

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOSTERING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Children are developing many skills and concepts during the early childhood years that will serve as the foundation for their later success in school, their entry into the workforce, and their important role as citizens of a democracy. During these all important formative years children are developing the basic literacy skills of reading and writing, the rudiments of the number system, basic science concepts, and even some of the technological skills necessary for succeeding in the 21st century. All of these skills are important and every quality early childhood education program will provide the time, materials, and teacher support needed for children to begin the process of developing these competencies.

A quality early childhood education program also has to provide the time and support for children to develop another set of skills, one that may, in fact, undergird the development of all of the other skills. A quality early childhood education must also address young children's development of *social competence*.

All of us, children included, move through our experiences as individuals within various social groups. These social groups can include the family, the classroom, a particular religious institution, the soccer team, the Girl Scout troop, etc. To function successfully and productively within any one of these social groups requires that we, as individuals, balance and integrate our individual desires, needs, and personalities with the needs and rules - which can be both implicit and explicit - of the group. In order to achieve this balance, children need to develop certain social competencies, some of which look inward towards themselves and some of which look to the other individuals in the group.

In order to function successfully within a group, young children need to be able to *self-regulate* - they need to be able to monitor and control their own emotions and behaviors. The truth is that to be a member of a group you can't always have what you want when you want it; you will need to learn how to wait your turn, share a toy, and cooperate with your friends. Children need to develop *impulse control* and a willingness to *delay gratification*. Children often form small playgroups within the early childhood classroom and to be included in such a group, a child has to understand that he or she can't always be the leader; sometimes you will need to subordinate your interests and ideas to the ideas and interests of the other players. The child who continually insists on having things his way is all too often the child who struggles finding other children willing to play with him.

In addition to monitoring, reflecting on, and regulating one's own emotions and behaviors, children need to develop the understanding that other children have emotions and behaviors that may be different from their own. Young children can often be what is

called, *egocentric*. This refers to an assumption that the way you see or understand things is the way everyone else see or understands it. It's why a young child may wonder if *you* can still see when she has *her* eyes covered. As children grow and develop, they *decenter* from this egocentric perspective. Much like the 16th century scientist Copernicus taught us that the earth wasn't at the center of solar system but was one of a number of planets orbiting the sun, children come to understand that they aren't the center of the universe and that their ideas or perspective can be just one of many. In order to be a good social player in the classroom and in order to be a good friend, the child needs to recognize and take into consideration the ideas, perspectives, and feelings of others.

How, then, does a quality early childhood education program help young children develop social competence? First of all, teachers must recognize that developing social competence is a *work in progress*. There will be times that young children won't be able to control their impulses, delay their need for immediate gratification, or understand the perspectives of other people. Children aren't born socially competent. But that doesn't mean that a program and its teachers don't have an important role to play in the development of social competence. It may sound obvious but for children to develop social competence they need to have the opportunity to engage socially with other children. Programs must provide adequate amounts of time for children to play together in small groups. It is within these play groups that children have the experience of setting goals for the activity, assigning roles to the players, and negotiating the self-determined rules that will allow the play activity to continue. Children want to be socially engaged with other children; motivated by that desire leads them to learning that there are times they have to put their immediate desires aside in order for the group to function. It is also within the play group that children come up against the ideas, interests, and perspectives of others, leading them to *decenter* from their *egocentric* perspective. Of course anyone who has worked with young children knows that the social play process doesn't always proceed smoothly; there are sometimes arguments, strong words, and hurt feelings among the players. This is where the skilled teacher comes in, not to shut down the play or direct it from her perspective, but to help the children work through the problem by using her own language to draw their attention to what each of them is feeling and support their efforts to arrive at a negotiated solution to the problem. It turns out that it takes a socially competent teacher to foster the development of social competence in children.

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