



# Becoming a Social and Emotional Teacher

## The Heart of Good Guidance

---

**Katherine M. Zinsser, Susanne A. Denham, and Timothy W. Curby**

---

It's the end of center time, and Jerome is standing beside the preschool classroom's computer screaming, "I want to play!" His teacher, Ms. Carolyn, crosses the room and squats beside him. She says, "I know that game is really fun, but you've already had your computer time this morning. See the center chart? Now it's José's turn. You can watch him play, but you'll have to wait to play again."

Jerome scowls at Ms. Carolyn, balls up his fists and slams them down on the keyboard in front of José, yelling, “I want to play NOW!” Ms. Carolyn takes a deep breath to remain calm. She has been working with Jerome on managing and expressing his feelings, and she reflects briefly on the strategies that have worked in the past.

“Jerome,” Ms. Carolyn says, “it looks like you’re having a really big feeling right now, and that’s okay. But it’s not okay for you to hurt our classroom materials or to yell like that because it hurts your friends’ ears—and mine.” Ms. Carolyn shows Jerome her slightly sad facial expression and asks, “Do you remember our calm-down song? Do you want to sing it with me?”

Ms. Carolyn begins singing, “Take three deep breaths” and places her hands on her stomach as she takes a deep breath. Hesitantly, Jerome joins in, singing quietly at first but matching her hand gestures and breathing: “Now count to three, 1-2-3, calm down, calm down.”

**M**s. Carolyn’s reaction to Jerome’s outburst helped to promote his social and emotional learning. In fact, her behaviors could be described as social and emotional teaching. Each of her actions—coming to Jerome when he was upset, remaining calm in a stressful situation, displaying an appropriate emotional reaction (sadness) when Jerome yelled, connecting Jerome’s emotions with the curriculum used in her classroom, and modeling an appropriate way to handle strong feelings—are teaching Jerome about the social and emotional world.

The term *social and emotional learning* is often used in early childhood education settings to encompass the behavioral and emotional skills children will need to be ready for kindergarten. However, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that social and emotional learning is an ongoing process of acquiring a set of skills or competencies, not the skills themselves. In early childhood, this process is grounded in the relationships children have with their caregivers.

In addition to parents, teachers play a critical role in the process through *social and emotional teaching*. Such teaching goes beyond direct instruction and related curricular programs; it is highly dependent on teachers’ own social and emotional skills. In this article, we synthesize recent research in child development and early childhood education to describe how teachers can foster social and emotional learning through their everyday interactions with preschool-aged children.

Before defining the components of effective social and emotional teaching, it is important to first consider what competencies teachers may wish to promote in young children for social and academic success. These interrelated abilities include

- › **Being socially and emotionally aware:** the ability to identify one’s own and others’ emotions as well as empathize with someone, even when you feel differently than they do. *Aaron knew that Chantel was crying and felt sad because another child refused to let her play at the water table.*



- › **Regulating one’s emotions:** the ability to manage one’s emotions and behaviors across various situations. *Martin laughed and danced across the carpet during music time but knew to be “quiet as a mouse” when walking in the hallway.*
- › **Making socially responsible decisions:** the ability to consider social norms and the consequences of one’s actions when making decisions about how to behave. *Jessica felt really mad when Andre accidentally bumped her block tower and sent it tumbling to the floor. But she could tell by looking at Andre’s surprised face that he didn’t mean to, so instead of yelling or throwing the blocks, she asked if he would help her build it again.*

Children who are more skilled in these areas have more success making friends, are more positive about school, and have better grades later in elementary school (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich 2010). The academic benefits of social and emotional learning make sense when you consider the competing emotional and attentional demands on preschoolers in busy, productive classrooms. The related concepts of social and emotional competence, self-regulation, and executive function are often grouped by researchers under the umbrella of *learning-related skills* (McClelland et al. 2007), which all contribute to children’s social and academic achievement.

## Social and Emotional Teaching

Children develop social and emotional skills primarily through interactions with family members, teachers, and peers. With many children spending large amounts of time in preschool (and other early education) settings, the influence of early childhood teachers on children’s social and emotional learning is attracting greater attention. Across the country, teachers are held accountable by early learning standards to promote their students’ social and emotional skills—but until recently, it was unclear what sorts of social and emotional teaching practices are highly effective.

Teachers promote social and emotional learning through a variety of activities and practices, some purposeful and planned, some naturally occurring. By reviewing the research, observing teacher-child interactions, and interviewing practitioners, we developed a model for social and emotional teaching with four essential components: (1) using a curriculum that addresses a broad range of social and emotional skills; (2) being a socially and emotionally competent teacher; (3) capitalizing on everyday interactions as natural opportunities for social and emotional learning; and (4) creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom. Together, as explained throughout the rest of this article, these practices facilitate the learning process, helping children acquire and practice using social and emotional competencies.

## Using a Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum

Research has shown that high-quality social and emotional curricula can improve children’s skills in the short and long terms (Bierman & Motamedi 2015; Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg 2007; Durlak et al. 2011). When teachers use a research-based curriculum effectively, they provide students opportunities to develop foundational skills—such as being able to identify and label their own and others’ emotions—that support later academic performance, school adjustment, peer relationships, and overall emotional well-being. The CASEL (2012) guide, *Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs*, identifies seven evidence-based preschool programs that successfully promote children’s self-control, relationship building, and problem solving, among other social and emotional skills. Administrators and teachers may find guides such as this one helpful in identifying and selecting evidence-based programs (see <https://pg.casel.org> for more information).

Although direct social and emotional instruction through curriculum can be effective, teachers should not limit their instruction to the prescribed lessons or feel confined by the curriculum (Zinsser et al. 2014). The three remaining components of our social and emotional teaching model work in conjunction with high-quality curricula to enhance children’s learning.

## Being a Socially and Emotionally Competent Teacher

Just as children come to school each day with their emotions, experiences, and backgrounds, teachers also differ in how successfully they navigate their social and emotional lives. These differences have meaningful impacts on how easily teachers can help children with social and emotional learning. When teachers experience, regulate, and appropriately express their emotions—positive or negative—in the classroom, they are modeling for children the social norms associated with different feelings and how to communicate those feelings. Teachers’ positive displays of warmth, joy, and excitement can positively impact children’s emotional well-being and promote learning (Ahn & Stifter 2006). Conversely, teachers’ displays of negative emotions in the classroom—especially when frequent, not well regulated, and not moderated for an audience of young learners—are associated with children’s poorer emotion regulation and increased aggressive behaviors (Ramsden & Hubbard 2002).

Teachers who are more aware of and knowledgeable about emotions may more easily scaffold children’s labeling of emotions and empathize with their complex emotional experiences. Teachers who are successful at regulating their emotions may respond to challenging interactions with students in more effective ways. For example, if Mr. Diego needs to help Suzie through a temper tantrum, he may regulate his own frustration, choose to validate Suzie’s expression, and help her problem solve. Mr. Diego might say, “I see that you’re very upset because you can’t play in the block area right now. Is there somewhere else you would like to play while you wait?” Knowing that Suzie enjoys the water table, he may also help her redirect her energy and reconsider her reaction: “Suzie, the water table is available. Would you like to play there with me while you calm down?” Once they are playing quietly together, Mr. Diego may find natural opportunities to reinforce that Suzie can have fun even while waiting for her preferred activity to become available.

Similarly, teachers who are better able to manage their emotions (thereby generally staying on an even keel in the classroom) can create a consistently positive emotional environment. Children learn what to expect from their teacher and anticipate that the teacher will respond to their emotional expressions with understanding, further supporting children’s learning process (Zinsser et al. 2013). In contrast,



teachers' negative feelings—including frustration, annoyance, and boredom—may detract from their ability to engage in effective social and emotional teaching. Teachers who experience intense negative emotions at work, such as stress or depression, are more likely to frequently express negative emotions and to react punitively to children's expression of emotions (Ersay 2007).

When teachers invest in developing their social and emotional competencies and take proactive steps to reduce their stress and regulate their emotions (both in and outside of the classroom), they not only feel better about themselves but may also be more effective social and emotional teachers (Zinsser et al. 2013). For steps teachers can take, see “Tips for Advancing Your Social and Emotional Competence.”

## Tips for Advancing Your Social and Emotional Competence

There are many small steps you can take to build your competence and enhance your social and emotional teaching.

- › **Take care of yourself.** Your physical and emotional health are critical! Studies show that meditation and mindfulness classes can decrease teachers' experiences of stress and burnout (Buchanan 2017). Check out the Association for Mindfulness in Education: [www.mindfuleducation.org](http://www.mindfuleducation.org).
- › **Practice what you preach.** Adopt a few routines and strategies for regulating your negative emotions when they arise at work or at home. Maybe start with the simple ones you want your students to use (e.g., take a deep breath, count to three).
- › **Examine your work environment.** What can you do to make your classroom a positive (frustration-free) place to work, learn, and play? The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations suggests several simple tips: [www.challengingbehavior.org/resources](http://www.challengingbehavior.org/resources).
- › **Don't go it alone.** Successful social and emotional teaching and learning require integrated support at all levels. Seek out mentoring and support from colleagues who will help you reflect on your classroom practice. Building your competencies will take time, so be patient with yourself.

## Promoting Social and Emotional Learning Through Interactions

Through their daily interactions, teachers give children information about the nature of various emotions—how, why, and when they are expressed. For example, a teacher may give children information about the individual nature of some emotions, saying, “I scream on roller coasters because the rides scare me, but some people find them fun and laugh instead.” Children are constantly observing and processing others' emotional expressions and behaviors and incorporating this learning into their own behavior (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt 2007). To bring intentionality to this learning through interactions, this component of social and emotional teaching describes how teachers *model* emotional expressions, *teach* about emotions, and *react* to children's emotions.

Teachers' well-regulated, intentional displays of positive and negative emotions are *models* for children of how to convey emotions across a variety of social contexts (Ahn & Stifter 2006). When emotions are expressed clearly, children learn to better recognize emotional expressions (Dunsmore et al. 2009). Similarly, when children see adults modeling appropriate emotional expressions, they develop greater emotion-regulation skills (Eisenberg et al. 2001). At times, teachers can also model the process of identifying and regulating emotions to promote students' use of similar strategies (Zinsser et al. 2015). For example, Ms. Jen may tell her students, “I feel frustrated. I'm going to the calm-down corner to take three deep breaths.”

To deepen recognition and understanding of emotions, educators *teach* children the labels, causes, and consequences of emotions through discussions as well as coach children through emotional situations (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt 2007). Activities like reading stories about feelings can be designed to create opportunities for teachers to directly teach about emotions. Teachers can also capitalize on situations as they arise. For example, following a dispute on the playground, a teacher may scaffold a discussion between the students about each child’s emotions and behavioral choices. The teacher might provide labels for children’s emotions and suggest strategies to resolve the conflict.

In addition to modeling and teaching, educators should prepare themselves to *react* calmly and supportively to children’s emotional displays. Warm, accepting reactions to children’s negative emotions—such as sadness and anger—help children better regulate their responses to emotions (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt 2007). For example, when a teacher crouches down next to a crying child and asks, “What’s wrong?” or says, “It’s okay to cry when you’re sad,” they are encouraging a child’s expression and validating the emotional experience. Conversely, punitive or dismissive reactions by caregivers are associated with negative outcomes for children (Denham 1998). If a teacher responds to a crying child by saying, “Stop crying! If you keep crying you’ll have to go to the baby room,” they are belittling a child’s emotional experience.

When carefully implemented by a mindful teacher, the components of social and emotional teaching work together. A teacher with strong social and emotional competencies is better able to recognize the origins of a child’s negative emotional expressions, to empathize, to regulate their own negative feelings, and to choose a constructive response. In turn, such awareness and sensitivity can strengthen the relationship between the teacher and the child while also enhancing the emotional climate in the classroom.



## Creating a Positive Emotional Climate

The emotional climate of an early childhood classroom, which is our final component of social and emotional teaching, is palpable. Markers of positive emotional climates include a classroom feeling warm and inviting, the children appearing comfortable, the teachers enjoying the children's company, and the children and teachers engaging in shared activities (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre 2008). Such positive learning environments are more enjoyable to spend time in and more conducive to children's social and emotional learning. Children learning in emotionally positive classrooms are more socially competent and display fewer problem behaviors (Mashburn et al. 2008). A positive classroom climate in preschool, in combination with a positive relationship with a preschool teacher, is associated with fewer problem behaviors well into second grade (Howes 2000).

In less positive classrooms, teachers and children may express more negative emotions; there may be power struggles, with teachers relying on raised voices or threats to manage children's behavior. In these classrooms, children tend to rely on more aggressive behaviors directed at peers and teachers to get their needs met. They may also continue to use those troubling strategies into elementary school (Denham et al. 2014).

Although children and teachers cocreate the emotional climate of their classroom, teachers have the advantages of planning and being intentional about the routines they introduce each school year. Teachers also have—or should be striving to develop—the ability to regulate their own emotions and to be mindful of the emotional expression they are modeling for the children. When successfully established, positive classroom climates continue to support social and emotional teaching and learning. Children in classrooms with happier peers have more opportunities to practice positive social skills (Garner 2010), and that practice contributes to an overall positive emotional climate in a classroom. Additionally, working in such positive classrooms may make it easier for teachers to remain happy and engaged in supporting children. If a classroom's climate is generally positive, teachers

also have more energy to appropriately manage students' challenging behavior, which otherwise can be a significant contributor to teacher stress and burnout (Hastings & Bham 2003).

### Reflection Questions

1. What are some steps you can take to be more socially and emotionally aware as a classroom teacher? How might you nurture yourself so you can calmly model and teach social and emotional competencies?
2. How do you and the other adults in your classroom support each other in becoming more socially and emotionally aware? Who do you trust to hold you accountable to growing socially and emotionally, particularly during challenging moments?
3. What brings you joy in your work environment? What challenges you? What are effective ways you've found to work with your emotions in the classroom?

## Putting the Pieces Together

Social and emotional skills can be learned—and they can be actively taught. While many discussions of children's social and emotional learning focus on teachers' use of specific curricula, teachers support children's development throughout the school day and year in many ways. In addition to using curricula, teachers support the learning process by modeling, teaching, and reacting to emotions and by creating and maintaining consistently positive classroom climates. Furthermore, teachers' effectiveness in using each of these approaches depends, in part,

on their own social and emotional competence. By knowing how they can impact their students' social and emotional learning, teachers can extend instruction, guiding children toward competence—and a lifetime of healthy, happy relationships.

---

## REFERENCES

- Ahn, H.J., & C. Stifter. 2006. "Child Care Teachers' Response to Children's Emotional Expression." *Early Education and Development* 17 (2): 253–70.
- Bierman, K.L., & M. Motamedi. 2015. "Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Preschool Children." Chap. 9 in *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*, eds. J.A. Durlak, C.E. Domitrovich, R.P. Weissberg, & T.P. Gullotta, 135–50. New York: Guilford.
- Buchanan, T.K. 2017. "Mindfulness and Meditation in Education." *Young Children* 72 (3): 69–74.
- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). 2012. *2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs—Preschool and Elementary School Edition*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED581699.pdf>
- Denham, S.A. 1998. *Emotional Development in Young Children*. Guilford Series on Social and Emotional Development. New York: Guilford.
- Denham, S.A., C. Brown, & C.E. Domitrovich. 2010. "Plays Nice with Others': Social–Emotional Learning and Academic Success." *Early Education and Development* 21 (5): 652–80.
- Denham, S.A., H.H. Bassett, K. Zinsser, & T.M. Wyatt. 2014. "How Preschoolers' Social–Emotional Learning Predicts Their Early School Success: Developing Theory-Promoting Competency-Based Assessments." *Infant and Child Development* 23 (4): 426–54.
- Denham, S.A., H.H. Bassett, & T.M. Wyatt. 2007. "The Socialization of Emotional Competence." Chap. 24 in *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, eds. J.E. Grusec & P.D. Hastings, 614–37. New York: Guilford.
- Domitrovich, C.E., R.C. Cortes, & M.T. Greenberg. 2007. "Improving Young Children's Social and Emotional Competence: A Randomized Trial of the Preschool 'PATHS' Curriculum." *Journal of Primary Prevention* 28 (2): 67–91.
- Dunsmore, J.C., P. Her, A.G. Halberstadt, & M.B. Perez-Rivera. 2009. "Parents' Beliefs About Emotions and Children's Recognition of Parents' Emotions." *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 33 (2): 121–40.
- Durlak, J.A., R.P. Weissberg, A.B. Dymnicki, R.D. Taylor, & K.B. Schellinger. 2011. "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions." *Child Development* 82 (1): 405–32.
- Eisenberg, N., E.T. Gershoff, R.A. Fabes, S.A. Shepard, A.J. Cumberland, S.H. Losoya, I.K. Guthrie, & B.C. Murphy. 2001. "Mother's Emotional Expressivity and Children's Behavior Problems and Social Competence: Mediation Through Children's Regulation." *Developmental Psychology* 37 (4): 475–90.
- Ersay, E. 2007. "Preschool Teachers' Emotional Experience Traits, Awareness of Their Own Emotions, and Their Emotional Socialization Practices." PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University.
- Garner, P.W. 2010. "Emotional Competence and Its Influences on Teaching and Learning." *Educational Psychology Review* 22 (3): 297–321.
- Hastings, R.P., & M.S. Bham. 2003. "The Relationship Between Student Behavior Patterns and Teacher Burnout." *School Psychology International* 24 (1): 115–27.
- Howes, C. 2000. "Social-Emotional Classroom Climate in Child Care, Child–Teacher Relationships, and Children's Second Grade Peer Relations." *Social Development* 9 (2): 191–204.
- Mashburn, A.J., R.C. Pianta, B.K. Hamre, J.T. Downer, O.A. Barbarin, D. Bryant, M. Burchinal, R. Clifford, D.M. Early, & C. Howes. 2008. "Measures of Classroom Quality in Pre-Kindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills." *Child Development* 79 (3): 732–49.
- McClelland, M.M., C.E. Cameron, S.B. Wanless, & A. Murray. 2007. "Executive Function, Behavioral Self-Regulation, and Social-Emotional Competence: Links to School Readiness." Chap. 4 in *Contemporary Perspectives on Social Learning in Early Childhood Education*, eds. O.N. Saracho & B. Spodek, 83–107. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Pianta, R.C., K.M. LaParo, & B.K. Hamre. 2008. *Classroom Assessment Scoring System Manual: Pre-K*. Baltimore: Brookes.



- Ramsden, S.R., & J.A. Hubbard. 2002. "Family Expressiveness and Parental Emotion Coaching: Their Role in Children's Emotion Regulation and Aggression." *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 30 (6): 657–67.
- Zinsser, K.M., C.S. Bailey, T.W. Curby, S.A. Denham, & H.H. Bassett. 2013. "Exploring the Predictable Classroom: Preschool Teacher Stress, Emotional Supportiveness, and Students' Social-Emotional Behavior in Private and Head Start Classrooms." *NHSA Dialog* 16 (2): 90–108.
- Zinsser, K.M., E.A. Shewark, S.A. Denham, & T.W. Curby. 2014. "A Mixed-Method Examination of Preschool Teacher Beliefs About Social-Emotional Learning and Relations to Observed Emotional Support." *Infant and Child Development* 23 (5): 471–93.
- Zinsser, K.M., S.A. Denham, T.W. Curby, & E.A. Shewark. 2015. "'Practice What You Preach': Teachers' Perceptions of Emotional Competence and Emotionally Supportive Classroom Practices." *Early Education and Development* 26 (7): 899–919.

## **About the Authors**

**Katherine M. Zinsser**, PhD, is associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she conducts applied research to support the social and emotional well-being and development of young children and their caregivers. For resources, visit [www.setllab.com](http://www.setllab.com).

**Susanne A. Denham**, PhD, is an applied developmental psychologist and professor emeritus with particular expertise in the social and emotional development of children. In addition to her experience as a mother and grandmother, Susanne also uses her 11 years of hands-on experience as a school psychologist to aid in her research.

**Timothy W. Curby**, PhD, is professor and interim chair of the Psychology department at George Mason University. Tim's work has focused on understanding the role of teacher-child interactions in promoting children's social, emotional, and academic learning.