



## Policy Brief

# Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Young Children

Traci Sawyers, January 2014

## PROBLEM

Teachers in both early care and education settings and in schools are increasingly dealing with children who exhibit emotional and behavioral problems. Rates of preschool expulsion ranging from 10% to 30% confirms this problem.<sup>1,2</sup> At the same time, research shows the emotional and behavioral competence of young children directly affects their success in first grade, even more than cognitive skills and family backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

According to Vermont's Kid Count, in 2011-12, 20% - or 23,000 - children had one or more emotional, behavioral or developmental conditions. National research confirms many mental health disorders begin in the early years but that they can be identified and treated before these problems escalate and affect learning and life-long development.<sup>4</sup>

## BACKGROUND

Young children's healthy social and emotional development is critical to school readiness and positive social and health outcomes throughout life.<sup>5</sup> Healthy social and emotional development is the capacity of infants, toddlers, and young children to manage emotions; form secure relationships; and actively explore the environment (adapted from ZERO TO THREE). When children feel good about themselves and have positive relationships with others, they are more likely to learn and succeed in school and beyond.

Especially since the high profile publication of *Neurons to Neighborhoods* in 2000, there has been a growing body of research and general understanding that children's early experiences affect social and emotional development.<sup>6</sup> In fact, this report and others found this development just as important as language and number skills in helping young children prepare for school. Most compelling, research also highlights that the trajectory of a child's social and emotional development can be changed if addressed early enough.<sup>7</sup> Early identification and treatment of developmental and mental health issues in young children can prevent more serious social, emotional and behavioral problems later in life.

Poor social and emotional development in young children often expresses itself in challenging behaviors that interfere with learning or social interactions. This includes not paying attention to directions or guidance and behaviors such as tantrums, throwing things, disobeying rules, displaying aggression or withdrawal due to anxiety or depression.<sup>8</sup> Young children who demonstrate these behaviors in a classroom are less likely to be accepted by classmates and teachers, get less instruction and positive feedback, and are more likely to be held back.<sup>9</sup>

Early experience of rejection can have lasting impacts beyond elementary school, creating a downward spiral that becomes increasingly hard to reverse.<sup>10</sup> These behaviors often lead to unpleasant family dynamics as well.<sup>11</sup> Challenging behaviors during the preschool years are one of the strongest predictors of later, more

serious problems such as delinquency, antisocial behavior, and substance abuse in adolescence and beyond.<sup>12</sup>

When children are young, the adults around them (parents, other adult caregivers, teachers) are the most important influences on their social and emotional development.<sup>13</sup> Positive parenting practices greatly increase the likelihood that children will develop early emotional competence and exhibit fewer behavior problems at home and at school.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, parent support and family strengthening activities are critical. At the same time, how caregivers and teachers interact with these children can also affect social and emotional outcomes negatively or positively.<sup>15</sup> Teachers and child care providers need support in promoting greater social skills in children and reducing challenging behavior in the classroom both to help individual children and ensure a positive learning environment for all.

## WHAT IS BEING DONE

One helpful framework in addressing social and emotional development in both early care and education and classroom settings is the *Pyramid Model for Promoting the Social Emotional Competence of Infants and Young Children* developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) which organizes activities along the mental health continuum.

The Pyramid emphasizes “nurturing and responsive relationships” and “high-quality, supportive environments” for all children (promotion); “targeted social emotional supports” for children at risk for behavioral problems (prevention); and “intensive intervention” for children exhibiting challenging behavior (intervention).<sup>16</sup> In addition, the bottom level of the Pyramid addresses the importance of an effective workforce of teachers who are trained in promoting optimal development of all children. The Pyramid

model is being implemented in pilot communities as part of Vermont’s Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).



Pyramid Model for Promoting the Social Emotional Competence of Infants and Young Children – CSEFEL and TACSEI

In addition, Vermont Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health) funded by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and being piloted in Chittenden County also uses the following strategies to support the positive social and emotional development of all children:

- Early screening and assessment using evidenced-based tools in a range of child-serving settings to identify children in need of support as early as possible for maximum impact.
- The integration of behavioral health into primary care settings using social workers to provide care coordination for children and families in need.
- Mental health consultation in early care and education setting that is both child and classroom centered to meet the needs of all children. This work uses the Pyramid framework above and is connected to Vermont’s MTSS.
- Enhanced home visiting using the evidence based Parents as Teachers model that builds protective factors by increasing parental

understanding of child development and improving parenting skills and practices.

- Parent Support Providers working on family strengthening and parenting skills through training, outreach and other support.

These are innovative new approaches specifically focused on social and emotional health as well as optimal family wellbeing that will be refined in the coming years and ready for statewide expansion at the end of the grant if funds are available.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Further action is needed to improve the social-emotional development and mental health of young children and their families. This includes:

### 1) Promote early childhood social and emotional development.

- Develop initiatives to increase the understanding of positive early social and emotional development;
- Integrate a social and emotional development focus into existing programs and services;
- Expand early identification of children experiencing social and emotional challenges through screening and assessment;
- Support and expand Project LAUNCH approaches and strategies described above statewide, such as primary care and behavioral health integration, evidence-based home visiting and increased parent support.

### 2) Ensure/expand access to quality early care and learning experiences with compassionate and well-trained teachers and in predictable, stimulating environments.

- Ensure access to high quality early care and education programs for all children, including high quality universal preschool in Vermont;
- Provide teachers with the training and other resources they need to maintain a positive and enriching classroom across cognitive, social and emotional domains;

- Support statewide rollout of Vermont's Multi-Tiered System of Support and use of the Pyramid model described above.

### 3) Invest in family mental health services and supports.

- Expand access to early mental health consultation for early care and education programs and schools;
- Integrate mental health services in primary care settings;
- Assure mental health services are available for both children and families as needed.

Children's ability to grow up healthy and happy and become productive members of society rests largely on their social competency and emotional health. This begins at birth and is greatly influenced during the early childhood years. These further investments in the social and emotional wellbeing of Vermont's children will make a significant difference in school success and far beyond.

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Gilliam, W. *Prekinergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Programs*, Foundation for Child Development (2005)

<sup>2</sup> Fox, L. Dunlap, G. Hemmeter, M. Joseph, G. & Strain, P. *The Teaching Pyramid: A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Preventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children*. Young Children (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Raver, C. & Knitzer J. *Ready to Enter: What Research Tells Policymakers About Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness Among Three-and Four-Year-Old Children*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University (2002)

<sup>4</sup>Shonkoff, J. & Phillips, D. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Board of Children, Youth and Families, National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2000)

<sup>5</sup>Cohen, J. Onunaku, N. Clothier, S Poppe, J. *Helping Children to Succeed: Strategies to Promote Early Childhood*

<sup>6</sup>Shonkoff & Phillips (2000)

<sup>7</sup>Raver & Knitzer (2002)

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Fox, L. & Smith, B. *Promoting Social, Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes of Young Children Served Under IDEA*. Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (2007)

<sup>10</sup>Boyd, J. Barnett, W. Bodrova, E. Leong, D. Gomby, D. *Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Development Through Preschool*, National Institute for Early Education Research (2007)

<sup>11</sup>Fox & Smith (2007)

<sup>12</sup>Cooper, J, Masi, R. Vick, J. *Social Emotional Development in Early Childhood: What Every Policymaker Should Know*, National Center for Children in Poverty (2009)

<sup>13</sup>Cohen, et. al (2005)

<sup>14</sup>Fox, et. al (2003)

<sup>15</sup>Cooper, et. al (2009)

<sup>16</sup> Fox & Smith (2007)

### **About These Policy Briefs:**

The mighty African warriors of the Masai tribe understood the importance of children to their community. An example of this is their traditional greeting to one another, "And how are the children?" This greeting demonstrates the importance of children in this tribe's day-to-day activities and they expected each reply to be, "All the children are well." It was a number one priority for the Masai that their children were safe, healthy and loved. Can we say the same about Vermont's children.....every single one of them?

There is much we can learn from this way of thinking, especially given the fact that in Vermont, there are over 128,000 children under the age of 18. Like the mighty Masai, we have the critical responsibility to answer, "All the children are well." In an attempt to challenge ourselves to start thinking along these lines, Building Bright Futures has begun publishing an annual "*How are Vermont's Young Children?*" data report and monthly policy briefs around the topic of young child and family well-being and highlighting solutions that can lead to smarter policies and laws. For more information, call Building Bright Futures at 802-876-5010 or find out more on line: [www.buildingbrightfutures.org](http://www.buildingbrightfutures.org)

### **About Project LAUNCH:**

Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health) is a federal initiative funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Vermont Department of Health (VDH) received a five-year SAMHSA Project LAUNCH grant in 2012. Project LAUNCH is being piloted in Chittenden County and is grounded in a comprehensive view of health that addresses the physical, emotional, social, cognitive and behavioral aspects of well-being. Building Bright Futures serves as the grantee of VDH for LAUNCH implementation.

### **About the Author:**

Traci Sawyers holds a M.A. in public policy from Tufts University and has 25 years experience in child and family policy, maternal/child health and behavioral health. In these areas, she has been a writer, lobbyist, researcher, planner, program administrator, consultant, facilitator, grant writer/administrator, elected official, and organizational director. She is currently the Early Childhood Health Policy Expert for Building Bright Futures and Vermont's Project LAUNCH initiative.

