

From Science to Public Policy: Promoting Policies that Support Early Childhood Social & Emotional Development

This article is excerpted from “[Helping Young Children Succeed: Strategies to Promote Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development](#),” a joint publication of ZERO TO THREE and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). The full policy brief can be downloaded from the ZERO TO THREE website at <http://www.zerotothree.org/policy>.

What the Science Says

The early years of life lay the foundation for a child’s development today and during the course of his or her life. From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life.¹ It is during this time that the brain undergoes its most dramatic growth, and children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn and reason. Early experiences can and do influence the physical architecture of the brain,² literally shaping the neural connections in an infant’s developing brain.

Gaining social and emotional skills enables children to learn from teachers, make friends, express thoughts and feelings, and cope with frustration. These kinds of skills, in turn, directly influence cognitive learning such as early literacy, numeracy and language skills.³ A child who cannot remain calm, focus on a task and stick with it will not be able to take advantage of the opportunity to interact with an adult who is reading her a story – an activity that effectively promotes early language and literacy skills.

In their first years of life, children rapidly develop the social and emotional capacities that prepare them to be self-confident, trusting, empathetic, intellectually inquisitive, competent in using language to communicate, and capable of relating well to others.⁴ Sometimes called early childhood mental health, or infant mental health, healthy social and emotional development refers to a child’s developing capacity to:

- Experience, manage and express the full range of positive and negative emotions;
- Develop close, satisfying relationships with other children and adults; and
- Actively explore their environment and learn.

Early childhood social and emotional development is firmly tied to every other area of growth and development – physical growth and health, communication and language development, and cognitive skills, as well as the child’s early relationships. Children who are emotionally healthy have a significantly greater chance of achieving success in school compared with those who have emotional difficulties.^{5 6} Cost-benefit analyses confirm that nurturing young children’s social,

emotional, and behavioral skills through quality early educational experiences produces an economic return to society. This occurs over the short term and over time through a contribution of labor force skills that generate national economic growth and lower crime rates that keep down taxpayer costs.^{7 8} A principle benefit of early childhood intervention is shaping what are considered the non-cognitive skills – behavior, motivation and self control.⁹ Children with healthy social and emotional skills form the capacities to develop lasting friendships and intimate relationships, effectively care for their own children, hold a job, and become productive citizens.¹⁰

Due to biological, relationship-based, and/or environmental risk factors, some young children do not develop healthy social and emotional skills and can experience mental health problems. As early as the first year of life, some infants demonstrate significant behavioral or emotional problems – this may be evidenced by poor weight gain; slow growth; recurrent vomiting; constipation; overall delayed development; inconsolable crying; excessive biting; kicking and hitting; flat affect (no expression, no emotions); feeding and sleep problems. Older toddlers and preschoolers may demonstrate aggressive or impulsive behavior, defiance and over-activity. In addition, young children can experience depression, grief, and disorganization in response to trauma, maltreatment and loss.¹¹

Promoting Healthy Social and Emotional Development through Public Policy

State policymakers can take steps to improve early childhood mental health and provide a framework for comprehensive early childhood mental health services. The following policy recommendations are designed to help state policymakers meet the needs of infants, toddlers and young children by preventing problems before they result in more expensive long-term social liabilities. The policy recommendations are listed here in brief but are described in more detail, along with examples of existing state and community strategies, in the full report, “Helping Young Children Succeed.”

Promotion services, aimed at maintaining social and emotional well-being, benefit all young children and their families. A promotion strategy might involve a public awareness campaign and/or the use of home visiting or family support programs to educate parents and other primary caregivers (e.g., child care and health care providers) about the key role they can play in creating and maintaining healthy relationships, environments and experiences.

A prevention approach is targeted toward children who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes. Prevention approaches, aimed to reduce the risk of mental health problems through early identification and intervention strategies, might include screening for social and emotional development. Screening can be provided through child care settings, pediatric offices, family resource centers, home

visiting programs, comprehensive child development programs, and child abuse prevention programs. Prevention services may specifically address areas such as environmental toxins (exposure to mercury or lead), focus on improving the quality of infant and toddler child care, or focus on reducing violence in the community and domestic violence.

Treatment offers targeted and individualized attention to young children and families who already are exhibiting symptoms of mental health disturbances. This highly specialized level of service requires skilled staff who have advanced training. For example, treatment might include the enrollment of a young child in a therapeutic, day care program or child-parent psychotherapy for both the child and parent(s).

Promotion, prevention and treatment strategies may overlap with one another. For example, quality child care may be used to promote positive mental health, and, at the same time, prevent poor developmental outcomes.

Policy Recommendations in Brief

Promoting Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development

- ✓ Develop initiatives to increase awareness and understanding of early childhood mental health.
- ✓ Integrate social and emotional development into existing services.

Preventing Mental Health Disorders or Their Consequences

- ✓ Fully implement federal referral requirements under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 2003 (CAPTA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C Reauthorization of 2004.
- ✓ Provide mental health consultation to early childhood programs to address challenging behaviors.
- ✓ Expand early intervention approaches.
- ✓ Invest in family mental health services and supports.

Treating Early Childhood Mental Health Disorders

- ✓ Address the distinct mental health needs of young children and their families who are affected by maltreatment, substance abuse and domestic violence.
- ✓ Expand the number of mental health clinicians trained to address early childhood mental health issues.

Several existing federal programs and funding streams are available for states to draw on to support early childhood social and emotional development.¹² They include:

- Medicaid
- Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT)
- Head Start and Early Head Start
- Part B of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): Preschool Special Education Program
- Part C of IDEA: Early Intervention
- Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)
- Title V Maternal and Child Health Services Block Grant

State policymakers have a unique opportunity to make a significant, lasting effect on young children's successful development by supporting effective policies and programs designed to support healthy social-emotional development. By building the social and emotional foundations, state policymakers can ensure that young children are fully equipped for success in school and in life.

¹ J. Shonkoff and D. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, DC: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press, 2000).

² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Children's Emotional Development is Built into the Architecture of their Brain, Working Paper No. 2*, Winter 2004, accessed on June 16, 2005, at www.developingchild.net/reports.shtml.

³ R. Parlakian, *Before the ABC's: Promoting School Readiness in Infants and Toddlers* (Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2003).

⁴ Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children* (New York, N.Y.: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994).

⁵ C. Raver, "Emotions Matter: Making the Case for the Role of Young Children's Emotional Development for Early School Readiness," *Social Policy Report of the Society for Research in Child Development* 16, no. 1 (2002): 3-23.

⁶ J. Currie, "Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness," *The Future of Children* 15, no. 1 (2005): 117-138.

⁷ P. Carneiro and J. Heckman, "Inequality in America: what Role for Human Capital Policies?" in *Human Capital Policy*, eds. J. Heckman and A. Krueger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

⁸ J. Heckman and D. Masterov, *The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*, Invest in Kids Working Group Paper No. 5 (Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development, 2004). Accessed on February 20, 2005 at www.ced.org/docs/

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ R. Weissbourd, *The Vulnerable Child: What Really Hurts America's Children and What We Can Do About It* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus, 1996).

¹¹ P. Zeanah, B. Stafford, G. Nagle, and T. Rice, *Addressing Socio-Emotional and Infant Mental Health in Early Childhood Systems*.

¹² K. Johnson, J. Knitzer, and R. Kaufman, *Making Dollars Follow Sense: Financing Early Childhood Mental Health Services to Promote Healthy Social and Emotional Development in Young Children* (New York, N.Y.: National Center for Children in Poverty, 2002).