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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Resources to Promote Social and
Emotional Health and School Readiness
in Young Children and Families**

A Community Guide

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The National Center for Children in Poverty identifies and promotes strategies that prevent child poverty in the United States and that improve the lives of low-income children and families.

Resources to Promote Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness in Young Children and Families—A Community Guide

by Jane Knitzer and Jill Lefkowitz

This document is part of a policy series intended to improve social, emotional, and learning outcomes for young children. Building on NCCP's work over the past several years (see Promoting the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Families series, at www.nccp.org), *Resources to Promote Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness in Young Children and Families—A Community Guide* builds on NCCP's earlier work to describe effective programs, highlight policy opportunities, and offer fiscal strategies to promote the emotional health of young children and their families. The analyses in this series will help state officials, community leaders, and advocates take action to ensure the healthy development of children and their families. This report describes targeted interventions that can help parents and other early care providers, such as home visitors and teachers, be more effective in promoting healthy relationships and reducing challenging behavior in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The companion document, *Spending Smarter: A Funding Guide for Policymakers and Advocates to Promote Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness*, focuses on strategies to maximize existing funding streams by building on federal programs.

AUTHORS

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Executive Summary

Social and emotional development in young children has to do with *how young children feel about themselves* (such as confident, always scared, eager to learn, proud of their culture, afraid of being wrong), *how they behave* (such as constantly fighting, easily upset, able to deal with conflict), and *how they relate to others*, especially people who matter to them (for example, parents, teachers, and friends). Sometimes the terms *infant and early childhood mental health* are also used instead of *social and emotional development*.

When young children who do not know what to do with their anger, feel very sad, or are out-of-control enter school, many will have a hard time. Research indicates that if young children do not succeed in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, they are less likely to do well in subsequent grades.¹ Therefore, it makes sense to try to help these young children before they get to school. Increasingly, research is helping to identify interventions to support the development of needed competencies. (See box.)

What Early Learning Research Tells Us

Most young children are “eager to learn” and have the cognitive, social, and emotional skills to succeed.

- The roots of successful early learning start *early*—the brain develops most rapidly in the first 3 years of life.
- The earliest relationships set the stage for healthy development and learning.
- Almost all children are born “wired to learn.”
- Social, emotional, and cognitive learning are all interconnected in young children (more than in older children).
- A significant group of young children experience problems in developing the social, emotional and behavioral strategies necessary to succeed in school.

Intentional social and emotional strategies can make a difference.

- Improved parenting with infants and toddlers has been linked to improved cognitive, behavioral, and language skills in 3 year olds.
- Parents who have learned how to better manage young children's behavior report positive outcomes at home and at school.
- Classroom-based strategies to help young children master social and emotional skills have been linked to improved reading ability.

(For sources, see the full report.)

This guide is intended to be especially useful for:

- Child care providers, preschool and kindergarten teachers, and others who work directly with young children and their families.
- Families and school readiness coordinators and administrators involved in organizing early childhood school readiness and early literacy campaigns.
- Family support advocates and others who provide support to parents of young children.
- Community leaders and coalitions who understand the importance of reaching out to young children and families to ensure early school success.

- Mental health and other professionals who want to do more to ensure that young children and families get help when they need it.

The full guide, available at www.nccp.org, provides information about resources and strategies that families, child care providers, teachers, and others who come into contact with young children every day can use to help infants, toddlers and preschoolers, especially those living in low-income communities, develop the social and emotional skills they need to succeed in school. It also provides web site and other contact information. See Figure 1 for an overview of the resources discussed.

Section I. Resources to Help Parents Promote Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness in Babies and Young Children

Research tells us that responding to the needs of young children with warmth, providing structure and routines for them, talking with them about feelings, and helping them to problem-solve can pave the way for them to be successful learners. But in reality, parenting is not so easy. Raising young children is sometimes joyful, but it is often challenging, with constant on-the-spot decisions about what to say and do. When parents are stressed about finding a home or meeting public assistance requirements, are worried about health care, or are feeling isolated and lonely, parenting is that much harder. Examples of the programs described include:

- **Touchpoints™**. Designed to give child care and health providers tools and strategies to help parents help their babies grow into thriving young children and to increase providers' knowledge of child development.
- **Incredible Years**. Using video vignettes to stimulate discussion, the parent component of the Incredible Years evidence-based training series helps parents promote positive social skills in their children and prevent or reduce conduct disorders.
- **Reach Out and Read (ROR)**. Promotes pre-literacy skills for low-income children from birth through age five using pediatricians and nurses to help parents understand the importance of early literacy and how to read with their child.
- **Motheread/Fatheread**. Targets parents (both English and non-English-speaking) with less than a high school education, using books that represent many cultures (such as African American, Latino, Native American) to help parents and children identify with and read the stories.

Section II. Resources to Help Child Care Providers and Teachers Promote Social and Emotional Competence

Every encounter with a young child is an opportunity to promote social and emotional competence. If young children are around caregivers who can create a rich language and reading environment, who can help them develop new social skills, and, above all, who can find and nurture their strengths as well as help them and their parents see and appreciate

Figure 1. Resources to Promote Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness

Program	Strategy Type	Control Group Evaluation	National Training Availability
Parent Support and Education: Infants and Toddlers			
Touchpoints™	Provider training	No	Yes
Baby FAST	Parent education and support	Control study in process	Yes
Parent Support and Education: Preschoolers			
Incredible Years	Parent education and support	Yes	Yes
DARE to be You	Parent and child interactive learning	Yes	Yes
Parent Services Project	Family support	Yes	Yes
The Spirit of Excellence Parent Empowerment Project	Parent education and support	No	Yes
Parent Support and Education: Early Literacy Strategies in a Social-Emotional Context			
Reach Out and Read	Literacy promotion	Yes	Yes
Motherread/Fatheread®	Literacy development in a social-emotional context	No	Yes
Child Care Provider, Teacher, and Other Caregiver Support: Screening, Assessment, and Guidance			
Devereux Early Childhood Assessment	Assessment, screening, and guidance to promote resilience in young children	Yes	Yes
Child Care Provider, Teacher, and Other Caregiver Support: Early Care and Education Program Curricula			
Tools of the Mind	Curriculum for early education programs	In process	No
Families and Caregivers Facing Special Needs: Intensive Parent Support			
Nurturing Father's Program	Father education and support	No	Yes
Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment and Recovery	Substance abuse treatment and support	Quasi-experimental	No
Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care-Preschool (MTFC-P)	Intensive support and behavioral training	Yes	Yes
Families and Caregivers Facing Special Needs: Parent-Driven Treatment			
Regional Intervention Program and the Early Childhood Centers	Parent skills training	No	Yes
Families and Caregivers Facing Special Needs: Family Child Care Partnerships			
Positive Behavior Support	Assessment and intervention to increase social and communication skills	Yes	Yes
Families and Caregivers Facing Special Needs: Informal Family Support			
Raising Our Children's Kids	Grandparent and other caregiver support	No	No
Family Ties of Westchester, Inc.	Parent-driven support organization	No	No
Building Partnerships			
Massachusetts Early Childhood Linkage Institute	Link child welfare with Early Intervention System	Yes	No
Community Planning Strategies			
Free to Grow	Program and community development through partnerships	In process	No
Pima County Prevention Partnership	Early intervention and screening; curricula; partnerships and training	No (still in pilot phase)	N/A

those strengths, many problem behaviors disappear. But the reality is that many child care providers and teachers report great concern about the numbers of young children with so called “challenging behaviors,” as well as not knowing how to respond to these behaviors. A national study found that the expulsion rates are three times as high for young children as for children in grades K–12.³ Even infants and toddlers are being asked to leave early care settings. But there are solutions. Examples include:

- **Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program.** Based on research on promoting resilience and reducing risks in young children, DECA helps teachers assess both their classroom environment and individual children and provides clear guidelines for what teachers can do to promote resilience in young children.⁴
- **Tools of the Mind (TOM).** Based on psychological research that is designed to increase preschool-aged children’s self-control and ability to stay with a task and to think about feelings and actions, Tools of the Mind is an integrated curriculum that pays special attention to social and emotional issues.
- **Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation.** Although there is no one agreed upon model for consultation, across the country states and communities are investing in these strategies and building a case for their efficacy in responding to children with challenging behavior. (See Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, www.csefel.uiuc.edu/.) Consultants are using positive behavioral support strategies to improve classroom functioning and address the problems of young children experiencing special challenges.

Section III. Resources to Help Young Children and Families Facing Special Stresses

In every community there is a group—often a large group—of young children and families facing especially daunting challenges in achieving age-appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive competencies. Frequently, the families of these young children are affected by circumstances that lead to poor parenting and, sometimes, to either the child’s or the parent’s removal from home. Typically, these are parents who themselves have been poorly parented. Many of them are too depressed to parent well, with problems compounded by domestic violence and substance abuse and, often, unaddressed childhood trauma. Helping these young children most often means helping their families as well, providing treatment for barriers that interfere with effective parenting, providing specialized parenting supports responsive to parental risks, and making sure that young children have access to early intervention as well as high-quality early care and learning experiences. Examples include:

- **Nurturing Father’s Program.** The Nurturing Father’s Program is a 13-week structured curriculum targeted to fathers’ facing special parenting challenges and designed to increase the quality involvement and bonding of fathers and their children, especially babies and young children, through a group-based program.
- **Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment and Recovery.** This group-based 17-week experiential and didactic learning approach is for parents in substance abuse recovery treatment programs. The aim is to help parents develop self-awareness and nurturing skills, explore the effects of substance abuse on themselves and their families, and build recovery skills.

- **Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care-Preschool (MTFC-P).** Targeted to young children between ages 3 and 6 who have been removed from the care of their parents, the intervention uses a team approach that provides intensive support and behavioral training to the child, foster parents, and permanent placement family to promote more healthy relationship development and positive behavior.
- **Regional Intervention Program (RIP) and the Early Childhood Centers (ECC) of the Positive Education Program in Cleveland, Ohio.** These behavioral skills training programs for groups of parents with preschool-aged children with severe aggressive and antisocial behaviors embed the best principles of behavioral learning and use parents as coaches for other parents.

Section IV. Taking a Community Approach

Even the most challenged community has natural leaders and access to some services through, for example, the WIC offices, well-child clinics, shelters, and early childhood programs that can be strengthened. Examples of highlighted approaches include:

- **Family Ties of Westchester, Inc.** A parent advocacy organization for families whose children have serious emotional and behavioral disorders that has partnered with the county children’s mental health agency to create local neighborhood early childhood “networks” to support individual young children and caregivers and to reach out to adult consumers of mental health with young children, including them in their parent training and support sessions.
- **Massachusetts Early Childhood Linkage Initiative (MECLI).** A partnership between child welfare and early intervention agencies to see that young children who are victims of substantiated abuse and neglect are assessed, and if needed, get services for any developmental problems.

A National Portrait of Young Children at Special Risk for Early School Failure

- More than 153,000 children under age 6 are in foster care.
- More than 300,000 children under age 6 (half of whom are infants and toddlers) have incarcerated parents.
- More than 567,000 young children are homeless, representing 42 percent of all homeless children.
- More than 300,000 young children are victims of substantiated child abuse or neglect every year.
- An estimated 2.2 million young children (10 percent) live with parental substance abuse or dependence.
- One to four million young children who are exposed to domestic violence.
- An estimated 27 percent of low-income kindergarten children are affected by parental, especially maternal, depression.
- An estimated 17 percent of young children have diagnosable emotional and behavioral disorders.

(For sources, see the full report.)

Section V. Toward a Community Response: Recommendations

Experience from communities organizing on behalf of young children to promote social and emotional competence and successful early school learning suggests there are four key steps:

- *Organize:* Bring as many voices to the table as possible: providers, kindergarten teachers, preschool and child care teachers, mental health and substance abuse providers, police, school leaders, and small business leaders. But especially make sure families are at the table (See Box).
- *Gather information:* 1) Take a snapshot to profile the social and emotional status of young children (numbers expelled from child care, numbers in high-risk circumstances); 2) Find out what parents, caregivers, and teachers think is needed; 3) Identify the existing resources (for example, training, consultations, parenting curricula) to help families, caregivers, and others better promote social and emotional health and school readiness in all young children, and match them against what families and the community want; and 4) Assess the health of existing community partnerships and collaborations. (See the box: Questions for Communities to Ask, which can help guide data gathering.)
- *Take action:* Identify two or three *doable* action steps to better use existing resources and community assets, and to strategically supplement what exists.
- *Track impacts:* Identify indicators to track progress (such as kindergarten assessments and special surveys).

Tips on Engaging Parents

- Develop explicit strategies to ensure a strong family voice:
 - Build leadership teams that include families, involving grandparents and other family members caring for young children.
 - Promote peer-to-peer family support and advocacy.
 - Provide child care and transportation, and pay for lost work time to facilitate family involvement.
 - Use family liaisons to reach out to parents and others.
- Reach out to parent groups and organizations, such as Head Start Advisory Councils, to find out their experiences and needs, and to talk with other parents.
- Include information about emotional and behavioral issues and how families might get help in family newsletters.
- Encourage the development of a coalition of family voices interested in promoting healthy emotional development, such as Head Start families, Part C families, Federation for Children's Mental Health families.

Promoting Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness—Questions for Communities to Ask

Children and Families

- How do those working most closely with young children feel the children are doing? Are there any more formal community indicators in place?

Numbers

- How many grandparents are raising young children?
- How many young children are being placed in foster care? Are homeless? Are in shelters? Are being served through Early Intervention programs? Are abused or neglected? Have incarcerated parents?
- How widespread are substance abuse and domestic violence problems in families with young children? Are these problems confined to one locality, or have they spread throughout the community?

Services and Supports

Helping Parents

- What are the most effective parenting (including foster and adoptive as well as biological) curricula for infants and toddlers? For preschoolers? How many curricula are in use across programs? Should these be consolidated? What do grandparents raising young children need or want?
- What kinds of informal parent support groups exist? Should these be expanded? What kinds of families are not served?
- Where can parents get respite care? How safe are the playgrounds?

Helping Child Care Providers, Teachers, and Home Visitors

- What are the social and emotional issues that most concern child care providers? Head Start and prekindergarten teachers? Pediatricians? Home visitors?
- What supports are available to pediatricians and health settings to identify maternal depression and to help young children with emotional and behavioral challenges?
- How are training dollars used to promote social and emotional competence? Does each agency decide? Are funds pooled and communitywide trainings organized?

Helping Higher-Risk Families

- What intensive family-focused services are available to higher-risk families in Head Start, Early Head Start, and home visiting programs?
- What informal support groups exist for grandparents raising children? For parents with depression?
- What supports are in place for frontline workers reaching out to help higher-risk families (e.g., in shelters, in child care programs, etc.)?
- What specific outreach activities exist for higher-risk families (e.g., routine assessments of young children entering foster care or of children with incarcerated parents)?
- What specialized resources exist in the community to help families that have young children with serious emotional and behavioral disorders?

Aggregate Community Risk Factors

- What is the community profile of young children facing extreme risks to healthy development? (See box above: A National Portrait of Young Children at Special Risk for Early School Failure, for risk factors.)
- How are these risks distributed? Evenly across all risks, or with concentrations (e.g., high rates of domestic violence in families with one parent incarcerated, low rates of foster care placement)?
- What kinds of communitywide preventive strategies could be put in place to address the three most common high-risk factors?

Partnerships and Collaborations

- What partnerships and collaborations (e.g., among church leaders, mothers, agencies, and policy initiatives) are in place to provide leadership to ensure social and emotional school readiness among young children as well as early success in school? How effective are these partnerships? Is there no collaboration, limited collaboration, or a strong community mechanism? (For more questions to consider, see the Partnership Tool <www.partnershiptool.net>).
- How strong is the family voice in these partnerships?
- What agencies/voices are not at the table that should be? Does the table include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as well as health, child welfare, substance abuse, and mental health agencies?

Promoting Social and Emotional Health and School Readiness—Questions for Communities to Ask (continued)

Moving Forward

- What strategies (identified as effective in the community; identified in this resource guide; others) would best respond to the challenges at hand and build on community assets?
- What are the two top priorities for:
 - Using existing resources more efficiently
 - Implementing new strategies
 - Expanding community partnerships and leadership
- What would a plan of action look like?

Conclusion

The strategies we describe in this guide are examples of what communities can do, and are doing, to support young children and their families. They emphasize the importance of not targeting the child as the “problem,” but rather changing the environment by reducing community risks and strengthening the capacity of parents, child care providers, teachers, and others who, on a daily basis, interact with children to promote healthy social and emotional relationships and school readiness. Using this framework, communities—especially low-income communities—will be in a stronger position to promote early school success on behalf of all young children, regardless of where they live or what hurdles they face.

Copies of this guide can be downloaded from the web site of the National Center for Children in Poverty (www.nccp.org), along with other materials that can be helpful resources.

Endnotes

1. Raver, C. C. & Knitzer, J. (2003). *Ready to enter: What research tells policymakers about strategies to promote social and emotional school readiness among three- and four-year-old children* (Promoting the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Families Policy Paper 3). New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health <www.nccp.org/pub_pew02c.html>.
2. National Research Council, Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences. Bowman, B. T.; Donavan, S.; & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
3. Gilliam, W. S. (2005). *Prekindergartens left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten programs* (FCD Policy Brief 3). New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development <www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02_new.pdf>.
4. Devereux Early Childhood Initiative. (1999). Pilot study of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment Program - Year 1 (1999-2000). *Research Bulletin No. 1*, pp. 1-2 <www.devereuxearlychildhood.org/pdfs/pilotstudy-year1.pdf>. Resilience factors are a child’s ability to be a self-starter, a comfort seeker, a leader, adventurous, a problem solver, optimistic, hopeful, autonomous, and creative. More and more research is showing that protective factors can buffer the negative effects of stress for at-risk children.