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PROMOTING SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Promoting Children's Success: Building Relationships and Creating Supportive Environments

For the past five months, we have been discussing social emotional competence in relation to infants and toddlers. Now we are heading into similar modules but in relation to older children.

Challenging Behaviors and Promoting Social Emotional Skills

We all know how difficult it is to deal with children with challenging behavior. It is important for teachers and caregivers to have support when working with these children. It can be difficult to see beyond the challenging behavior, and a team approach is helpful, along with professional intervention to brainstorm possible solutions. Children often use challenging behavior when they don't have more appropriate behaviors or skills to accomplish the same goal or communicate the same message. This means that our focus **MUST** be on teaching children new skills, rather than trying to get them to stop using challenging behaviors. Keep it positive! Teach them what **to do**, rather than what not to do!

Our goal should be to facilitate the learning of skills which are valued in the school and community in order to ensure the child's success. This needs to be done in the context of honoring the values and beliefs of their home culture and/or language.

The following are key social emotional skills children need as they enter school:

- Confidence
- The capacity to form good relationships with peers and adults
- Concentration and persistence on challenging tasks
- The ability to effectively communicate various emotions
- The ability to be attentive (listen to instructions)
- The ability to solve social problems

Children often use challenging behavior when they lack the social emotional skills necessary to engage in more appropriate interactions. Challenging behavior usually carries a message. (I am bored, tired, hungry, thirsty, sad, or you hurt my feelings or I need some attention.) Let's face it, behavior that persists over time is usually working for the child in some way. Again, our focus must be on teaching the child what **TO DO** in place of the challenging behavior.

Building Positive Relationships

The best place to start is with building positive relationships. Relationships form the foundation of the pyramid and are essential to everything else we do. It is important to build and strengthen relationships with all children as a context for supporting their social emotional development and preventing challenging behavior. It is much easier to address challenging behavior when you already have a strong relationship with the child and his/her family.

Some ideas for building relationships with children include:

- Pay attention to each individual child.
- Joke and laugh with children.
- Know what interests each child and talk with the child about their interests.
- Respect each child's approach to situations and people.
- Talk to the child seriously when the topic is serious or important to the child.
- Ask children to tell you what makes them happy and sad, and respect their feelings.
- Show children that you are happy they are there.
- Learn and remember personal information about children (ex: best friend's name, pet's name, siblings, activities they do outside of school) and use this information in your conversations.
- Give children genuine choices and assist them in following through with their choices.
- Show respect for children's cultural, linguistic and religious beliefs.
- Listen to children when they speak to you, and respond appropriately to their questions.
- Spend time with children doing what they love to do.
- Smile at children.
- Respond to children consistently.

Here are some ideas for building relationships with families:

- Keep lines of communication open between program and families (notes, phone calls).
- Support and encourage parental involvement in activities.
- Learn from family members about their children, and home and family life.
- Share resources with parents about how to support the child's social emotional development.
- Share positive things the child did at the program.
- Conduct meetings with parents in an environment and at a time convenient for them.
- Assure parents about confidentiality and privacy rights.
- Implement activities that bring families together.
- Acknowledge the good things families are doing with their child.
- Have parents share their unique resources with your program (talents, jobs etc.).

Making Emotional Deposits

Carolyn Webster-Stratton suggests using the metaphor of a piggy bank to illustrate making deposits into children's emotional banks as a way of building positive relationships. (Webster-

Stratton, 1999) We make deposits when we do things to build relationships and we make withdrawals when we engage in behaviors that are detrimental to relationship building. She lists the following ideas for making deposits:

- Greet each child by name at the door.
- Post children's work around the room.
- Have a star of the week bring in special things from home and share them during circle time.
- Tell a child's parent in front of the child what a great day he/she had; send home positive notes.
- Call a child after a difficult day and say, "I'm sorry we had a tough day and I know tomorrow is going to be better."
- Give lots of hugs, high 5's and thumbs up!
- When a child misses a day, let them know how much you missed them.
- Write special things about a child on a t-shirt and let them wear it.
- Read to an individual child or a small group of children.
- Acknowledge children's efforts.
- Find out what each child's favorite book is, and read it to the class.
- Give compliments liberally.
- Play with children and follow their lead.
- Help children make "All About Me" books and share them at circle time.

Keep your focus on filling up those piggy banks! Remember that empty emotional piggy banks increase the likelihood of challenging behavior.

Designing the Physical Environment

Now let's consider how the design of the physical environment factors in. The design should promote children's engagement and prevent/discourage challenging behavior. When setting up your room you should stand back and take a look at traffic patterns. Minimize large open spaces which may lead to children running, etc. You should also minimize obstacles and other hazards. Be sure to consider the environmental arrangement as it relates to children with physical or sensory disabilities. Footprints on the floor can be helpful in leading children in, out and around learning centers in an organized fashion. Partial barriers, such as a fence, can help delineate space and prevent unwanted traffic through an area.

Thoughtfully designed learning centers will increase the likelihood of children being engaged and decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviors occurring. Here are some design suggestions:

- Have clear boundaries so that all children know where the center begins/ends, and so that children are not crowded together.
- Make sure that all children are visible to adults and that adults are visible to children.

- Have enough centers for the number of children in your care and enough materials within the centers so that children are engaged and not arguing over materials.
- Use developmentally appropriate/creative ways to limit the number of children in centers.
- Consider size and locations. Avoid having a center with a high level of activity near a center with quieter activities.
- Centers must be organized and ready to go when children arrive.
- Materials within the centers should be meaningful, relevant and engaging to children's needs, interests and lives.
- Provide a variety of materials in each center and rotate the materials and themes on a regular basis.

Daily Routines and Transitions

In addition, it is important to teach children the daily routine. Schedules and routines provide some security and a sense of what comes next. When children are able to anticipate what will happen next, they feel more secure. Be consistent in your daily routines. Post your schedule visually and refer to it frequently throughout the day. For some children, especially those with disabilities (e.g., autism), changes in the schedule can be a trigger for challenging behavior.

Transitions are another time when challenging behavior often occurs. Minimize the number of transitions during the day. Always give children a warning before a transition occurs. Plan transitions so that there is a minimal amount of time spent in transition, and that children remain engaged during this time. Also minimize those transitions during which every child has to do the same thing at the same time, such as bathroom time. You can plan transition activities such as finger plays, songs or guessing games to give children something to do while they are waiting. Assigning some children with helping roles, such as holding a door or passing out paper towels helps keep them engaged as well.

Summary: Promoting Social Emotional Development

In summary, the first and most important thing we need to do is build positive relationships with every child and their family. Our focus must be on prevention of challenging behaviors through teaching appropriate skills to use in place of the challenging behavior. It is important for teachers to use a comprehensive approach that includes not only relationship building, but continual assessment of the classroom in terms of physical design and content, as well as attention to consistent schedules and smooth transitioning from one activity to the next.

Promoting social emotional development is not easy, and there are no quick fixes to challenging behavior. Despite our best efforts at prevention, there are times when a situation requires the intervention of a professional to work with the child, the family and the child care staff. Ask your nurse consultant to assist you in deciding when a referral is appropriate. She can also provide you with referral sources available in your area.

Resources:

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University.
Promoting Children's Success: Building Relationships and Creating Supportive Environments.

Webster-Stratton, C. (1999). *How to promote children's social and emotional competence.*
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.