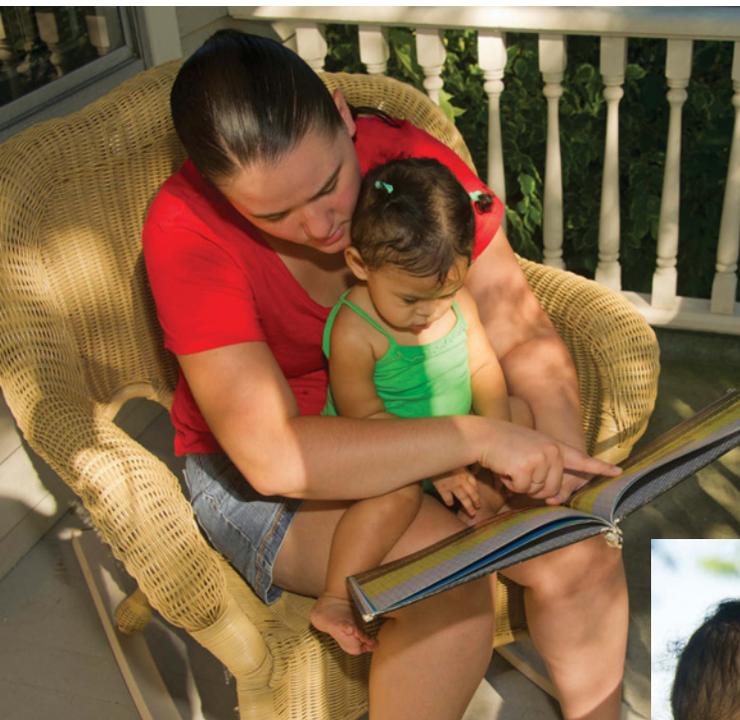


Helping Families Connect

Early Literacy with Social-Emotional Development



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Early childhood educators know that home is a child's first learning environment. From birth, children are comforted by hearing and listening to their caregivers' voices. The language used by families supports young children's development of oral language skills. Exposure to print materials in the home—not just children's books but also newspapers, catalogs, cookbooks, and many other everyday sources—also supports literacy development. Gonzalez and Uhing (2008)

sum up the critical role parents play in emerging literacy: "Reading with children, opportunity for verbal interactions, value placed on literacy, and experiences with print are some key ways in which the home environment influences children's early literacy development" (116).

Literacy opportunities that arise naturally—in the home and early childhood settings—not only develop listening, oral language, and reading and writing skills but also foster

social-emotional growth. As children experience more sophisticated forms of language and literacy, such as using longer sentences and a larger and diverse vocabulary, they build increasingly complex communication skills and use them to express needs, feelings, and ideas and to interact with others. In addition, families and other caregivers model positive ways to make friends and to recognize and manage emotions, persist during difficult tasks, and build confidence.

Early care and education programs use many classroom activities such as reading, writing, singing, drawing, listening, and engaging in conversations to support both children's literacy and social-emotional development. For example, teachers often read books that include themes about emotions (such as *On Monday When It Rained*, by Cheryl Kachenmeister) or interactions (for example, *Hands Are Not for Hitting*, by Martine Agassi). Other activities may include labeling feelings, sharing stories about families, and singing songs about friends. These same activities also can help families support their children's development of social-emotional skills at home (Coppola 2005; Dunst & Shue 2005; Bierman et al. 2008). By suggesting meaningful, fun, and engaging activities, early educators can play a critical role in supporting families as they support their children's social-emotional development.



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The link between literacy and social-emotional skills

Researchers have long emphasized that children's social-emotional and cognitive skills are interrelated and develop within responsive and caring environments (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). Both what children think *and* how they feel influence their ability to learn concepts, manage their own behaviors, and relate to others (Connors-Tadros & Yates 2003). Across cultures, books and stories are a source for teaching moral lessons and values to the next generation. Written and oral stories provide the framework for building important social-emotional concepts such as empathy and relationships (National Research Council 1999). Exposing children to a variety of books and stories allows families, teachers, and caregivers to introduce and reinforce social-emotional skills that help children succeed in school and beyond.

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) lists key social-emotional skills that support children's success in school and in the community:

- Confidence
- Capacity to develop relationships with peers and adults
- Concentration and persistence on challenging tasks
- Ability to effectively communicate emotions
- Ability to listen to instructions and be attentive
- Ability to solve problems (Hemmeter et al. 2006, 6)

Children develop these and other important social-emotional skills through participation in literacy-based activities. For example, as adults read or tell stories to children, their facial expressions and intonation create a visual and auditory connection to the emotions being represented. When parents, caregivers, and teachers model emotions, children become more aware of the emotions in themselves and in others. While following cookbook recipes together, parents often help their children learn to follow instructions and pay attention to details required to complete a task.

Next, we describe specific and effective literacy-based strategies and activities that early childhood

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educators can use in the classroom and suggest to families so they can support their young children's social-emotional skills at home.

Begin with books and stories

Reading aloud involves much more than saying printed words. Research on book reading (such as van Kleeck et al. 1997 and Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal 2005) recommends that teachers and parents engage children in conversations about the story and images. The adult reader might ask children to describe the picture on the cover; point out letters, words, or symbols; or introduce the act of reading (for example, turn the pages). They can expand children's knowledge by linking story themes and nonfiction content to children's experiences. Also, reading the same book repeatedly is a great way to support social-emotional development. When children hear, learn, and retell a story, it becomes *their* story and thus they gain a sense of confidence and competence.

Children need access to books to develop literacy skills. Early childhood programs with libraries or family resource rooms can support classrooms and families by providing a diverse selection of age-appropriate books in a variety of genres. Many children's books are written explicitly for teaching social-emotional skills such as sharing, turn taking, making friends, and labeling emotions. These books use a range of vocabulary to describe the pictures and name the feelings of the characters in the story. Well-written and illustrated children's

literature typically introduces characters and situations that also lead to meaningful discussions about facing challenges, resolving problems, or using skills such as cooperation or sharing.

Early childhood libraries should include fiction and nonfiction books that tell stories in two languages (for example, text in both English and Spanish) as well as books written in or translated into various languages (Palmer et al. 2006), especially those spoken by the children and the families the program serves. Providing books to families in their home language supports their child's home language development along with English. In addition, children feel a sense of pride in their culture and home language when books reflect their experiences, family, and community.

Not to be overlooked are fables and fairy tales that often contain important life lessons that impart moral beliefs valued by communities (for example, the classic story of the hare and the tortoise). While some of these stories are still shared orally, many are now available in print form. Many old tales focus on values such as being helpful and sharing with others.

Class-made books and individual minibooks are also excellent literacy tools. These personalized books carry meaning for children that can be shared with families. For example, in class, children can create minibooks about emotions and the particular circumstances that may bring about those emotions (for example, "I was sad when I left my favorite toy in the cab"). Families then read these books with their children at home, providing more opportunities for learning about social-emotional concepts.

Creating literacy-rich home environments that support social and emotional development

Through a variety of strategies, teachers show families how to incorporate literacy-based activities in their daily routines. Encourage them to notice and make use of common print materials (for example, food labels, recipes and cookbooks, newspapers, magazines, catalogs, and prayer books). In supporting social-emotional growth, for example, parents might point out a cereal box photo of children playing together and then talk with their child about cooperation.

Here are three ways teachers can invite families to combine literacy experiences and foster their children's social-emotional development.

Send home periodic newsletters.

In addition to keeping parents informed of classroom progress, include suggested family activities that support children's social and emotional development (see short, sample articles, "Sharing a Meal and More" and "Literacy Lessons on the Go," p. 91; and "Documenting Special Family Occasions," p. 92). Encourage families to seize opportunities during everyday interactions to describe different feelings and discuss how to share, solve problems, and make friends. Generate and publish a list of age-appropriate books (see "Online Sources for Children's Books on Social-Emotional Topics," p. 91). Remember to include easy, fun, book-related activities for family members to do together as they cook, take walks, or go to the library or the store.

Provide interactive, themed book bags for children and families.

Create a book bag based on a social-emotional topic (such as exploring different feelings or learning how to share, solve problems, or make friends). Include instructions for related activities (such as a simple

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Sharing a Meal and More

Preparing a meal, eating together, and cleaning up afterward are great times for families to foster a young child's emerging literacy and social-emotional growth.



Conversations about a surprising event at school, meeting a new neighbor, or trying a new recipe occur naturally around mealtimes.



Children enjoy and learn helping skills as they participate in cooking activities. Reading and following a recipe with a child is a great way to teach turn taking. As your child helps carry out some steps of the recipe, you might say, "We are taking turns mixing the fruits together! First it's your turn; then it's my turn." Or, referring to a favorite children's book, you might say, "You help take care of your baby brother Enzo just like the bunny in our story!"

Family gatherings around a table are times to talk about various topics, including those that relate to interactions with others and emotions. During conversations you can introduce and encourage your child to practice new vocabulary words. For instance, talking about what happened at school is often an opportunity for parents to label emotions, which helps children build their vocabulary and better express their emotions: "It sounds like you got frustrated today" or "He must be embarrassed when he fell down."



During after-meal cleanup, parents can talk about helpfulness, teamwork, and cooperation. They can explain how each family member shares chores such as shopping for food, cooking, and washing the dishes. Being part of a family means taking responsibility for the different tasks, which leads to pleasurable mealtimes for all. "We all work together when we help each other. Daddy cooks, you help clear the table, and Mommy washes the dishes. Our family works together like a team!"



game or a song). Include stuffed toys or finger puppets to represent characters in the book. Make book bags available in English and the home languages of the children in the class. Provide culturally and developmentally appropriate materials that support the story (see "A Book Bag about Families," p. 92).

Invite families to events combining literacy and social-emotional development. Literacy-based events and activities at school support the overall development of young children (Parlakian 2003). Reading aloud, making simple books, singing and dancing, telling stories, performing plays, making items such as puppets to use at home, and many other activities can be based on books that children read. For



Online Sources for Children's Books on Social-Emotional Topics

American Academy of Pediatrics Literacy Toolkit. www.aap.org/literacy

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/documents/booklist.pdf

Children's Books about Family Relationships and Experiences. www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200505/07Birckmayer.pdf

International Reading Association Choices Reading Lists: Children's Choices. www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists/ChildrensChoices.aspx



Literacy Lessons on the Go

Running errands can be a chore, but they are also excellent opportunities to teach your child literacy skills and foster social-emotional development. On a walk, or during a car, bus, or subway ride, you and your child can tell stories, sing songs, read a book, or listen to an audio recording of a favorite book.

Young children love to hear stories about themselves as babies, about you as a child, or about other children. Together, you can make up stories about people, animals, signs, symbols, and objects you see along the way ("Let's make up a story about where the people on the bus are going today" or "How do you think the people will feel if it starts raining before the bus gets there?"). Stories are important because they develop closeness and create an understanding of what makes each of our families unique!

example, in a nursery rhyme festival, children could come dressed as their favorite character. With their parents, children could play a Cake Walk game that uses the alphabet, giving the children practice in recognizing upper- and lowercase letters, following instructions, and taking turns. Schedule programs on a regular basis to share how to extend classroom literacy activities at home.

Conclusion

Strong parent involvement is linked to children's school readiness—academically, socially, and emotionally. Research shows that family involvement in early learning positively affects children's school performance, including higher academic achievement and greater social-emotional development (McNeal 1999; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza 1999; Fantuzzo & McWayne 2002; Copple & Bredekamp 2009). Positive interactions around literacy-based activities such as reading to young children support academic success and social-emotional development (National Research Council 1998).

Positive interactions around literacy-based activities such as reading to young children support academic success and social-emotional development.



A Book Bag about Families

In school we are learning about families. Through listening to stories, singing songs, and playing games, we are learning about various family events and celebrations. The theme of this book bag is family relationships and social-emotional skills. Please read the book with your child and talk about things that your family does to celebrate a holiday. How are they similar to the activities in the book? How are they different? Talk about the reasons for the characters' different feelings. You can use the enclosed finger puppets as you read and discuss the story. Later you can use them to act out the story. Encourage your child to make a drawing of the special day.

Literacy skills and social-emotional skills are critical for success in school (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels 2003; Coppola 2005; Dunst & Shue 2005; Hadaway 2005). A strong foundation in literacy and social-emotional skills is necessary for young children to learn and access information about the world around them and use that information in meaningful and productive ways. For example, a lesson on measurements would require the children to concentrate, follow directions, read numbers on a ruler, and record the measurement through writing.

The influence families and teachers have on children's social-emotional development cannot be understated. Teachers need to recognize the important role families play in their children's development and suggest activities to support social-emotional development at home. Literacy activities, such as

Documenting Special Family Occasions



Children love to see themselves, relatives, and other people they know in a book. With your child, make a special photo album, book, scrapbook, or online album about family events. Looking at pictures and other memorabilia from special family events and celebrations is a great way to help your child develop memory skills and family connections.

As you recall the event together, sort, place, and discuss the photos. You might ask "Who is that?" "What were you doing here?" "Look! Tio Carlos looks really surprised." Invite your child to help write labels for the photos. Look for opportunities to build social-emotional as well as literacy skills. For a photo of Grandma cooking, for example, the caption might be, "Grandma loves to share her pancit." For a group photo of the entire family, a label might say, "We are happy to see everyone."

Take time to share and save family stories too. Your child probably loves to hear stories about your childhood and Aunt Sally's adventures and misadventures. Encourage other family members to share their special memories: "Papi, please tell us about the time you got scared" or "Gina, would you tell us about winning the blue ribbon?"



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reading books, writing stories, drawing pictures, and many others, provide fun, learning opportunities for teachers and families to use to promote children's social-emotional skills.

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