

**THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL**

# Development of Young Children

RESOURCE GUIDE FOR HEALTHY START STAFF



American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™



**W**hen babies are born, parents make a commitment to love, protect and provide for their children. Society expects that parents will do their part to ensure that their children survive, but most parents want more for their children – they want them to thrive! In addition to being healthy, most parents want their children to be bright, curious, confident, caring, happy and successful. They might imagine their children taking their first steps, riding bikes, or heading off for their first days of school. They may even wonder how they will adjust to Kindergarten, if will they make new friends in the second grade, whether they will want to try playing a musical instrument, or what sports or hobbies they will enjoy in high school. Will they be shy or the child that everyone wants to have as their friend? Will they think for themselves, or will they follow the pack? Will they make good, healthy decisions and avoid all the trappings of the teenage years (like substance abuse, promiscuity, depression or violence), or will they lack the resilience and vision needed to see them through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood? Although a bit overwhelming at times, all of these are normal thoughts and concerns for new parents as they look upon their new child and begin to wonder how their child will learn and grow under their care. What parents may not realize is that many of these hopes and fears are related to their child's social and emotional development.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Social emotional development is a fundamental part of a child's overall health and well-being, as it both reflects and impacts upon the developing brain's wiring and function. Social emotional development is sometimes called early childhood mental health or infant mental health. It spans from how children interact with others to how they manage or cope with adversity and stress. Social emotional development within the first few years of life sets a precedent and prepares children to be self-confident, trusting, empathic, intellectually inquisitive, competent in using language to communicate, and capable of relating well to others.<sup>i</sup> Healthy social and emotional development refers to a child's emerging ability to:

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

A child's emerging social and emotional skills form a critical foundation for learning and wellness that will guide them



into adulthood. The healthier a child's early experiences are, the more apt they are to enter school and life with a strong foundation of social-emotional skills. It is important to remember that these are the experiences and skills that will influence how they deal with both success and adversity across their lifespan. To understand how these early childhood experiences and skills influence life-long trajectories of health and productivity, parents and caregivers need to be aware of three important types of connections that are forming in the first few years of life.





## MAKING CONNECTIONS PART I: UNDERSTANDING BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

At birth, an average newborn's brain has about 1 billion nerve cells, or neurons, and weighs about a pound. By three years, the average brain still has about 1 billion neurons, but it now weighs three pounds! The difference is due to more support cells (called glia) and an explosion in the number of connections between the neurons, called synapses. These new connections are forming at an astronomical rate – several hundred per second! Whether these connections are saved into adulthood or pruned during childhood depends upon whether they are actually used or activated, and their activation is often dependent upon the child's experience with the environment. To put it simply, the more enriching or stimulating the child's environment, the more connections are strengthened and maintained. This brain plasticity (the ability of the brain to literally alter its connections to adapt to its surroundings), however, is



a double edged sword: are the connections underlying self-regulation, social skills, and speech being activated and strengthened, or is the environment unintentionally activating and strengthening the connections underlying fear, anxiety, aggression or hopelessness? Perhaps even more importantly, this brain plasticity is a limited time offer: as the child grows, brain plasticity declines, and the effort

needed to form new connections increases.

In sum, parents need to understand that a young child's experience with the environment literally sculpts the connections that are forming within the child's brain, and that this initial wiring is critical because making new brain connections gets much harder as we age.





## **MAKING CONNECTIONS PART II: UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

During the first few years of life, no aspect of the child's environment is more important for proper brain development than his or her connections with others. Sometimes called attachment, the bonds young children form with parents and caregivers are critical. Early nurturing relationships teach children how to become calm after stressful events, be it hunger, frustration with their unsuccessful attempts to express themselves, or scraping their knee. This ability to regulate strong emotions, initially with the help of others and eventually by one's self, is a critical skill. Regulating strong emotions is necessary for age-appropriate behavior. On the other hand, the inability to turn off the body's stress response can disrupt the neuronal connections that are forming within important areas of the brain, including those responsible for learning, memory and planning. Nurturing and supportive social connections early in life promote healthy emotional regulation, and that allows for optimal brain development and function. Conversely, excessive or prolonged stress in absence of social supports activates and strengthens the neuronal connections underlying the stress response, setting up a brain that is wired more for stress and survival and less for learning and empathy.



Another reason early social connections are so important is that most of what young children learn occurs within the context of a relationship, beginning with the social smile and continuing on through babbling, walking, speaking, understanding and eventually enjoying others. Nurturing and responsive social connec-

tions encourage the child to imitate these important elements of healthy development. As parents and caregivers develop caring, supportive connections with children, they are better able to assist them in developing crucial intellectual, emotional, and social abilities. Examples include: learning to give and accept love; being confident and secure; showing empathy; being curious and persistent. These are all abilities that will enable their child to learn, to relate well with others, and to lead a happy and productive life.

That being said, it is important to remind parents that every child grows and develops differently. Some of these foundational skills may come quite easily and will only need to be reinforced with praise, while other skills will need to be purposefully





modeled, taught and practiced. This is the challenge of purposeful parenting – making sure that their child’s emerging social emotional and linguistic needs are MET by:

- **M**odeling age appropriate social-emotional-linguistic behaviors for their child (like smiling, cooing, babbling, using words, reading, regulating their own emotions, and demonstrating caring relationships with others – not just the child!). If they have nurtured a caring, responsive relationship with the child, the child will want to imitate these behaviors.
- **E**ncouraging emerging social-emotional-linguistic skills (like smiling, cooing, babbling, using words, regulating strong emotions, reading, regulating their emotions, and demonstrating caring relationships with others) to ensure that these important behaviors continue to be used. By “catching them being good,” or actively encouraging positive behaviors, parents are practicing positive discipline (remember that the word discipline means “to teach” NOT to punish!). They also are solidifying important basic skills that will serve as the foundation for more complex skills later in life.
- **T**eaching and even practicing social-emotional-linguistic skills that might be more difficult to master – like healthy adaptations to cope with adversity or stress (using words when

frustrated or angry, taking turns when learning to share, walking away from conflict, or, as the child ages, solving problems collaboratively).

Parents should also be aware of the signs that a child might be in need of additional support to develop these critical social-emotional skills. Like when a child:

- Is more fearful and worried than other children
- Has sleeping, eating, or toileting problems
- Displays behavior like hitting, screaming, or fighting on a daily basis
- Treats other children, animals, or objects cruelly or destructively
- Is not talking or expressing needs
- Has trouble forming relationships
- Is unusually quiet, shy, or withdrawn
- Is unable to play
- Has trouble with self-control
- Is hard to soothe or comfort
- Tends to have frequent headaches or stomach aches

It is important for Healthy Start staff to recognize that different cultures may have various expectations about the age a child achieves certain social milestones – smiling, playing well with other children, sharing, etc. Therefore, be patient with the family and encourage them to be patient with their child, reminding them again that every child grows and develops differently.

### **MAKING CONNECTIONS PART III: UNDERSTANDING LIFE COURSE**

The social and emotional connections that young children develop with their caregivers literally helps to determine which neuronal connections are activated and strengthened within their brains, and these early neuronal connections form the foundation for lifelong brain function. This is the biology that underlies the long established connection between early childhood experiences and life course. Children who have adverse childhood experiences are more likely to have unhealthy and unproductive lives, whereas young children who have positive, stimulating experiences are more likely to be healthy, to finish school, to remain married, to be gainfully employed, and to shun violence and substance abuse. In sum, the foundations for lifelong health and productivity begin in childhood and are built upon early social emotional connections.





## HOW CAN HEALTHY START STAFF MEMBERS HELP PARENTS PROMOTE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THEIR CHILDREN?

Healthy Start plays an integral role in helping new parents and parents of young children become well-informed about their child's development. Whether it is a resource about immunizations and child development or tips shared during a "Daddy and Me" playtime workshop, Healthy Start is there to ensure parents have what they need to better understand the overall development of their child. In this context, one of the most important contributions that Healthy Start staff can make is to assist parents in understanding the thread of connections linking 1) how they nurture their child's social, emotion and linguistic skills with 2) how the brain forms its most basic connections with 3) how those early neuronal connections form a foundation for lifelong brain function and behavior. Every moment is a teachable moment for Healthy Start staff, especially for those staff who are home visitors, case managers, or promotoras. A staff member could be educating a depressed mother about the importance of smiling at her two month old, or "catching" a 10 month old who is using happy sounds and babbling to get his father's attention, or discussing positive parenting techniques with the parents of an easily frustrated toddler – these are all excellent opportunities to ensure that a child's social emotional needs



are **MET** by **m**odeling, **e**ncouraging, and **t**eaching. When working with families to help promote the social and emotional well-being of children, here are some additional strategies to consider:

### **FORM A RESPECTFUL AND OPEN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FAMILY.**

Interaction will be more positive if the parent(s) and family members are treated with respect and empathy. By approaching families with sensitivity and acceptance, sound relationships can be built. Parent(s) and family members are more likely to turn to those that they trust when they are concerned about their child. It is helpful to gain an understanding of the culture of family as this also has an influence on development. Once a relationship is established, try to develop a



common set of goals and objectives (e.g., “Would you like him to smile more” or “Would you like her to cry less, etc.), and then to provide a some information and options on how those goals might be best achieved (e.g., “Perhaps if you smile back whenever he smiles...,” or “Perhaps if you give her lots of attention when she makes happy sounds...”).

### **PROMOTE THE “SRs” OF EARLY EDUCATION TO FAMILIES.**

- Reading together as a daily family activity.
- Rhyming, playing, and cuddling together often.
- Routines and regular times for meals, play, and sleeping, which help children know what they can expect and what is expected from them.
- Rewarding everyday successes with praise.
- Reciprocal and nurturing relationships, which are the foundations of healthy child development.

The importance of this last suggestion cannot be overstated. Research suggests that it is the quantity and quality of the “dance” between caregiver and child that promotes both school readiness and adult measures of wellness and productivity. Parents don’t need fancy or expensive toys to promote their child’s brain and social-emotional development – they just need to be willing to invest the time and energy to actively engage and play with their child! In doing so, they will naturally

learn their child’s strengths (so they can be nurtured and reinforced) as well as those areas that need to be actively modeled and taught.

### **HELP PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS TO LEARN ABOUT CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OBSERVATION AND USING DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE MATERIALS.**

Many families may be unfamiliar with child development, particularly social and emotional development. Help increase the parents’ understanding by offering materials in multiple formats and languages that talk about expected developmental milestones. Include information that provides parents and caregivers with strategies on how to encourage development.

### **OBSERVE HOW THE CHILD AND THE PARENT OR CAREGIVER RELATE TO EACH OTHER.**

Notice the way the parent responds to the child’s cues and cries. Are they met with positive interaction? What is observed can offer insight into the current relationship between the parent and the child. Be sure to emphasize strengths and reinforce positive behaviors that support the social emotional development of the child.

### **ENSURE THAT FAMILIES ARE LINKED WITH A FAMILY-CENTERED MEDICAL HOME AND THAT THEY SHARE ANY SOCIAL EMOTIONAL CONCERNS WITH THE MEDICAL HOME CARE TEAM.**

A family-centered medical home is an



approach to providing comprehensive primary care that facilitates partnership between patients, physicians, and families. In a family-centered medical home, the pediatric care team works in partnership with a child and a child’s family to assure that all of the medical and non-medical needs of the patient are met. Ask parents to discuss any concerns or issues around social emotional development with their child’s pediatric care team. The medical home framework encourages families and their child’s care team to work together to ensure that children are developing well and safe.

### **ENSURE THAT FAMILIES ARE LINKED WITH A HIGH QUALITY CHILD CARE ENVIRONMENTS AND EARLY LEARNING EXPERIENCES.**

This is a critical opportunity because a child’s earliest experiences influence brain development, social emotional development, and wide variety of health and life outcomes. Children with high quality,

nurturing, early-learning environments and experiences have fewer contacts with the justice system, fewer risk-taking behaviors, and improved physical, mental and financial health as adolescents and adults. Healthy Start staff may play an important role in linking families with the high quality child care environments and early learning experiences available in their particular area.

### **DISCUSS THE IMPORTANCE OF A SUPPORT SYSTEM AND APPROPRIATE COPING STRATEGIES WHEN PARENTS FEEL TIRED, OVERWHELMED, OR FRUSTRATED.**

Encourage parents to be proactive in making time for themselves and taking opportunities to de-stress. Modeling, encouraging and teaching healthy social emotional skills can be challenging when fatigued, overwhelmed or frustrated. Assist parents in developing strategies to deal with these feelings, such as recognizing their limits and paying attention to internal warning signs. If warning signs are detected early, it is often easier to plan for extra help, to take a brief break, or to go for a walk outside. All parents get upset – what matters is what parents actually DO when they get upset! Remind parents that it is okay to set the child down briefly in a safe place such as a crib. By developing a support system, whether it is through friends, family, or community support, parents are not only taking care of themselves – they are modeling effective stress management for their children.

## CONCLUSION/STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

As the National Healthy Start Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and Healthy Start continue to work together to promote healthy social emotional development in children, here are strategies proposed by Jane Knitzer, Ed.D. that we can implement to address the needs of Healthy Start families. These strategies stem from a service delivery perspective to define early childhood mental health:



- Promote the emotional and behavioral well-being of all young children.
- Strengthen the emotional and behavioral well being of children whose development is compromised by virtue of poverty or other environmental or biological risk factors.
- Help families of young children address whatever barriers they face to ensure that, as children's first nurturers and teachers, their children's emotional development is healthy.
- Expand the competencies of non-familial caregivers (e.g., child care providers, home visitors, Early Head Start and Head Start staff, health care providers) to promote the emotional well-being of young children and families.

- Ensure that young children experiencing atypical emotional and behavioral development and their families have access to needed services and supports.

Learning more about social emotional development in children will help you to better serve the families you meet in your work. The resources provided can be used to help educate families about social emotional development so they have a better understanding of their child's needs. Use these resources as tools to help answer questions for families. We encourage you to review the resources and determine those that best meet the needs of the families you serve.

## RESOURCES

### American Academy of Pediatrics

#### *Bright Futures (Web site)*

Provides materials such as practice guides, PowerPoint presentations, handouts, implementation materials, and family resources. Promoting child development as a key theme.  
<http://brightfutures.aap.org/>

#### *Healthy Children (Web site)*

Provides information on social emotional health as well as the AAP's many programs and activities, policies and guidelines, and publications and other child health resources. The information comes from the nation's leading child health experts.  
[www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)

#### *Healthy Child Care America (Web site)*

The Healthy Child Care America Web site provides key social and emotional AAP resources for early education and child care professionals, AAP policies and standards, and information on early childhood mental health consultation.  
[www.healthychildcare.org](http://www.healthychildcare.org)

#### *National Center for Medical Home Implementation*

Provides information regarding family-centered medical home and how practices, families, and states are advancing medical home in their communities.  
[www.medicalhomeinfo.org/](http://www.medicalhomeinfo.org/)

### Born Learning

#### *Ages & Stages (handouts)*

Provides handouts that highlight specific information on stages of child development.  
[www.bornlearning.org/default.aspx?id=19](http://www.bornlearning.org/default.aspx?id=19)

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site provides information child development and developmental screening. Handouts on positive parenting and fact sheets on developmental screening are available for download.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/default.htm>

### Maternal and Child Health Library at Georgetown

#### *Social and Emotional Development in Children and Adolescents Knowledge Path (Web site)*

This knowledge path directs readers to a selection of current, high-quality resources about promoting healthy social and emotional development in children and adolescents.  
[http://www.mchlibrary.info/knowledgepaths/kp\\_mental\\_healthy.html#overviewBF](http://www.mchlibrary.info/knowledgepaths/kp_mental_healthy.html#overviewBF)

### Technical Assistance Center on Social-Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) for Young Children

Takes the research that shows which practices improve the social-emotional outcomes for young children with, or at risk for, delays or disabilities and creates FREE products and resources to help decision-makers, caregivers, and service providers apply these best practices in the work they do every day.  
<http://www.challengingbehavior.org/>

### text4baby

Text4baby is a free mobile information service designed to promote maternal and child health. It provides pregnant woman and new moms with information they need to take care of their health and give their babies the best possible start in life.  
<http://www.text4baby.org/about.html>

### Zero to Three

#### *Zero to Three (Web site)*

A national, nonprofit organization that informs, trains, and supports professionals, policymakers, and parents in their efforts to improve the lives of infants and toddlers. This site provides a range of practical tools and resources for use by the adults who influence the lives of young children.  
[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

#### *Healthy Minds: Nurturing Your Child's Development (handout)*

Learn how young children develop and what parents can do to support their child's healthy development and growing brain. The information is age-specific, summarizes key findings from the National Academy of Sciences report, and suggests how parents might be able to use key findings to nurture your own child's healthy development.  
<http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/brain-development/healthy-minds.html>

<sup>1</sup>R. Parlakian, Before the ABCs: Promoting School Readiness in Infants and Toddlers (Washington, D.C.: ZERO TO THREE, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>J. Cohen, et al, Helping Young Children Succeed. Strategies to Promote Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development. National Conference of State Legislators. September 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup>J. Knitzer, Using Mental Health Strategies to Move the Early Childhood Agenda and Promote School Readiness. National Center for Children in Poverty. September 2000





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