



“You Got It!”

Teaching Social and Emotional Skills

Lise Fox and Rochelle Harper Lentini

Lise Fox, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies of the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute of the University of South Florida in Tampa. She conducts research and training and develops support programs focused on young children with challenging behavior.

Rochelle Harper Lentini, MEd, is a faculty member in the Department of Child and Family Studies of the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute. She provides training and technical assistance to early educators and families on supporting young children with challenging behavior and promoting social and emotional competence.

Development of this article was supported by the Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior (Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, Cooperative Agreement #H324Z010001) and the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Cooperative Agreement #90YD0119/01).

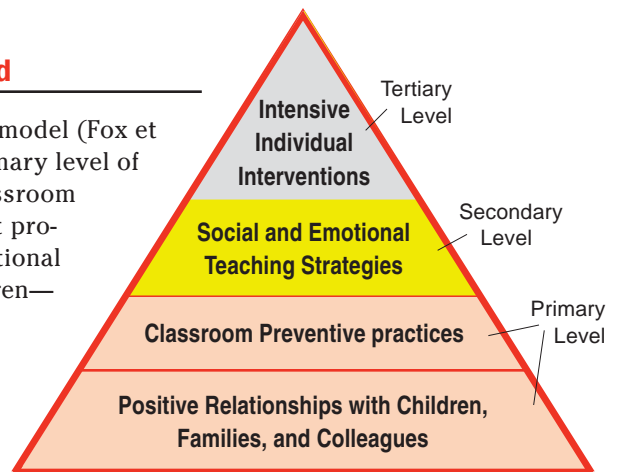
Teaching Pyramid diagram adapted from L. Fox, G. Dunlap, M.L. Hemmeter, G.E. Joseph, & P.S. Strain, “The Teaching Pyramid: A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Preventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children,” *Young Children* 58 (July 2003): 49.

Photos courtesy of the authors. Illustration © Adjoa Burrowes.

EARLY EDUCATORS REPORT that one of their biggest challenges is supporting young children who have problem behavior beyond what might be expected (Buscemi et al. 1995; Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham 2005). Some children engage in problem behavior that is typical of a particular stage of development as they build relationships with peers and adults and learn to navigate the classroom environment. For example, a toddler might grab a cracker from another child’s plate because she is still learning to use words to ask for what she wants or needs. What troubles teachers is how to meet the needs of children who have persistent problem behavior that does not respond to positive guidance or prevention practices. The extent of this problem is highlighted by recent reports on the rates of expulsion of children from preschool programs (Gilliam 2005).

The teaching pyramid

The teaching pyramid model (Fox et al. 2003) describes a primary level of universal practices—classroom preventive practices that promote the social and emotional development of all children—built on a foundation of positive relationships; secondary interventions that address specific social and emotional learning needs of children at risk for challenging behavior; and development of individualized interventions (tertiary level) for children with persistent problem behavior (see the diagram “The Teaching Pyramid”). The model is explained more fully in “The Teaching Pyramid: A Model



The Teaching Pyramid

Teachers may find that there are children whose lack of social and emotional skills or whose challenging behavior requires more focused attention.



for Supporting Social Competence and Reinventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children,” in the July 2003 issue of *Young Children*.

The foundation for universal practices begins with nurturing and responsive caregiving that supports children in developing a positive sense of self and in engaging in relationships with others. At this level, teachers focus on their relationships with children and families. Universal class-

room practices include developmentally appropriate, child-centered classroom environments that promote children’s developing independence, successful interactions, and engagement in learning. While universal practices may be enough to promote the development of social competence in the majority of children in the classroom, teachers may find that there are children whose lack of social and emotional skills or whose challenging behavior requires more focused attention.

In this article we look at the secondary level of the teaching pyramid, which emphasizes planned instruction on specific social and emotional skills for children at risk for developing more challenging behavior, such as severe aggression, property destruction, noncompliance, or withdrawal. Children who may be considered at risk for challenging behavior are persistently noncompliant, have difficulty regulating their emotions, do not easily form relationships with adults and other children, have difficulty engaging in learning activities, and are perceived by teachers as being likely to develop more intractable behavior problems.

Research shows that when educators teach children the key skills they need to understand their emotions and the emotions of others, handle conflicts, problem solve, and develop relationships with peers, their problem behavior decreases and their social skills improve (Joseph & Strain 2003). Emphasis on teaching social skills is just one component of multiple strategies to support a child at risk for challenging behavior. Additional critical strategies include collaborating with the family; addressing the child’s physical and mental health needs; and offering the support of specialists and other resources to address the child or family’s individual needs.

Reframing problem behavior

The teaching pyramid model guides teachers to view a child’s problem behavior as serving a purpose for that child. Some children may use problem behavior instead of socially conventional and appropriate behavior to avoid or join interactions and activities, obtain or avoid attention, and obtain objects. For example, a child who wants another child’s toy may hit the other child instead of asking to have a turn with the toy. Other children may use problem behavior to express their disappointment or anger to the teacher, rather than asking for help or sharing their feelings with words. For example, a child may throw toys or destroy materials when frustrated rather than asking a teacher for help.

Reasons for challenging behavior

Children may use problem behavior to get their needs met for a variety of reasons. For example, a child may have language development problems, social-emotional delays, difficulties with peer interactions, or developmental disabilities;

Social and Emotional Skills to Teach

- Following rules, routines, and directions
- Identifying feelings in oneself and others
- Controlling anger and impulses
- Problem solving
- Suggesting play themes and activities to peers
- Sharing toys and other materials
- Taking turns
- Helping adults and peers
- Giving compliments
- Understanding how and when to apologize
- Expressing empathy with others' feelings
- Recognizing that anger can interfere with problem solving
- Learning how to recognize anger in oneself and others
- Learning how to calm down
- Understanding appropriate ways to express anger

she may have experienced neglect or trauma; or she may simply have not had opportunities to learn appropriate social or communication skills before entering preschool.

When teachers view challenging behavior as actions children use to get their needs met, they can reframe problem behavior as a skill-learning or skill-fluency issue. *Skill fluency* refers to a child's ability to use a skill consistently and independently. Children with problem behavior may not have appropriate social or communication skills or may not use those skills well in a variety of situations. Reframing problem behavior as a skill-instruction issue opens the door to the development of effective strategies teachers can implement in the classroom: if young children with problem behavior are missing key social and communication skills, then a next step is to teach them those skills!

A skill-learning issue

Many skills are important in children's development of relationships with adults and peers. Skills help children learn self-regulation (ability to respond appropriately to anxiety, distress, or uncomfortable sensations) and how to problem solve (see "Social and Emotional Skills to Teach," left). Young children at risk for challenging behavior (children at the secondary intervention level) may not be fluent in or have the ability to use these skills. The teaching pyramid model encourages early educators to teach children these skills systematically, using planned procedures within developmentally appropriate activities and with sufficient intensity to ensure that children learn the skills quickly and can use them when needed (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak 2005).

Teaching social skills

In thinking about how to teach social skills systematically, teachers need to be aware of the three stages of learning (Bailey & Wolery 1992) (see "Stages of Learning," p. 4). The first stage is skill acquisition—the skill is introduced to the child; the second stage is fluency—the child has learned the skill and can use it easily; and the final stage of learning is skill maintenance and generalization—the child can use the skill over time and in new situations. In this article, we present strategies for addressing each stage of learning in the instruction of social skills.

Introducing a new skill: Show-and-tell

Explain the new skill. When you first teach a child a social or emotional skill, it is important to ensure that you have explained the skill in concrete terms so the child understands what the skill is and when to use it. Children who have social development challenges may find the nuances of social behavior difficult to interpret. Thus, it is important to identify the skill ("ask to take a turn"), demonstrate or identify when it is used ("Watch Emily ask to play with the water wheel"), and link the idea or concept to other skills the child has ("When you see your friends playing with a toy you want, you can watch them play, you can wait for a turn, or you can ask them for a turn").

It is important to identify the skill, demonstrate or identify when it is used, and link the idea or concept to other skills the child has.

Stages of Learning

Stage 1—Skill acquisition: Show-and-tell

The teacher introduces a new skill to a child by giving concrete examples of what the skill is and how to use it. For example, the teacher may say, “It’s hard to wait until it is your turn to ride a trike. I’m going to help you learn how to wait.”

Stage 2—Skill fluency: Practice makes perfect

The teacher provides many opportunities to practice the skill so the child can eventually use it with ease. Practice opportunities may include prompting the child (“How can you ask to play with Brendan?”), helping the child remember to use the skill (“I know you are disappointed and you want a turn right now. What can you do instead?”), and identifying situations that call for the use of the skill (“We have three children who want to sit at the art table and only one chair. What can we do?”).

Stage 3—Skill maintenance and generalization: “You got it!”

The teacher continues to promote the child’s use of the skill in familiar and new situations. For example, when the child uses his newly learned skill of giving compliments with his mother, the teacher says, “You gave your mom a compliment! Look, she’s smiling because you said you like her haircut.”

Adapted from D.B. Bailey & M. Wolery, *Teaching Infants and Preschoolers with Disabilities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

Demonstrate it. For many children, it is helpful to provide both a positive example of someone using a skill and an example in which the skill is not used. For example, you may ask children to demonstrate the wrong way to ask for a turn and the correct way to ask for a turn. In this manner, children can practice under a teacher’s guidance and receive additional information about how the skill is appropriately used.

Give positive feedback. When children first learn a new skill, they need feedback and specific encouragement on their efforts to use the skill. The importance of feedback cannot be overstated! Think, for example, about a time when you learned something new—such as a language, a sport, or a craft. The instructor most likely gave you feedback: “That’s right, you did it” or “That looks good, I think you are getting it.” Feedback may provide the support a child needs to persist in practicing a newly learned skill. Have you ever tried to learn a new skill and quit when you were in the early learning stages? Perhaps you did not receive encouragement or maybe those initial attempts were so uncomfortable or awkward that you decided to stop practicing.

Provide opportunities for practice. There are a variety of instructional methods for teaching new social and emotional skills (Webster-Stratton 1999; Hyson 2004; Kaiser & Rasminsky 2007). An important teaching practice at the acquisition stage of learning is providing multiple opportunities for a child to learn a skill in meaningful contexts—that is, in activities that are part of the child’s natural play or routines. The more opportunities for practicing, the quicker the child will learn the skill. The box “Classroom Teaching Strategies” (see p. 5) lists a variety of ways to teach social and emotional skills within typical classroom activities.

When a child learns a new skill, he needs to practice to build fluency in the skill.

Building fluency: Practice makes perfect

When learning to play a new song on the piano, the player must practice before the song becomes easy to play. Similarly, when a child learns a new skill, he needs to practice to build fluency in the skill. When teaching social skills, teachers need to ensure that a skill is not only learned but also practiced often enough that the child becomes fluent in the skill and can easily use it. Consider the following example:

Madison struggles when playing with peers. Recognizing that Madison needs extra help in learning how to ask others to play with toys, her teacher, Mr. Jackson, decides to read the children a story about taking turns and asking to join play during group time. On that same day, several times during center activities and outdoor play, Mr. Jackson reminds Madison to “ask to play.” After that day of focused instruction on using the skill, whenever Madison tries to enter a game without asking to play, Mr. Jackson provides corrective feedback or redirection, stating, “Madison, you need to ask to play” or “Madison, you may not grab toys; ask to play.” A month later, Madison still has difficulty entering play and asking to play with toys.

Why did Madison have difficulty learning the skill? Perhaps Mr. Jackson did not provide enough opportunities to practice, so Madison quickly forgot to use the new skill. Or possibly Madison had not learned when and how to use the skill: she may not have become fluent in the skill.

Classroom Teaching Strategies

Instruction is more effective when it is embedded in the meaningful activities and contexts that occur throughout a child's day (Katz & McClellan 1997). Here are suggestions and examples for teaching social skills within classroom activities.

Modeling. Demonstrate the skill while explaining what you are doing. As you pass a block to a child, say, "Look, I am sharing my blocks with my friend."

Modeling with puppets. Use puppets to model the skill while interacting with a child, an adult, or another puppet. A puppet can explain to the teacher and the class how she became angry and hit her brother to get a toy. You can ask the puppet to consider other solutions and then discuss what a child might do when he or she wants a toy that another child is using.

Preparing peer partners. Ask one child to show another child the skill or to help the child use the target skill. You can prompt the peer by saying, "Carmen, Justin is still learning how to wait and take turns. Since you know what to do, can you help him? Show him the line-up picture while you wait for a drink at the water fountain."

Singing. Introduce a new skill through a song. To teach children to trade toys, pass out small toys during a large group activity, then sing the following song to the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and practice trading:

I can be a problem solver, problem solver, problem solver,
I can be a problem solver, let me show you how.

Maybe I can trade with you, trade with you, trade with you,
Maybe I can trade with you; let me show you how.

Children then practice trading toys with each other.

Doing fingerplays. Introduce the skill with a fingerplay, then follow up with a discussion or story. While showing fingers, have children recite this rhyme:

One little friend cried, "Boo-hoo"; a friend gives a hug
and then there are two.

Two little friends share with me; we play together and
that makes three.

Three little friends ask for more; they all say "Please,"
and then comes four.

Four little friends take turns down the slide; another
comes to play, and that makes five.

Five little friends have fun at school, because they
follow every rule.

Using a flannel board. Introduce a new skill using flannel board activities and stories. For example, to teach turn taking you could have flannel pieces for Humpty Dumpty and change the rhyme so that "All the king's horses and all the king's friends / Work as a team to put Humpty together again." As you say the rhyme, have the children take turns putting the pieces (castle, bricks, Humpty Dumpty pieces, horses, and friends) on the flannel board. When you finish the rhyme, extend the activity by talking about how Humpty felt when he sat on the wall; when he fell; and when his friends helped put him back together.

Using prompts. Give a child verbal, visual, or physical prompts to use a skill during interactions and activities. When a child who has difficulty with initiating play interactions moves toward a group playing together, you might say privately, "Remember to use your words and ask to play."

Giving encouragement. Provide specific feedback when the child uses the skill. For example, describe what the child did: "You asked Joey for a turn. I saw that you two had a good time playing together." Encouragement can be verbal or a signal (a thumbs-up or high five).

Using incidental teaching. Guide the child to use the skill during interactions and activities. Quietly say to the child, "Quan, I see that you are very angry that all the trucks are being used. What can you do when you are angry? Let's go over the steps."

Playing games. Use games to teach problem solving, words that express feelings, identification of others' feelings, friendship skills, and so on. Place photographs of each child in a bag. Have the children take turns pulling a photo out of the bag and offering a compliment to the child in the photo.

Discussing children's literature. Read books to help teach friendship skills, feeling words, problem solving, and so on. While reading a story, pause and ask the children how a character in the story might feel or ask them to suggest ideas for solving the character's problem.

Additional ideas for many of these activities may be found on the Web site of the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, at www.csefel.uiuc.edu. Under **Resources**, click on **Practical Strategies**.

Find more activities in "Teaching Children a Vocabulary for Emotions," and "Child-Friendly Ideas for Teaching Problem Solving" by Lise Fox and Rochelle Harper Lentini, in this issue of **Beyond the Journal**.

To ensure that children learn a skill to the fluency level, teachers can use several strategies. They may offer the child multiple opportunities to practice, help the child link the new concept or skill to other social skills, or remind the child in advance so he or she can use the skill or concept in new situations.



Scaffolding the use of the skill within interactions may be effective. For example, the teacher can monitor child interactions and offer a verbal bridge for problem solving when children have conflicts or face difficulties (Katz & McClellan 1997). The teacher can pose questions like “What else can you do?” to help children problem solve or “How do you think Emily felt when you said that?” to help them take the perspective of the other child. When scaffolding, the teacher need only offer as much support or guidance as the child requires to navigate the situation, and she should be cautious about becoming overly directive or controlling the situation.

Additional teaching techniques to promote fluency include reminding the child, as she goes into a situation, to use the new skill; creating opportunities to practice by staging situations that call for the skill (creating a problem-solving task or plan-

ning an activity that requires sharing or taking turns); and providing the child with peer buddies who can remind her to use the new skill.

In the fluency stage of learning, the teacher should continue to offer encouragement when the child is practicing the skill.

Teachers can offer repeated opportunities to practice the skill in familiar and new situations.

Promoting maintenance and generalization: “You got it!”

For a child acquiring a new social skill, the final stage of learning is maintaining and generalizing the skill—learning it to the point that it becomes part of the child’s social skill repertoire and he uses it in familiar and in new situations. When teaching children social skills, it is important to ensure that children reach this stage.

For many children, moving from skill acquisition to skill generalization occurs quickly and seamlessly with little teacher effort. However, for children who are at risk for social development delays or challenging behavior, a more systematic approach may be needed.

To ensure maintenance and generalization of a new skill, after introducing the skill and providing practice opportunities, teachers can offer repeated opportunities to practice the skill in familiar and new situations. At this stage of learning, children continue to need occasional encouragement to remember to use the skills, and they need feedback on the successful use of the skill in new situations. The example that follows describes how Ben’s teacher supported and encouraged Ben to use his newly learned problem-solving ability in new situations.

Four-year-old Ben tends to get very frustrated when playing with his peers, especially on the playground. He screams, pushes children, and grabs toys. Ms. Mitchell, his teacher, has introduced a four-step problem-solving process to the class, using a puppet (who has a problem to solve) and picture cards depicting the problem-solving process: (1) Ask yourself, What's my problem? (2) Think, think, think of some solutions; (3) What would happen? and (4) Give it a try.

Although Ben uses the process during play times, Ms. Mitchell realizes that he needs additional prompting to problem solve in new situations. Today the class is visiting the children's museum. Before entering, Ms. Mitchell takes Ben aside and reviews the problem-solving steps.

Inside the museum, there are several magnet activity stations, all occupied. Knowing that Ben will want to play with the magnets, Ms. Mitchell moves near him to give him support. She reminds Ben about the problem-solving steps: "Remember, think, think, think." Ben then says to a child playing with the magnets, "Can I play too?" The child hands him a magnet and they build together. Ms. Mitchell looks at Ben, winks, and smiles.

The goal at this stage of instruction is for children to use the social skills they have learned in a variety of situations, helping them build satisfying relationships with children and adults. They are then motivated by their successes and the joy they experience playing and developing relationships. As children develop new social skills and grow in their social competence, they gain access to a wider variety of play and learning opportunities; increase the duration and complexity of play interactions and engagement in social interactions; build friendships with peers; and feel good about themselves.

Conclusions

It is critically important that early educators identify children who need focused instruction—children who may be considered at risk for challenging behavior. Teachers can guide them to learn new social and emotional skills, teaching them within child-centered, developmentally appropriate activities. It is equally important to design a systematic teaching approach that allows such children to acquire and use their new skills easily, over time, and in a variety of situations.

When young children do not know how to identify emotions, handle disappointment and anger, or develop relationships with peers, a teacher's best response is to teach!

References

- Bailey, D.B., & M. Wolery. 1992. *Teaching infants and preschoolers with disabilities*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan.
- Buscemi, L., T. Bennett, D. Thomas, & D.A. Deluca. 1995. Head Start: Challenges and training needs. *Journal of Early Intervention* 20 (1): 1–13.
- Fox, L., G. Dunlap, M.L. Hemmeter, G.E. Joseph, & P.S. Strain. 2003. The teaching pyramid: A model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behavior in young children. *Young Children* 58 (4): 48–52.
- Gilliam, W.S. 2005. *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. Online: www.fcdu.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02_new.pdf.
- Grisham-Brown, J., M.L. Hemmeter, & K. Pretti-Frontczak. 2005. *Blended practices for teaching young children in inclusive settings*. Baltimore: Brookes.
- Hemmeter, M.L., R. Corso, & G. Cheatham. 2005. Issues in addressing challenging behaviors in young children: A national survey of early childhood educators. Manuscript.
- Hyson, M. 2004. *The emotional development of young children: Building an emotion-centered curriculum*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Joseph, G.E., & P.S. Strain. 2003. Comprehensive evidence-based social-emotional curricula for young children: An analysis of efficacious adoption potential. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 23 (2): 65–76.
- Kaiser, B., & J.S. Rasminsky. 2007. *Challenging behavior in young children: Understanding, preventing, and responding effectively*. 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Katz, L.G., & D.E. McClellan. 1997. *Fostering children's social competence: The teacher's role*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Webster-Stratton, C. 1999. *How to promote children's social and emotional competence*. London: Paul Chapman.