps children experience empathy and responsibility as part of daily life (Bierman et al., 2008).

Intentional teaching of social competence requires reflection, patience, and consistency. It is not a scripted curriculum, but a way of being with children, one that recognizes relationships as the foundation for all learning. When educators teach from a place of empathy and awareness, they help children build the emotional architecture that supports resilience, curiosity, and lifelong connection.

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14.9: The Importance of Relationship Repair

Even the most skilled educators occasionally lose patience, misunderstand a child, or respond in ways they later wish they had handled differently. Emotional intelligence is not about being perfect. It is about recognizing mistakes, taking responsibility, and repairing relationships when necessary.

Relationship repair teaches children one of life's most important lessons: relationships can recover from conflict.

When educators acknowledge mistakes and make genuine efforts to reconnect, they model accountability, humility, and respect. Simple statements such as:

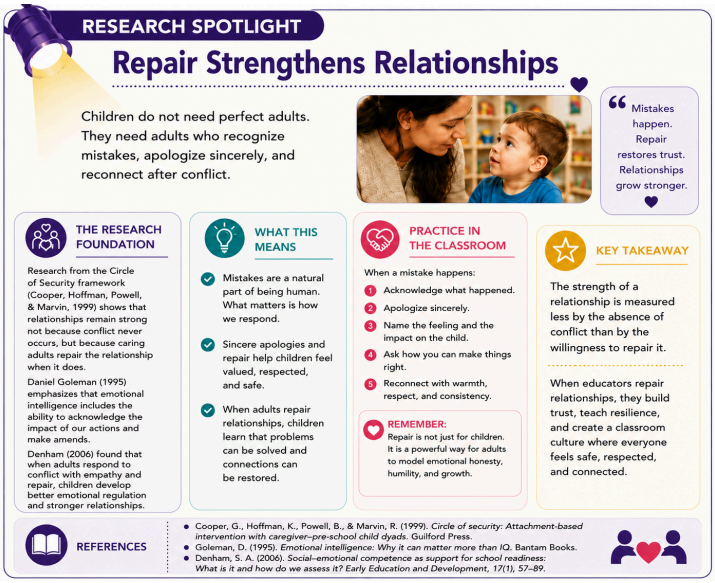
- "I'm sorry that I spoke so quickly. Let me try again."
- "I can see that I hurt your feelings. I am sorry."
- "Let's figure this out together."

These simple sentences demonstrate that mistakes are opportunities for learning rather than sources of shame.

Repair strengthens trust because it communicates that relationships are valued even when difficulties occur. Children who experience relationship repair learn that conflict does not have to result in rejection or disconnection. Instead, they learn that healthy relationships involve communication, forgiveness, and renewed understanding.

For children who have experienced inconsistent or stressful relationships, these moments of repair can be especially powerful. They provide corrective experiences that reinforce safety, trust, and emotional security.

In many ways, the strength of a relationship is not measured by the absence of conflict but by the ability to reconnect after conflict occurs.



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14.10: Professional Boundaries and Compassionate Care

Early childhood educators care deeply about the children and families they serve. While empathy is an essential component of effective teaching, it is equally important to maintain healthy professional boundaries.

Empathy allows educators to understand and share another person's feelings. Boundaries help educators remain supportive without becoming overwhelmed by the emotions and challenges of others. Without boundaries, educators may experience emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, or burnout.

Healthy boundaries allow educators to care without carrying.

For example, a teacher may feel compassion for a child experiencing family stress while recognizing that it is not their responsibility to solve every problem affecting the family. Instead, the educator offers support, listens with empathy, and connects families with appropriate resources when needed.

Professional boundaries are not barriers to caring. Rather, they help sustain caring relationships over time. Educators who maintain healthy boundaries are better able to remain emotionally available, patient, and effective in their work.

Reflective questions can help educators evaluate whether healthy boundaries are being maintained:

- Is this situation mine to solve?
- Am I providing support or taking responsibility for something beyond my role?
- What resources or partnerships might better support this family?
- How can I remain compassionate while protecting my own well-being?

By balancing empathy with boundaries, educators create sustainable relationships that support both children and themselves.

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14.11: WAGER - Building Relationships That Foster Belonging

Theories of attachment, emotional intelligence, and social competence all point to a common conclusion: relationships matter. Children learn best when they feel safe, valued, respected, and connected to caring adults. A sense of belonging is not a bonus; it is a developmental necessity.

One practical framework for building emotionally supportive relationships is captured in the acronym WAGER, which stands for Warmth, Acceptance, Genuineness, Empathy, and Respect. Together, these qualities create the foundation for relationships that support children's social-emotional development and sense of belonging. Identified by Kostelnik et al. (2015), these five relational qualities help create environments that foster trust, belonging, and emotional security.

The WAGER framework comes to life through everyday interactions and intentional teaching practices that help every child feel valued, included, and connected.

Facilitating a Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

One of the most powerful roles of the early educator is to cultivate belonging in every interaction, environment, and relationship. This begins with a simple assumption: *all children are competent and capable learners*.

Educators can facilitate belonging and inclusion by:

- **Adapting the environment** to be developmentally appropriate, challenging, and responsive to each child's needs and interests.
- **Focusing on the whole child**, particularly their emotional and social experiences and not just their skill mastery (Paris, 2020).
- **Valuing every child's background, temperament, and culture** as integral parts of the learning community.

When children feel seen and respected, they begin to internalize a sense of worth and safety that mirrors the secure base described in attachment theory.



The Five Elements of WAGER

W — Warmth

Offer genuine affection, positive regard, and consistent emotional availability. Children need to feel welcomed and valued each day.

A — Acceptance

Accept children as they are while supporting their growth. Recognize that behavior is often a form of communication rather than a sign of defiance.

G — Genuineness

Be authentic and sincere in your interactions. Children quickly recognize when adults are being honest, consistent, and trustworthy.

E — Empathy

Seek to understand children's feelings and experiences. Empathy helps build emotional connection and models compassion.

R — Respect

Treat children as capable individuals worthy of dignity, voice, and participation. Respect fosters trust, cooperation, and mutual understanding.

When educators embody these qualities, they communicate a powerful message: You are safe. You matter. You belong.

Putting WAGER into Practice

Educators can strengthen relationships and foster belonging by:

1. **Listening attentively** and showing genuine interest in children's thoughts and feelings. (Maintain gentle eye contact, nod, smile, and use verbal cues to show interest and care.)
2. **Protecting dignity** by providing privacy when offering corrective feedback or personal support. (Avoid correcting children in front of their peers).
3. **Being fully present** during interactions and minimizing distractions. (Refrain from multitasking, fidgeting, or responding to distractions during interactions.)
4. **Creating predictable routines** that promote safety and trust. (This helps children feel secure by anticipating what comes next.)
5. **Reflecting daily** on how tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions communicate acceptance and respect. (These behaviors can communicate acceptance or unintentionally signal rejection.)

WAGER reminds us that social-emotional learning begins with relationships. Children learn who they are in the eyes of the people who care for them. When educators consistently demonstrate warmth, acceptance, genuineness, empathy, and respect, they create the conditions in which children can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

When educators embody these relational habits, they transform theory into daily practice and become the secure base from which children can explore the world, take risks, and develop empathy for others.

Children learn who they are in the eyes of the people who care for them. When we meet them with warmth, empathy, and respect, they learn to see themselves as worthy of love. (Kostelnik et al., 2015)

Supporting children's social and emotional development requires more than intentional teaching and caring relationships.

Educators must also learn to observe, document, and assess children's growth over time. Thoughtful assessment helps teachers understand each child's strengths, identify areas where additional support may be needed, and make informed decisions about instruction and intervention.

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14.12: Assessing Social and Emotional Development

Observation is the cornerstone of assessing children's social and emotional growth. Young children often communicate their inner world through play, behavior, and relationships rather than through words. For this reason, effective assessment in early childhood education focuses on what children do, how they interact, and how they manage their emotions in context, rather than on formal testing or checklists (NAEYC, 2019).

Effective assessment of social and emotional development relies on several interconnected practices that help educators understand, document, and support children's growth over time. The following assessment practices are particularly important:

1. Observation as the Primary Assessment Tool

Educators observe children in natural settings, during free play, group activities, routines, and transitions, to gather authentic information about emotional regulation, social interactions, and relationship skills. Through ongoing observation, teachers can identify patterns of behavior that indicate a child's strengths and emerging areas of need. Meaningful assessment is based on multiple observations, collected using a variety of methods, by more than one observer whenever possible, and across multiple points in time. Looking for consistent patterns rather than isolated incidents helps educators develop a more accurate understanding of each child's development. Anecdotal records, running observations, timed interval observations, photo documentation, and work samples all provide valuable insight into how children engage socially and emotionally (Jablon et al., 2007).

2. Reflective Assessment Practices

Assessment of social-emotional learning requires educators to reflect on their own biases and expectations. What is considered "appropriate" behavior may vary across cultures, families, temperaments, and individual differences. Reflective assessment encourages teachers to interpret behaviors within the child's developmental, cultural, and relational context, ensuring equity and respect in evaluation (Hyson, 2004; NAEYC, 2019).

3. Authentic Assessment and the DRDP (2025)

Many early childhood programs use comprehensive assessment systems to observe, document, and monitor children's development over time. Examples include the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), Teaching Strategies GOLD, HighScope's Child Observation Record (COR Advantage), and other curriculum-based assessment systems. Although these tools differ in their organization and reporting methods, they share a common goal: helping educators understand children's development through ongoing, authentic observation.

In California, the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) (California Department of Education [CDE] & California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2025) is the primary observational assessment used in state-funded early childhood programs. The DRDP is designed to measure children's progress across developmental domains, including Social and Emotional Development (SED) and Approaches to Learning–Self-Regulation (ATL-REG).

- The SED domain focuses on relationships and social interactions, including empathy, cooperation, and social problem-solving.
- The ATL-REG domain examines attention, persistence, and emotional regulation—skills foundational to learning and resilience.

By using the DRDP, educators can document growth over time, communicate progress with families, and individualize teaching strategies to support each child's emotional and social development.

While the DRDP documents developmental progress over time, educators may also use screening tools to identify children who could benefit from additional evaluation or support.

4. Using the ASQ-3 and ASQ:SE-2 for Developmental Screening

In addition to ongoing observation and assessment, many early childhood programs use developmental screening tools to identify children who may benefit from additional support or evaluation. One of the most widely used screening systems is the *Ages & Stages Questionnaires* (ASQ) (Squires & Bricker, 2009), which includes both the *Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3)* and the *Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2)*.

The ASQ-3 is designed to screen children's development across multiple domains, including communication, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, problem-solving, and personal-social development. The ASQ:SE-2 focuses specifically on social-emotional development and helps identify concerns related to emotional regulation, social interactions, adaptive functioning, self-regulation, and behavior.

- The ASQ-3 screens for developmental strengths and potential concerns across multiple developmental domains.
- The ASQ:SE-2 focuses specifically on social-emotional competencies, including emotional expression, self-regulation, social relationships, and behavioral functioning.

Unlike the DRDP, which documents developmental progress along a continuum over time, the ASQ system is designed as a screening tool that helps identify children who may need additional assessment or support services. Families typically complete the questionnaires, providing valuable insight into the child's functioning across home and community settings.

By combining information from developmental screenings, classroom observations, and ongoing assessment tools such as the DRDP, educators can develop a more comprehensive understanding of each child's strengths, needs, and developmental progress. Early identification is key and allows educators and families to work together to provide timely interventions and support when needed (Squires & Bricker, 2009).

Note: It is important to remember that screening tools do not diagnose developmental delays or behavioral health conditions. Rather, they serve as an early warning system that helps educators and families determine whether additional assessment or support may be beneficial.

5. Linking Observation to Practice

Assessment should always inform teaching. When educators notice a child struggling with peer relationships, transitions, or emotional regulation, they can adapt routines, modify the environment, or introduce targeted social-emotional supports. Observation and assessment are ongoing processes that deepen the educator's understanding of each child and strengthen the connection between teaching and learning (Jablon et al., 2007).

In essence, assessing social and emotional development is less about labeling behavior and more about listening, noticing, and responding. It helps educators see the whole child, and tailor experiences that foster confidence, empathy, and belonging.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, one message has remained constant: relationships are at the heart of social-emotional development. Children learn emotional regulation, empathy, cooperation, and resilience not simply because adults teach these skills, but because they experience them within caring, responsive relationships. Every conversation, every moment of comfort, every repaired misunderstanding, and every thoughtful response contributes to the emotional foundation upon which children build their understanding of themselves and others.

Observation and assessment help educators recognize children's strengths, identify emerging needs, and make informed decisions about how best to support each child's development. Yet effective assessment is never an end in itself. Its purpose is to deepen understanding, strengthen relationships, and guide intentional teaching. When educators observe with curiosity, respond with empathy, and reflect on their own practice, they create learning environments where every child feels safe, valued, and capable of success.

As important as these practices are, they also require emotional energy, patience, and resilience. Supporting children's social and emotional development begins with emotionally healthy adults. The next chapter explores how educators can care for their own well-being through self-awareness, healthy boundaries, resilience, and sustainable self-care so they can continue building the relationships that help children flourish.

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14.13: Chapter Vocabulary

Emotional intelligence: The ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions while responding effectively and empathetically to the emotions of others.

Emotional contagion: The process through which one person's emotional state influences the feelings, behavior, and physiological responses of others.

Social Support Pyramid: A tiered framework that begins with positive relationships and supportive environments, progresses to intentional social-emotional instruction, and provides individualized intervention when needed.

WAGER framework: A relationship-building framework representing Warmth, Acceptance, Genuineness, Empathy, and Respect.

Authentic assessment: The ongoing collection of information about children's development through observations, documentation, and naturally occurring activities in familiar settings.

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14.14: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **NAEYC: Teaching Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood/links to an external source:** Explains how educators can use their own emotional intelligence to recognize children's feelings, model emotional skills, and support emotional learning throughout the day.
- **National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations: Pyramid Model Basics/links to an external source:** Introduces the Pyramid Model and its evidence-based practices for promoting young children's social-emotional competence and addressing challenging behavior.
- **Head Start: Social and Emotional Development Effective Practice Guides/links to an external source:** Provides teaching strategies related to children's relationships, emotional functioning, classroom environments, and individualized social-emotional support.
- **Desired Results: DRDP (2025) Instrument and Forms/links to an external source:** Provides the current DRDP instruments, rating records, domain information, and forms for infant-toddler, preschool, transitional kindergarten, kindergarten, and early elementary settings.

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15: TEACHER WELL-BEING AND SELF-CARE

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15.1: Chapter Introduction



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 15.1:** Explain how emotional labor, workplace stress, and educator well-being influence teaching practices, relationships, and classroom climate.
- **SLO 15.2:** Differentiate burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress and identify their potential causes, signs, and appropriate sources of support.
- **SLO 15.3:** Apply mindfulness, self-regulation, self-compassion, healthy boundaries, and sustainable self-care practices to manage stress and strengthen resilience.
- **SLO 15.4:** Develop a realistic plan for supporting long-term professional well-being through daily wellness practices, reflective supervision, supportive relationships, professional assistance, and activities that promote joy.

Chapter 15 Short Overview

This chapter examines why educator well-being is essential to responsive relationships, emotionally safe classrooms, and high-quality early childhood education. It differentiates burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress while exploring resilience, mindfulness, self-regulation, professional boundaries, and sustainable self-care. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships, reflective supervision, creativity, play, and reclaiming joy.

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15.2: Why Educator Well-Being Matters



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Introduction

Early childhood education is one of the most meaningful and rewarding professions, but it is also one of the most emotionally demanding. Every day, educators comfort frightened children, celebrate milestones, resolve conflicts, support families, collaborate with colleagues, and make countless decisions that influence children's learning and well-being. This work requires far more than knowledge of child development. It requires emotional presence, patience, empathy, and the ability to remain calm during challenging moments.

Providing this level of care requires what researchers describe as emotional labor, the ongoing process of managing one's own emotions while responding sensitively to the emotions of others. Early childhood educators are expected to remain patient when children are upset, reassuring when families are worried, and supportive when colleagues need encouragement, even during times of personal stress or fatigue. While this emotional work is one of the most meaningful aspects of teaching, it can also become exhausting when educators continually care for others without replenishing their own emotional resources (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teaching is often described as a profession of the heart because educators invest so much of themselves in the children they serve. They celebrate children's successes, comfort them during disappointments, and help them navigate life's earliest challenges. These relationships are deeply rewarding, but they also require significant emotional energy. Without opportunities for rest, reflection, and renewal, even the most dedicated educators may experience chronic stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

The familiar expression, "You cannot pour from an empty cup," captures an important truth. Educators who neglect their own physical, emotional, and mental well-being eventually have less energy available to support others. Caring for oneself is not selfish, nor is it a sign of weakness. Rather, self-care is an ethical responsibility that protects educators' ability to remain patient, compassionate, and fully present for the children and families they serve (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

When educators intentionally care for their own well-being, everyone benefits. Emotionally healthy teachers are more likely to build secure relationships with children, respond thoughtfully during challenging situations, collaborate effectively with families and colleagues, and create emotionally safe classroom environments. Children learn emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience by observing calm, caring adults who model these skills every day (Goleman, 1995; Hyson, 2004).

Ultimately, educator well-being is not separate from high-quality early childhood education. It is one of its essential foundations. Caring for children begins with caring for the adults who care for them.

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15.3: Recognizing Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Secondary Traumatic Stress

Teaching young children is deeply rewarding, but it also requires tremendous emotional energy. Educators spend their days comforting upset children, supporting families through difficult situations, managing challenging behaviors, and responding with patience even during stressful moments. While these responsibilities are meaningful, they can also take an emotional toll over time.

Feeling tired after a busy day is normal. However, when emotional exhaustion becomes chronic, educators may begin to experience burnout, compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they describe different experiences. Recognizing the differences helps educators identify what they are experiencing and seek appropriate support (Figley, 1995; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Burnout

Burnout develops gradually as the result of prolonged workplace stress. It is not caused by a single difficult day or a challenging child, but by ongoing demands that exceed an educator's available resources over time. Burnout is often characterized by emotional exhaustion, growing cynicism or detachment, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Educators experiencing burnout may feel physically and emotionally drained, lose enthusiasm for teaching, become increasingly irritable, or question whether they are making a difference. Tasks that once brought joy may begin to feel overwhelming, and the energy required to care for children can become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue develops from continually caring for others who are experiencing distress. Early childhood educators often support children who are frightened, grieving, living with trauma, or facing significant family challenges. Over time, continually responding with empathy and compassion can leave educators feeling emotionally depleted (Figley, 1995).

Unlike burnout, compassion fatigue is closely connected to the emotional demands of caring. Educators may continue to love their work while simultaneously feeling emotionally exhausted by the constant responsibility of supporting others. Without opportunities for rest, reflection, and support, compassion fatigue can gradually reduce an educator's emotional capacity.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress occurs when educators are repeatedly exposed to the trauma experienced by others. Hearing about abuse, neglect, domestic violence, homelessness, community violence, or other traumatic experiences can affect educators emotionally, even though they did not experience the trauma themselves (Figley, 1995).

Educators experiencing secondary traumatic stress may have intrusive thoughts about children, difficulty sleeping, increased anxiety, heightened emotional reactions, or a tendency to worry excessively about children's safety. These responses are understandable reactions to repeated exposure to others' trauma and should never be viewed as signs of weakness. Instead, they are reminders that caring professionals also need support.

Fortunately, burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress are not inevitable. Building supportive relationships, establishing healthy boundaries, practicing self-care, seeking reflective supervision, and asking for help when needed all strengthen resilience and help educators remain emotionally healthy throughout their careers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Comparing Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Secondary Traumatic Stress: Table 15.1

Condition	Primary Cause	Common Signs
Burnout	Chronic workplace stress and prolonged demands	Emotional exhaustio feeling overwhelmec
Compassion Fatigue	Continually caring for children and families experiencing distress	Emotional depletion emotionally “empty”
Secondary Traumatic Stress	Repeated exposure to children’s or families’ traumatic experiences	Anxiety, intrusive thc emotional responses

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15.4: Building Emotional Resilience

While teaching is emotionally demanding, it is also possible to develop habits and mindsets that help educators remain healthy, hopeful, and effective throughout their careers. Resilience is not a personality trait that some people possess and others do not. Rather, resilience is the ability to adapt, recover, and continue moving forward after experiencing stress, setbacks, or adversity. Like emotional intelligence, resilience can be strengthened through intentional practice, supportive relationships, and ongoing reflection (Goleman, 1995; Masten, 2014).

Resilient educators recognize that challenging days are an inevitable part of teaching. Rather than expecting perfection, they acknowledge difficulties, learn from their experiences, and continue growing professionally. They understand that mistakes are opportunities for learning rather than evidence of failure. This perspective reflects a growth mindset, the belief that abilities and professional skills continue to develop through experience, reflection, and effort (Dweck, 2006).

Emotional intelligence also plays an important role in resilience. Educators who are aware of their own emotions are better able to recognize stress before it becomes overwhelming. Self-awareness allows educators to identify emotional triggers, while self-regulation helps them respond thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively. Empathy, optimism, and strong relationship skills further strengthen resilience by helping educators maintain supportive connections with children, families, and colleagues (Goleman, 1995).

Another important protective factor is reflective practice. Effective educators regularly pause to consider what happened, how they responded, and what they might do differently in the future. Reflection encourages continuous learning while reducing self-criticism. Rather than asking, *"Why did I fail?"* reflective educators ask, *"What can I learn from this experience?"* Reflective practice promotes professional growth and supports emotionally responsive teaching (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Schön, 1983).

Self-compassion is equally important. Many educators readily extend kindness, patience, and understanding to children and families while holding themselves to unrealistic standards of perfection. Self-compassion encourages educators to respond to themselves with the same kindness they would offer a trusted friend. Instead of engaging in harsh self-criticism after a difficult day, resilient educators acknowledge that mistakes are a normal part of learning and choose to respond with understanding, perspective, and hope (Neff, 2011).

Optimism also contributes to resilience. Optimism does not mean ignoring problems or pretending that difficult situations do not exist. Rather, it is the belief that challenges can be addressed, support is available and tomorrow offers another opportunity to learn and grow. Hopeful educators are more likely to persevere through challenges, seek creative solutions, and maintain positive relationships with children and colleagues (Seligman, 2011).

Resilience is strengthened through relationships as well as individual habits. Supportive colleagues, mentors, administrators, friends, and family members provide encouragement, perspective, and practical assistance during stressful times. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It is one of the most effective ways to sustain both personal well-being and professional effectiveness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Ultimately, resilience is built one choice at a time. Every moment of reflection, every healthy boundary, every supportive conversation, and every act of self-care contributes to an educator's ability to continue doing this important work with compassion, confidence, and joy.

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15.5: Mindfulness and Self-Regulation

Early childhood educators spend much of their day helping children regulate their emotions. Before adults can effectively co-regulate with children, however, they must first regulate themselves. As discussed in Chapter 4, self-regulation is the ability to recognize emotions, manage stress, and respond thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively. Mindfulness supports this process by helping educators become more aware of their thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and surroundings without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Hanh & Weare, 2017).

Mindfulness does not require long periods of meditation or complicated routines. Often, it involves simply pausing for a few moments to breathe, notice the present moment, and choose a thoughtful response. Even brief moments of mindfulness throughout the day can reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and help educators remain calm and emotionally available for children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

When educators practice self-regulation, they also strengthen their ability to co-regulate with children. Calm adults help create calm classrooms. Children often borrow the emotional stability of trusted adults until they gradually develop the ability to regulate their own emotions independently (Hyson, 2004).

The following evidence-based strategies can help educators regulate stress and restore emotional balance throughout the day.

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15.6: Box Breathing

One simple technique is box breathing, sometimes called 4-4-4-4 breathing. This strategy slows breathing, activates the body's natural relaxation response, and reduces physiological stress.

1. Inhale slowly for four seconds.
2. Hold your breath for four seconds.
3. Exhale slowly for four seconds.
4. Hold again for four seconds.
5. Repeat several times.

Many educators find it helpful to practice box breathing before difficult conversations, during stressful transitions, or after emotionally challenging situations (Stinson, 2024).

Grounding Through the 5-4-3-2-1 Technique

When emotions become overwhelming, grounding techniques help redirect attention to the present moment. The 5-4-3-2-1 technique engages the senses and gently interrupts anxious or racing thoughts. By intentionally focusing on what we can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste, grounding techniques help calm the nervous system and return attention to the present moment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Notice:

- 5 things you can see.
- 4 things you can touch.
- 3 things you can hear.
- 2 things you can smell.
- 1 thing you can taste.

Grounding exercises help educators reconnect with the present moment so they can respond thoughtfully rather than react automatically.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Stress often accumulates in the body before we recognize it emotionally. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) helps release physical tension by intentionally tightening and relaxing different muscle groups, promoting relaxation and reducing physiological stress (Varvogli & Darviri, 2011).

Beginning with the feet and gradually moving upward, tense each muscle group for several seconds before slowly releasing the tension. This practice increases awareness of physical stress while promoting relaxation throughout the body.

Mindful Pauses Throughout the Day

Mindfulness does not need to happen only during formal relaxation exercises. Small moments of mindfulness throughout the day can be equally powerful (Hanh & Weare, 2017).

Educators might:

- Take three slow breaths before greeting children each morning.
- Pause before responding to a challenging behavior.
- Notice children's laughter, birds outside the window, or sunlight coming through the classroom.
- Briefly check in by asking, *"What am I feeling right now?"*

These brief moments of awareness help educators respond with intention rather than reacting automatically.

Mindfulness is not about eliminating stress or achieving perfect calm. Rather, it is about developing the awareness to notice stress, regulate emotions, and respond with intention. Small, consistent practices often have a greater long-term impact than occasional, ambitious efforts at self-care. Over time, these everyday habits strengthen an educator's capacity to remain fully present for the children, families, and colleagues they serve.

Daily Practices That Sustain Educator Well-Being: Table 15.2

Practice	Why It Matters
Create Daily Rituals	Grounding rituals provide calm, predictability, and emotional balance.
Move Your Body	Physical movement relieves stress and restores energy and focus.
Nourish Yourself	Food, hydration, and adequate rest support emotional regulation and ov being.
Connect with Colleagues	Supportive relationships build resilience and reduce isolation.
Unplug Regularly	Technology boundaries protect attention, reduce stress, and encourage
Reflect Often	Reflection transforms everyday experience into opportunities for learnin
Practice Gratitude	Gratitude shifts attention toward positive experiences, strengthens resil supports emotional well-being.

None of these practices needs to take a great deal of time. Small, consistent habits practiced each day often have a greater impact on long-term well-being than occasional, large efforts at self-care.

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15.7: Healthy Boundaries

Early childhood educators enter the profession because they care deeply about children and families. They are often compassionate, generous, and willing to help whenever they are needed. While these qualities are among the profession's greatest strengths, they can also leave educators vulnerable to taking on more responsibility than they can realistically sustain. Without healthy boundaries, compassion can gradually become exhaustion, and dedication can lead to burnout.

Healthy boundaries are not walls that keep people out. Rather, they are limits that protect an educator's time, energy, emotional well-being, and professional effectiveness. Establishing boundaries allows educators to remain compassionate without becoming overwhelmed. In fact, healthy boundaries make it possible to continue caring for others over the long term (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Boundaries are not barriers; they are bridges to balance.

Ask Yourself, "Is This Mine to Carry?"

One of the simplest questions educators can ask themselves is, "Is this mine to carry?"

Caring professionals often feel responsible for solving every problem they encounter. While educators play an important role in supporting children and families, they are not responsible for fixing every situation. Some concerns belong to administrators, counselors, social workers, medical professionals, or the family itself.

Before accepting a new responsibility, pause and ask:

- Is this within my professional role?
- Do I have the emotional and physical capacity for this right now?
- Am I agreeing because I genuinely want to help, or because I feel guilty saying no?
- Would accepting this responsibility prevent me from doing my current responsibilities well?

Sometimes the healthiest response is to offer support without taking ownership of a problem that belongs to someone else.

Use "I" Statements

Healthy boundaries are communicated respectfully and clearly. One effective strategy is the use of I statements, which express personal needs without blaming or criticizing others.

For example:

- "I need a few minutes before we continue this conversation."
- "I'm not able to take on another committee right now."
- "I need to leave on time today because I have another commitment."
- "I appreciate being asked, but I'm at capacity this week."

Using I statements allows educators to communicate honestly while maintaining positive relationships. Clear communication reduces misunderstandings and models respectful problem solving for children and colleagues alike (Gordon, 2000).

Learning to Say No

For many educators, saying no is one of the most difficult professional skills to develop. Many worry that declining a request will disappoint others or make them appear uncooperative. However, saying yes to every request often means saying no to personal well-being, family time, or responsibilities that matter most.

Learning to decline requests respectfully is an important leadership skill. Consider responses such as:

- “Thank you for thinking of me. I’m not able to commit to that right now.”
- “I’d like some time to think about that before I answer.”
- “I’m at capacity this week, but please keep me in mind for future opportunities.”
- “I can’t take this on, but perhaps I can help you think of another solution.”

Thoughtful responses like these preserve relationships while protecting personal well-being.

Protecting Your Time

Time is one of an educator’s most valuable resources. Protecting time for planning, meals, breaks, family, hobbies, exercise, and rest is not selfish, it is an essential part of maintaining long-term effectiveness (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

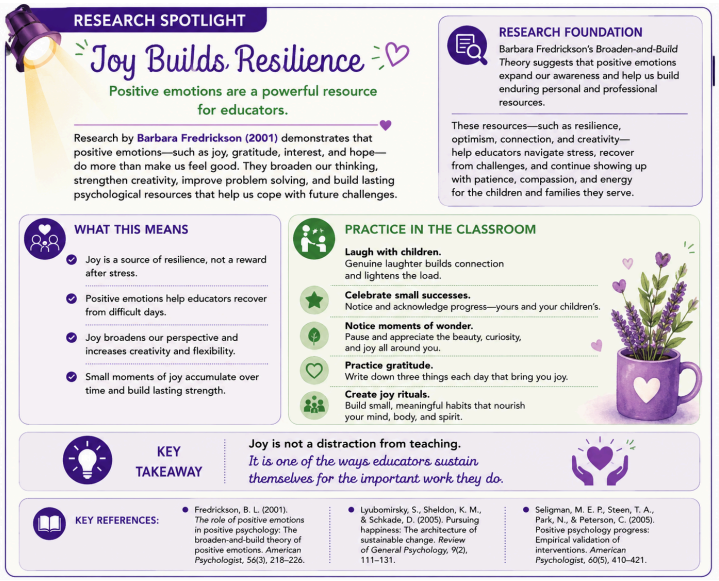
Simple habits can make a significant difference:

- Schedule breaks and treat them as important appointments.
- Avoid checking work email late at night whenever possible.
- Leave work at work when the day ends.
- Make time for activities that restore energy and joy.
- Protect regular time for sleep, movement, and relationships.

When educators protect their own well-being, they also protect the quality of care they provide to children. Healthy boundaries make it possible to remain patient, emotionally available, and fully present in the classroom.

Ultimately, boundaries are acts of self-respect rather than self-protection alone. They preserve the emotional energy needed to teach with empathy, respond with patience, and continue finding joy in the important work of nurturing young children (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Every time you say *yes* to one commitment, you are also saying *no* to something else. Healthy boundaries help ensure that what you choose to say *yes* to reflects your values, protects your well-being, and allows you to remain fully present for the children, families, and colleagues you serve.



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15.8: Sustainable Self-Care

Self-care is often misunderstood. It is sometimes portrayed as expensive vacations, spa treatments, or occasional indulgences. While these experiences can certainly be enjoyable, they are not what sustains educators over the course of a long and meaningful career. Sustainable self-care is built through small, intentional choices that support physical, emotional, and mental well-being every day. These daily habits help educators restore energy, manage stress, and remain fully present for the children and families they serve (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Daily routines help us accomplish necessary tasks. Daily rituals help us reconnect with what matters most. Whether it is enjoying a quiet cup of coffee, taking a morning walk, journaling, or spending a few moments in reflection, meaningful rituals can provide calm, perspective, and emotional balance before or after the workday.

Prioritize Rest and Sleep

Sleep is one of the most important forms of self-care. During sleep, the brain processes emotions, consolidates learning, and restores physical and mental energy. Chronic sleep deprivation can reduce patience, impair decision making, and make emotional regulation more difficult. Prioritizing adequate rest allows educators to approach each day with greater clarity, resilience, and emotional balance (Walker, 2017).

Move Your Body

Regular movement benefits both physical and emotional health. Exercise reduces stress hormones, improves mood, increases energy, and supports emotional regulation. Movement does not have to involve an intense workout. Walking, stretching, dancing with children, gardening, yoga, or simply spending time outdoors all contribute to physical and emotional well-being. Small amounts of movement throughout the day can have lasting benefits (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008).

Nourish Your Body

Food and hydration influence far more than physical health. They also affect concentration, mood, and energy levels. Educators often become so focused on caring for children that they forget to care for themselves. Eating balanced meals, drinking enough water, and taking time for lunch are not luxuries; they are essential practices that support effective teaching.

Make Time for Joy

Joy is not something that should be postponed until weekends, vacations, or retirement. It is an important source of resilience. Activities that bring genuine enjoyment help replenish emotional energy and remind educators that their identity extends beyond their professional role. Listening to music, reading, creating art, gardening, cooking, hiking, photography, or spending time in nature all contribute to emotional renewal (Fredrickson, 2001).

Protect Your Relationships

Supportive relationships are among the strongest protective factors against stress and burnout. Spending time with family, friends, colleagues, and mentors provides encouragement, perspective, and connection during difficult times. Meaningful conversations, laughter, and shared experiences strengthen resilience and remind educators that they are not alone (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Practice Gratitude

Gratitude is more than simply saying “thank you.” It is the intentional practice of noticing the people, experiences, and moments that bring meaning and joy to everyday life. Research suggests that regularly practicing gratitude can improve well-being, strengthen resilience, and increase overall life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005). For educators,

gratitude may be as simple as writing down three positive moments at the end of the day, thanking a colleague for their support, or pausing to appreciate a child's laughter, a breakthrough in learning, or a small act of kindness. Over time, these simple practices help shift attention toward the many meaningful moments that make teaching worthwhile.

Take Time Away

Rest is most effective when it includes periods of genuine disconnection from work. Even the most dedicated educators benefit from vacations, long weekends, personal days, and quiet moments away from professional responsibilities. Time away allows the mind and body to recover so educators can return with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

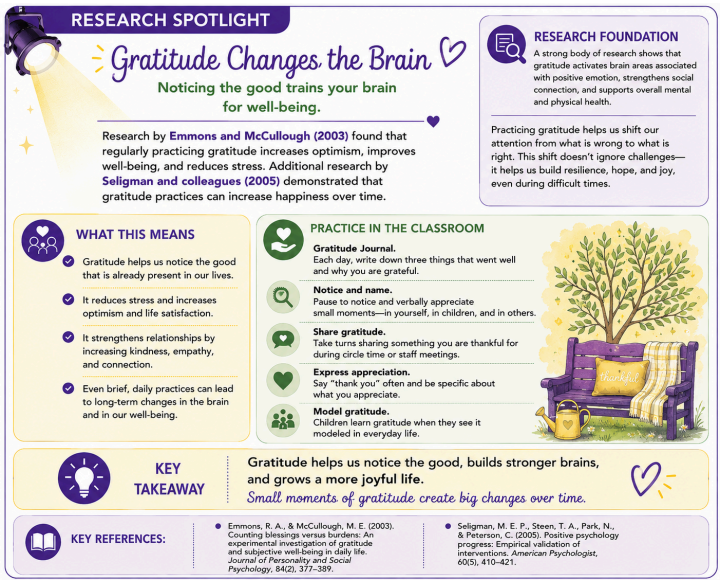
Unplug from Technology

Technology makes it possible to remain connected at all hours of the day. While this can be helpful, constant accessibility also makes it difficult to rest. Establishing healthy digital boundaries, such as limiting work email outside of work hours or setting aside screen-free time each day, helps protect attention, reduce stress, and improve overall well-being.

Never Lose Your Sense of Play

Play is not only essential for children; it is valuable for adults as well. Adults benefit from curiosity, creativity, laughter, humor, and opportunities to simply enjoy life. Play reduces stress, strengthens relationships, encourages creativity, and reminds educators why they chose a profession centered on childhood. Whether through games, music, creative hobbies, travel, or time outdoors, playful experiences nourish the spirit and contribute to long-term resilience (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

Sustainable self-care is not about perfection, nor is it another item to add to an already busy to-do list. Instead, it is the ongoing practice of making choices that restore rather than deplete. Small acts of care, repeated consistently over time, help educators remain healthy, resilient, and fully present for the important work of nurturing young children.



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15.9: The Importance of Community

Teaching has often been described as a profession of relationships. While educators spend much of their time building relationships with children and families, they also need meaningful relationships with other adults. One of the strongest predictors of resilience is not extraordinary personal strength, but connection with supportive people who encourage, listen, and help during difficult times (Masten, 2014).

Early childhood educators are not meant to carry the emotional demands of their work alone. Trusted colleagues, mentors, coaches, supervisors, friends, and family members all provide valuable perspectives that help educators process challenges, celebrate successes, and continue growing professionally. Reaching out for support is not a sign of weakness. It is an important professional practice that strengthens resilience and promotes long-term well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The Value of Mentors and Coaches

Throughout an educator's career, mentors and instructional coaches provide guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for professional growth. Experienced educators can offer practical advice, share effective strategies, and provide reassurance during difficult situations. They also help newer educators develop confidence while encouraging reflection rather than simply providing answers. Strong mentoring relationships foster both professional competence and emotional resilience (Costa & Kallick, 2000).

Reflective Supervision

Reflective supervision provides educators with dedicated time to think about their work in a safe, supportive environment. Rather than focusing solely on solving problems or evaluating performance, reflective supervision encourages thoughtful conversations about relationships, emotions, successes, and challenges. These discussions help educators better understand their own reactions, strengthen self-awareness, and develop more responsive approaches to working with children and families (Parlakian, 2001).

Counseling and Professional Support

There are times when personal stress, grief, anxiety, trauma, or major life changes become too difficult to manage alone. Seeking support from a counselor, therapist, or other mental health professional is a healthy and responsible decision. Just as educators encourage families to seek services when children need additional support, educators should feel comfortable seeking help for themselves when needed. Caring for one's mental health is an important part of sustaining a long and healthy career.

Trusted Colleagues

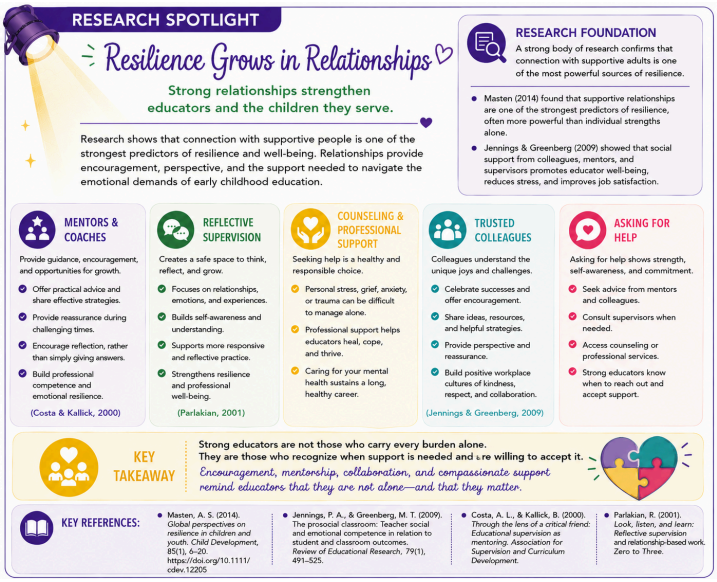
Supportive colleagues understand the unique joys and challenges of working with young children. They celebrate milestones, offer encouragement after difficult days, share ideas, and remind one another that no educator is expected to be perfect. A brief conversation with a trusted coworker can often provide reassurance, perspective, and renewed confidence. Positive professional relationships also contribute to healthier workplace cultures where collaboration, kindness, and mutual respect are valued (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Asking for Help

Many educators find it easier to offer help than to ask for it. However, asking for help demonstrates self-awareness rather than inadequacy. Whether seeking advice from a mentor, requesting assistance from a colleague, consulting a supervisor, or accessing professional counseling services, asking for support reflects a commitment to both personal well-being and professional effectiveness.

Strong educators are not those who carry every burden alone. They are those who recognize when support is needed and are willing to accept it.

Ultimately, resilience grows in relationships. Encouragement, mentorship, collaboration, reflective conversations, and compassionate support remind educators that they are part of a professional community. Together, these relationships strengthen the emotional well-being that allows educators to continue nurturing children with patience, empathy, and joy.



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15.10: Reclaiming Joy

Teaching young children offers countless opportunities for joy. A child's spontaneous laughter, a first successful attempt at writing their name, an unexpected hug, or the excitement of discovering a ladybug can remind educators why they chose this profession. Yet when stress, deadlines, and daily responsibilities begin to accumulate, it becomes easy to overlook these small moments of wonder. Reclaiming joy means intentionally noticing and embracing the experiences that renew our spirits and reconnect us with the meaning of our work.

Joy is not simply the absence of stress. It is an active source of resilience that helps educators thrive despite the inevitable challenges of teaching. Positive emotions help broaden our thinking, strengthen creativity, improve problem solving, and build lasting emotional resources that help us navigate future challenges (Fredrickson, 2001). Research also suggests that intentionally engaging in activities that bring meaning and enjoyment can significantly increase happiness and well-being (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). For educators, moments of joy are not distractions from teaching; they are essential to sustaining the emotional energy needed to teach with presence, compassion, and enthusiasm.

Laugh with Children

Children laugh hundreds of times each day. They delight in silly songs, unexpected discoveries, imaginative play, and simple moments that adults often overlook. Joining children in these moments reminds educators that learning and laughter naturally belong together. Shared laughter strengthens relationships, reduces stress, and creates classrooms where children and adults feel emotionally safe.

Celebrate Small Victories

Not every success is dramatic. Sometimes the most meaningful accomplishments are the quiet ones. A child who waits patiently for a turn, comforts a friend, uses words instead of hitting, or proudly zips a coat independently has achieved something worth celebrating. Taking time to notice these everyday victories helps educators focus on growth rather than perfection and reminds everyone that development occurs one small step at a time.

Cultivate Wonder and Awe

Young children naturally approach the world with curiosity and amazement. A butterfly landing nearby, the sound of rain on the classroom roof, a colorful sunset, or watching seeds sprout into plants can become moments of shared wonder. Educators who slow down long enough to notice these experiences often rediscover the joy of learning alongside the children they teach. Wonder invites curiosity, gratitude, and lifelong learning.

Make Time for the Things You Love

Joy also exists beyond the classroom. Gardening, listening to music, reading, painting, cooking, hiking, photography, quilting, woodworking, traveling, or simply spending time with loved ones all help replenish emotional energy. Hobbies remind educators that they are whole people whose identities extend beyond their professional roles. Time spent pursuing personal interests is not wasted time; it restores the creativity and enthusiasm that educators bring back into their classrooms.

Creativity Nourishes the Spirit

Creative expression allows educators to process emotions, reduce stress, and experience the satisfaction of making something meaningful. Whether through music, writing, crafts, photography, gardening, dance, or artistic expression, creativity encourages flexibility, curiosity, and problem solving. These same qualities enrich teaching and inspire children to become creative learners themselves.

Protect Joy as Intentionally as You Protect Your Time

Just as educators schedule meetings and lesson planning, they should also protect time for activities that restore their sense of joy. Waiting until life becomes less busy rarely works. Joy grows through intentional choices made every day, whether that means taking a walk after work, listening to favorite music during the drive home, tending a garden, sharing dinner with family, or simply pausing to appreciate a child's smile.

Children benefit from educators who genuinely enjoy being with them. Joy is contagious. When teachers laugh, wonder, create, and celebrate alongside children, they model optimism, curiosity, resilience, and a lifelong love of learning. In many ways, joyful educators give children permission to become joyful learners.

Ultimately, reclaiming joy is not about ignoring life's challenges. It is about remembering that even during difficult seasons, beauty, laughter, creativity, and hope remain available to us. Children deserve joyful teachers, and teachers deserve joyful lives.

Joy Menu: Figure 15.3



Figure 15.3 was generated by the author using AI

Conclusion

Early childhood education is a profession built on relationships. Every day, educators help children feel safe, valued, capable, and connected. They celebrate first steps, comfort hurt feelings, encourage persistence, nurture curiosity, and create environments where children can grow socially, emotionally, and academically. This work is deeply meaningful, but it is also emotionally demanding.

Caring for children has never required educators to sacrifice themselves. The healthiest educators are not those who never become tired, discouraged, or overwhelmed. Rather, they are the ones who recognize their own needs, ask for support, establish healthy boundaries, and care for themselves with the same compassion they so freely extend to others. By protecting their own well-being, educators preserve the emotional energy needed to remain patient, responsive, and fully present for the children and families they serve.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored resilience, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, healthy boundaries, supportive relationships, self-care, and joy. None of these ideas is about becoming a perfect educator. Instead, they remind us that teaching is a lifelong journey of learning, reflection, and growth. Every thoughtful conversation, every moment of self-awareness, every healthy boundary, and every act of self-compassion strengthens an educator's capacity to continue doing this important work.

Perhaps the greatest gift educators give children is not a perfectly planned lesson or a beautifully organized classroom. It is the experience of being known, valued, encouraged, and loved by a caring adult. Children may forget the specific activities they

completed, but they will remember how they felt in the presence of the adults who cared for them.

As you continue your journey as an early childhood educator, remember that your own well-being matters. The care you extend to yourself is not separate from the care you provide to children. They are deeply connected. When educators nurture their own physical, emotional, and professional well-being, they strengthen their ability to nurture the children who depend on them.

Sustainable teaching is not about giving more. It is about remaining healthy enough to keep giving what matters most: your presence, your wisdom, and your heart.

Children deserve joyful teachers, and teachers deserve joyful lives.

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15.11: Closing Textbook Reflection



Throughout this textbook, one message has remained constant: relationships are the foundation of positive social-emotional development. Children learn emotional regulation through co-regulation. They develop empathy by experiencing empathy. They learn trust by being trusted, respect by being respected, and kindness by being treated with kindness. Every caring interaction helps children build a deeper understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them.

As educators, we have the extraordinary privilege of helping shape not only what children know, but also who they become. The work of early childhood education extends far beyond preparing children for kindergarten. It helps lay the foundation for healthy relationships, lifelong learning, resilience, and emotional well-being. Every conversation, every shared laugh, every moment of comfort, every repaired relationship, and every act of encouragement becomes part of a child's story.

There will be days filled with laughter, discovery, and celebration, and there will be days that test your patience, resilience, and hope. Through it all, remember that your presence matters. Your calm voice, your encouragement, your willingness to listen, your belief in every child's potential, and your commitment to caring relationships leave lasting impressions that extend far beyond the classroom.

As you continue your journey as an early childhood educator, may you never underestimate the difference you make. Continue learning. Continue growing. Continue believing in every child's potential. The seeds you plant today may not fully blossom for many years, but they have the power to influence a lifetime.

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15.12: Chapter Vocabulary

Emotional labor: The ongoing process of managing one's own emotions while responding sensitively and appropriately to the emotional needs of others.

Burnout: A condition resulting from prolonged workplace stress that may involve emotional exhaustion, cynicism or detachment, and a reduced sense of professional accomplishment.

Compassion fatigue: Emotional depletion that can develop from continually caring for and empathizing with people experiencing distress, trauma, or significant challenges.

Secondary traumatic stress: Emotional and physiological distress that can result from repeated exposure to another person's traumatic experiences.

Resilience: The ability to adapt, recover, and continue moving forward after experiencing stress, setbacks, or adversity.

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15.13: Extra Internet Resource Links



- **Head Start: Promoting Staff Well-Being/links to an external source:** Provides resources for strengthening the physical and mental well-being of early childhood professionals and creating an organizational culture that supports staff wellness.
- **NAEYC: Preventing Compassion Fatigue, Caring for Yourself/links to an external source:** Explains burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress and offers practical strategies that early childhood educators can use to manage stress and care for themselves.
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Secondary Traumatic Stress/links to an external source:** Describes the causes and effects of secondary traumatic stress among child-serving professionals and provides resources for prevention, recognition, and support.
- **ZERO TO THREE: Three Building Blocks of Reflective Supervision/links to an external source:** Explains how active listening, thoughtful questioning, and supportive professional relationships help educators reflect on emotionally demanding work and make responsive decisions

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About the Author

Dr. Laurie Daly has been a full-time professor at Woodland Community College's Lake County Campus since 2006, where she teaches in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Department. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from Pacific Union College, a Master's degree in Education with an emphasis in ECE from Sonoma State University, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Mills College. Her dissertation, *Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children and Its Influences*, was based on field research conducted in Lake County, California (Daly & Perez, 2009).

With a lifelong commitment to children, families, and communities, Dr. Daly began her career in early childhood education at the age of 19 as a preschool teacher's aide. In her mid-twenties, she became the founding preschool director of Papermill Creek Children's Corner, the first full-time, permanent childcare facility in Point Reyes, California.

Dr. Daly was first certified as a Mentor Teacher in 1992 in Marin County and holds credentials in all five modules of WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC). Professionally, she integrates the roles of professor, child development specialist, researcher, and child advocate. Passionate about ethical leadership and high-quality early learning, Dr. Daly continues to inspire the next generation of educators with insight, warmth, and deep respect for the children they serve.



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GLOSSARY

A

ABC Observation Method

| A method of documenting the antecedent, behavior, and consequence associated with an incident to identify patterns and possible influences on behavior.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

| Potentially traumatic experiences occurring before age 18 that can affect development, health, relationships, and well-being.

Attachment

| A deep and enduring emotional bond between a child and a caregiver that provides security, comfort, and a sense of belonging.

Authentic assessment

| The ongoing collection of information about children's development through observations, documentation, and naturally occurring activities in familiar settings.

B

Behavior Support Plan

| A proactive, individualized plan that identifies a child's strengths, behavioral patterns, possible triggers, prevention strategies, replacement skills, adult responses, and methods for monitoring progress.

Burnout

| A condition resulting from prolonged workplace stress that may involve emotional exhaustion, cynicism or detachment, and a reduced sense of professional accomplishment.

C

Calming space

| A comfortable, supportive area where children can voluntarily relax, regulate their emotions, regain control, and prepare to return to classroom activities.

The child does not know but is ready to learn

| A possible cause of behavior in which a child is developmentally capable of learning an expected skill but has not yet received sufficient teaching, modeling, or practice.

Co-regulation

| The process through which a responsive adult helps a child manage emotions, behavior, and physiological responses until the child gradually develops greater self-regulation.

Co-Regulation

| The supportive process through which a responsive adult helps a child manage emotions, behavior, and physiological responses.

Compassion fatigue

| Emotional depletion that can develop from continually caring for and empathizing with people experiencing distress, trauma, or significant challenges.

Conflict resolution

| The process of identifying and addressing a disagreement through communication, emotional regulation, perspective taking, and collaborative problem-solving.

Cultural Competence

| The developing ability to understand, respect, and interact positively with people from different cultural, linguistic, family, and ability backgrounds.

Cultural humility

| The ongoing practice of reflecting on one's own beliefs and biases while remaining open to learning from each family's unique culture, values, and experiences.

Culturally responsive practice

| An approach that respects families' cultures, languages, traditions, and caregiving practices and incorporates them meaningfully into the learning environment.

D

Developmental-stage behavior

| Behavior that reflects a child's age, developmental abilities, or need to practice a newly emerging skill.

Discipline

| A respectful, instructional response used after an expectation has not been met to help children understand their actions, repair harm, and practice more appropriate behavior.

Display rules

| Socially and culturally influenced expectations concerning when, where, and how emotions should be expressed.

E

Emotional competence

| The ability to understand emotions, use emotional vocabulary, express feelings appropriately, cope with emotional experiences, and respond sensitively to others.

Emotional contagion

| The process through which one person's emotional state influences the feelings, behavior, and physiological responses of others.

Emotional development

| The process through which children learn to recognize, express, understand, and manage their emotions and respond to the emotions of others.

Emotional intelligence

| The ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions while responding effectively and empathetically to the emotions of others.

Emotional intelligence

| The ability to recognize, understand, use, and manage emotions in oneself and in relationships with others.

Emotional Intelligence

| The ability to recognize, understand, express, and manage emotions in oneself and respond appropriately to the emotions of others.

Emotional labor

| The ongoing process of managing one's own emotions while responding sensitively and appropriately to the emotional needs of others.

Empathy

| The ability to recognize, understand, and respond to another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.

Environment as the third teacher

| The concept that the physical space, materials, organization, schedule, and emotional climate actively influence children's development, behavior, relationships, and learning.

Environmental influences

| Physical, social, emotional, cultural, and situational conditions that can affect children's feelings, actions, and behavior.

Executive Function

| A group of mental processes, including working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility, that help children plan, focus attention, remember information, and manage behavior.

F

Family partnership

| A respectful, collaborative relationship in which families and educators share information, expertise, decision-making, and responsibility for supporting a child.

Feisty Temperament

| A temperament style often characterized by high activity, intense emotional reactions, irregular biological rhythms, distractibility, and difficulty adapting to change.

Flexible Temperament

| A temperament style generally characterized by regular biological rhythms, adaptability, positive mood, and relatively mild emotional reactions.

G

Goodness of Fit

| The degree to which an adult's expectations, responses, and environment are compatible with a child's temperament and individual needs.

Guidance

| A proactive, instructional process that teaches children the social, emotional, and behavioral skills needed to make increasingly responsible choices.

I

I statement

| A communication strategy used to express feelings, describe what happened, and explain why the experience was upsetting without blaming or attacking another person.

Individual differences

| Variations in temperament, sensory processing, physiology, neurodevelopment, executive functioning, and life experiences that influence how children respond to the world.

Inhibitory Control

| The ability to pause before acting, resist an immediate impulse, and choose a response that is appropriate for the situation.

Internal Working Model

| A child's developing expectations and beliefs about whether they are worthy of care and whether other people can be trusted and relied upon.

L

Least Restrictive Environment

| The legal principle that children with disabilities should learn alongside children without disabilities to the greatest extent appropriate while receiving the supports needed for meaningful participation.

Limbic system

| A network of interconnected brain structures involved in emotion, motivation, memory, stress responses, and behavior.

M

Moral development

| The gradual process through which children develop an understanding of right and wrong, fairness, responsibility, honesty, and respect.

O

Observational learning

| Learning that occurs by watching another person's behavior and observing the consequences of that behavior.

P

Peace table

| A designated classroom space where children can calm themselves, communicate their perspectives, listen to one another, and work toward mutually acceptable solutions.

Perspective taking

| The ability to consider a situation from another person's point of view.

Positive guidance

| A respectful approach that teaches children appropriate behavior by communicating clear expectations, modeling social skills, and helping children learn from their choices.

Prosocial behavior

| Voluntary actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, comforting, cooperating, and showing kindness.

Protective factors

| Relationships, strengths, resources, and environmental conditions that help reduce the effects of stress and adversity.

R

Reciprocal communication

| A two-way exchange in which educators and families both share information, listen to one another, and contribute their knowledge and perspectives.

Reciprocal interactions

| Back-and-forth exchanges in which children and caregivers respond to and influence one another through sounds, gestures, facial expressions, words, and actions.

Redirection

| A guidance strategy that shifts a child's attention or behavior toward a safe, acceptable, and developmentally appropriate alternative.

Reflective listening

| Listening carefully and restating what a person has communicated to confirm understanding and help the person feel heard.

Resilience

| The ability to adapt, recover, and continue moving forward after experiencing stress, setbacks, or adversity.

S

Safe Haven

| A trusted caregiver to whom a child turns for comfort, protection, and reassurance during distress.

Secondary traumatic stress

| Emotional and physiological distress that can result from repeated exposure to another person's traumatic experiences.

Secure Base

| A trusted caregiver who provides the emotional security a child needs to explore, learn, and interact with others.

Self-Efficacy

| A person's belief in their ability to accomplish a task, solve a problem, or influence what happens through their actions.

Self-Regulation

| The developing ability to manage emotions, attention, behavior, and impulses in ways that support relationships, learning, and goal-directed activity.

Self-Regulation

| The developing ability to manage emotions, attention, thoughts, impulses, and behavior in ways that are appropriate for the situation.

Sense of belonging

| The feeling of being welcomed, accepted, connected, respected, and valued as an important member of a classroom community.

Slow-to-Warm-Up Temperament

| A temperament style characterized by cautious responses to unfamiliar people or situations, low initial activity, and gradual adaptation over time.

Social and Emotional Learning

| The process through which children learn to understand and manage emotions, develop healthy identities, form positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions.

Social competence

| The integrated ability to communicate, cooperate, regulate behavior, solve social problems, and build and maintain positive relationships with others.

Social Competence

| The ability to interact effectively with others, express emotions appropriately, cooperate, solve social problems, and build positive relationships.

Social Support Pyramid

| A tiered framework that begins with positive relationships and supportive environments, progresses to intentional social-emotional instruction, and provides individualized intervention when needed.

Socialization

| The process through which children learn the values, behaviors, customs, expectations, and social practices of their families, communities, and cultures.

Stages of social play

| Parten's description of children's increasingly interactive forms of play, including unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play.

Strengths-based communication

| Communication that recognizes and builds upon a child's abilities, interests, relationships, progress, and family resources while addressing areas in which support may be needed.

T

Temperament

| Biologically influenced individual differences in emotional reactivity, activity, attention, adaptability, and responses to people and experiences.

Theory of Mind

| The understanding that other people have thoughts, feelings, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge that may differ from one's own.

Toxic stress

| Prolonged or excessive activation of the body's stress-response systems without sufficient support from caring adults.

Trauma

| An emotional, psychological, and physiological response to an event or series of events that overwhelms a person's ability to cope.

Trauma-informed care

| An approach that recognizes the possible effects of trauma and emphasizes safety, trust, connection, empowerment, cultural responsiveness, and compassionate support.

U

Universal Design for Learning

| A framework for designing flexible learning environments that provide multiple ways for children to engage, access information, participate, communicate, and demonstrate learning.

Unmet emotional need

| A need for security, connection, trust, acceptance, belonging, comfort, or control that a child may be attempting to communicate or satisfy through behavior.

W

WAGER framework

| A relationship-building framework representing Warmth, Acceptance, Genuineness, Empathy, and Respect.

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