

# Helping Children

# Play and Learn Together

Michaelene M. Ostrosky and Hedda Meadan

The preschoolers in Ms. Mimi's classroom are very busy throughout the day, working on emerging pretend-play skills, turn taking, conflict management, phonological awareness, math knowledge, and other academic, behavioral, and social skills. Ms. Mimi knows that young children's readiness for school comes with increased expectations for academic skills, but she worries that her preschoolers are not getting enough experience with social skill building. When her supervisor comes for a visit, Ms. Mimi shares her concern that she may not be meeting her preschoolers' social needs. She says, "Some days I find myself worrying so much about teaching literacy, numeracy, and all the other academic skills that I wonder if the children have enough opportunities to learn how to get along with each other."

**M**s. Mimi's concern is an important one. Young children's "readiness for school" has taken center stage for educators and policy makers, while their social development, a powerful predictor of school adjustment,

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success in school, and later success in life, is often ignored (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips 2001).

During the early childhood years, children learn to interact with one another in ways that are positive and successful (Bovery & Strain 2003a). For example, young children use social skills to get a friend's attention, offer or ask to share something, and say something nice to a friend.

Researchers stress the importance of positive peer relationships in childhood and later life (Ladd 1999). Several national reports—for example, *A Good Beginning* (Peth-Pierce 2000), *Eager to Learn* (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2000), *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips 2001), the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (2002) report on social

emotional development—discuss the significant role of social emotional development in children's readiness for success in school. These studies identify a number of social emotional skills and abilities that help new kindergartners be successful:

- confidence,
- the ability to develop good relationships with peers,
- concentrating on and persisting with challenging tasks,
- attending and listening to instructions,
- being able to solve social problems, and
- effectively communicate emotions.

The absence of positive social interactions in childhood is linked to negative consequences later in life, such as withdrawal, loneliness, depression, and feelings of anxiety. In addition, low acceptance by peers in the early years is a predictor of grade retention, school dropout, and mental health and behavior problems (Ladd 1999).

## The pyramid for teaching social skills

Educators can do many things to promote and support positive social interactions and prevent challenging

behavior. They can develop a positive relationship with each child, structure the physical and social classroom environments to support positive interactions, and teach individual children specific social skills that they lack.

Fox and colleagues (2003) describe a pyramid framework for supporting social competence and preventing young children's challenging behavior (see [www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel) and [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)). The pyramid includes four levels of practice to address the needs of all children: (1) building nurturing and responsive relationships with children, families, and colleagues; (2) implementing high-quality supportive environments; (3) using social and emotional supports and teaching strategies; and (4) planning intensive individualized interventions. The focus of the pyramid model is on promotion and prevention, with the top level, individualized interventions, used only when necessary; the premise is that when the bottom three levels are in place, only a small number of children will require more intensive support.

This article highlights environmental and teaching strategies that support and facilitate the development of preschoolers' peer interaction skills—the skills children use to successfully interact with one another, such as sharing, taking turns, asking for assistance, and helping one another. We use a question-and-answer format to describe strategies that support the teaching pyramid's second and third levels (creating supportive environments and fostering positive social interactions), with the questions coming from many early childhood educators across the United States.

## Structuring the physical environment

*The 18 children in my classroom have a variety of strengths and come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The class does not have the community feeling I had hoped to*



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*achieve by this point in the school year. While I realize that most of the children did not know one another prior to entering the group, I try to encourage relationships between them. What can I do to my classroom setting to support peer interactions (such as talking, playing, and enjoying being together), especially during center time?*

When considering the design of the classroom's physical environment, two factors related to social emotional development warrant careful attention: strategies to promote engagement and ideas for preventing challenging behavior. Effective physical and social emotional aspects of early childhood classroom environments can enhance children's learning (Curtis & Carter 2005). Teachers need to ensure that the classroom is a place where children want to be. In addition, it is important to teach

children the skills they need to be successful with their peers.

Well-planned and well-stocked learning centers increase the likelihood that children will engage in play and learning with each other. They decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviors. Consider the following when designing and maintaining learning centers:

**1. Placement.** Set clear boundaries to let children know where a center begins/ends, prevent overcrowding, and to separate noisy centers from quieter ones so children can concentrate on their play and learning.

**2. Number.** Make sure there are enough centers to accommodate all the children, but not so many that children play by themselves most of the time. The ratio of centers to the number of children is affected by the overall personality of the group, group and

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individual needs and interests, and the physical setting (such as the size and shape of the room and permanent fixtures that influence where centers are located).

**3. Materials.** Offer items that promote social play, such as dramatic play props and dress-up clothes, art materials for collaborative projects, and toy farm/zoo animals and diverse family figures. Provide enough items so children can carry out their plans and do not get frustrated waiting for what they want to use.

**4. Images.** Display posters and photographs of children and adults shaking hands, hugging, and otherwise enjoying each other's company. Include books that reflect the diversity of the community and highlight important social emotional skills (see the book list at [www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/resources/strategies.html](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/resources/strategies.html)) (Lawry, Danko, & Strain 1999; Bovey & Strain 2003b).

NAEYC (Copple & Bredekamp 2009) and the Division for Early Childhood (Sandall et al. 2005) offer recommendations and guidelines for creating developmentally appropriate early childhood settings. The ideas offered by these professional organizations can assist teachers in creating early childhood environments that foster peer interaction.

*Some of my centers seem to promote peer interaction, while in others children tend to play alone. What types of toys, activities, and materials are most likely to support peer interaction?*

Most children are drawn to centers that are highly engaging and reflect their interests. Teachers who offer materials and activities that follow and build on children's interests are more likely to have classrooms in which children are busily making and



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the number of glue sticks or scissors can encourage children to share while doing a small group activity (initially, teachers may need to support and model sharing). Also, structuring activities, such as a puzzle activity whereby each partner has some of the pieces and the children work collaboratively to put the puzzle together, can support peer interaction. Finally, make sure the classroom has some quiet, solitary-play centers. Most children need time alone or downtime occasionally; some need it quite often.

## Enhancing the social environment

*My teaching assistant and I notice that all of the table groups are sometimes very talkative at mealtimes, while at other times one or two of the tables are so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Given that the children can choose where to sit, how does group composition influence peer interaction?*

Individual child characteristics such as temperament and confidence, along with the size of a group, can influence the ways children talk and interact with each other (Bovey & Strain 2003b). Observing natural interactions among children who seek out each other as play partners is an excellent way to collect information to use later to foster peer interaction. Grouping children who are outgoing with peers who tend to be shy can facilitate interactions and the development of relationships during activities such as snack or large group time. Creating an atmosphere in which conversation is encouraged is an excellent way to build communication and social skills. During snack and mealtimes, for example, carefully observe children and



occasionally assign seats (perhaps through the use of creatively designed placemats) based on what you know about each child's language skills and approach to engaging with others. Teachers also can pair children to pass out materials (such as napkins, cups, snacks), play guessing games (like I Spy or 20 Questions), and use conversation starters (Tell me one fun thing you did over the weekend. If you were an animal, what would you be and why? What is your favorite sports team?).

For children who lack specific social skills, such as sharing or inviting a friend to play, teachers can provide frequent skill-building opportunities and take advantage of teachable moments.

*Two children in my class have never been in group care before. Both are extremely quiet. What can I do to help children who appear to be withdrawn or really shy play and make friends with others?*

Placing children with less developed social skills alongside or near more socially skilled children during large and small group activities is a minimally intrusive way to encourage interaction (Lawry, Danko, & Strain 1999; Bovey & Strain 2003b). Try partnering a child who is shy with a classmate who is more outgoing—perhaps for a dance activity, to share a bingo card, or to distribute props for a finger play. Activities such as Special Friend of the Week, in which the designated child tells the group about his or her favorite foods, activities, and toys, allow classmates to learn about common interests.

### Strategies to support peer interaction

*A child in my class rarely makes eye contact, only occasionally approaches other children, and rarely responds to other children's invitations to play.*

*What can I do to help her build social skills so she can enjoy playing and learning with others in the class?*

Role-playing, modeling playful activities, providing descriptive feedback, and prompting peer interactions are excellent ways to support peer interaction (Vaughn et al. 2003). For children who lack specific social skills, such as sharing or inviting a friend to play, teachers can provide frequent skill-building opportunities and take advantage of teachable moments.

For example, it is better to teach sharing before a struggle over a favorite toy occurs or after children calm down from an argument. A teacher, for example, might suggest to a small group of children in the house-keeping area that each child take a turn with the popular cash register for

two or three minutes, then let a classmate have a turn. By helping children learn to share, the teacher also helps ensure, through prompting and facilitation, that one child does not dominate use of the desired material.

*If some children in my class are struggling with peer interactions, should I "teach" social skills to them individually or to all of the children during large or small group time? Or would I be better off teaching each child in a one-to-one situation?*

The format for teaching social skills depends on the child and the skill being taught (Sugai & Lewis 1996). If numerous children share the same needs in terms of social skill instruction—for example, several children might be struggling with taking turns or entering into an existing play situation—using large group time to discuss and practice a skill might be most beneficial. However, if one child is struggling in isolation with a skill (such as how to enter into a play situation), it might be better to walk through the steps with this child alone and then support him as he attempts to use the new skill.

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*I know it is important to give children feedback when they learn and use new skills, such as hanging up their coat, using scissors, and picking up their toys. What strategies should I use to reinforce positive peer interaction?*

Pay attention to children when they are engaged in positive social interactions by using verbal (“You are playing so nicely together”) and nonverbal (high fives and smiles) reinforcers. Be careful not to interrupt children’s activities to provide feedback. The key is finding the right time. For example, if two children are working together on an art project, wait for them to complete their work and then provide positive, descriptive feedback (“Skye and Lizzy, I noticed that the two of you shared the molds, rollers, and pipe cleaners when making your clay creations. You seemed to enjoy yourselves and you both made interesting creations.”).

*Several parents have asked me how they can help their children make friends. It breaks their hearts when they repeatedly see their children playing alone or struggling to enter into a play situation. What can families do at home to help children make friends?*

We must remember that, while we want children to develop peer social skills, some children need more alone time than others, a personal characteristic that should be respected. The number of friends a child has is not as important as whether the child uses appropriate social skills



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when interacting with peers. When suggesting ways a family could foster a child’s social skills with peers, teachers also should consider the family’s culture, beliefs, and values.

Taking into consideration individual child and family differences, families can arrange play dates, model how to interact with others, and spend time with their children in places where other children and families participate in enjoyable activities, such as parks, museums, or sports events (Ladd 1999; Ostrosky, McCollum, & Yu 2007). At home, adults can support children in learning and practicing new skills—turn taking, sharing, initiating, and responding—with siblings or other family members. Parents can play board games that involve turn taking, and they can structure pretend play focusing

on relationship building (playing school or animal hospital with stuffed animals is a fun way for children to connect with other family members). Parents can also support their children in learning the give-and-take of conversation at mealtime and other social skills that can be fostered during household routines like cooking, folding laundry, and gardening (by taking turns, responding to questions). Adults model social skills by the way they treat each other within the family and beyond—when they invite other neighbors over for activities and celebrations, when they get together with extended family members, and when they involve their children in family rituals (such as game nights and special person of the day).

## Conclusion

Carefully arranging the environment, focusing on children’s skills and strengths, and regularly celebrating these strengths within early childhood settings can help promote peer interaction among all children. The

## Tips for Enhancing Positive Peer Interactions

### Physical environment

- Set clear boundaries between learning centers.
- Make sure there are enough centers to allow the children opportunities for social interaction.
- Offer materials that are motivating, novel, and culturally sensitive.
- Select materials that are relevant to children's needs, interests, and lives.
- Include materials and activities that promote social interaction.
- Give children ideas for using the materials or suggest ways to engage in an activity ("One of you might be the cook and someone else might be the server.").
- Provide visual cues in the environment that support and promote social interaction.

### Social environment

- Take children's characteristics into consideration when grouping children.
- Consider the number of children in each group or center to maximize social interaction.
- Pair socially competent children with shy or less socially skilled children.
- Give children with limited social skills many opportunities to interact with others.

### Teaching strategies

- Implement social skill instructions in large group, small group, and one-on-one formats as appropriate.
- Use strategies such as modeling, prompting, and role-playing.
- Give children positive feedback for engaging in healthy social interactions.
- Share information about fostering social interaction with family members.

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pyramid model (Fox et al. 2003) provides a framework for critical thinking about how to support young children's social emotional development and prevent challenging behavior. By using the model, teachers can reflect on their own practice (see "Tips for Enhancing Positive Peer Interactions," p. 109) and how to best facilitate children's peer-related social interaction skills. It is only by reflecting on our own behavior and evaluating the physical and social environments that we can best support the development of all young children in our care.

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