Social-emotional Development in the Digital Age

by Linda C. Whitehead

Most early childhood educators have had to defend the importance of social and emotional development at some point in their careers. It may have been with a parent who felt pressure to have an academically-prepared child and who was concerned her child's program included too much play. Or it might have been with the principal of an elementary school who was arguing for the importance of science and math instruction over social-emotional skills. Today, children have fewer opportunities for face-to-face social interactions and negotiations as technology proliferates with the use of texting, video games, and movies on tablets, television, and smartphones.

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And yet the social and emotional needs of children haven't changed. Teachers wonder how to support children's social-emotional growth in the digital age. What is an early childhood educator to do?

In a world where collaboration and negotiation skills are critical on interpersonal, community, and global levels, it feels safe to say that social and emotional skills will always be needed. Individuals with a strong ability to share, negotiate, work with others, and act with compassion will continue to be in high demand. We don't know yet all of the skills that today's preschoolers will need in the workplace of 2030 and beyond, but it is almost certain that they will continue to need social and emotional skills. Consider the following points:

- Social-emotional development will continue to be critical throughout the lifespan.
- Intentional teaching of social-emotional skills is needed.
- Technology is one tool for social-emotional development.

The Case for Social-emotional Development

Social development refers to a child's ability to build relationships and to function as a member of a family and society. *Emotional development* is the umbrella term for a child's growing sense of self and mastery of his emotions. The latter is also sometimes called 'emotional literacy.' Put together, these two critical areas of development form the foundation for how human beings function in the world with others: how we feel about ourselves, how we interact, and how we build relationships.

Most of us in the field of early childhood education agree that the development of self, of emotions, and social relationships are key to a child's healthy overall growth and development (Espinosa, 2010). For example, learning specific, finite academic skills is not more important than nurturing children's social-emotional development. Additionally, play-based settings allow children the fullest opportunities to practice social-emotional skills and to flourish (Katz, 2015). And yet the push for early academics and the increasing use of technology by children and adults threaten to encroach on the development of social-emotional skills.

Add to this the decreasing amount of time that children spend in open-ended outdoor play. Think of the skills that many of today's adults learned in the outdoors with their friends. They:

- became heroes and heroines, adventurers, and more through imaginative play.
- practiced climbing, skateboarding, jumping rope, and swimming.
- played games like flashlight tag, kick the can, handball, and hopscotch with friends.
- learned to try new things, to negotiate, be a team member, and so much more.

With less outdoor play time, there are also fewer chances to practice these skills. We need to find new ways to help children gain these skills (Bergen & Robertson, 2013).

Social-emotional development is not only important to young children under five. This area of development remains critical and continues to develop across the lifespan. Erik Erikson, in his classic *Childhood and Society* (1950), discusses eight stages of man and how individuals continue to develop and evolve their personal identity and interaction skills from birth throughout their lives.

What Will Today's Preschoolers Need When They are Adults?

Many agree that future workers will need a different set of skills when they reach the workplace of 2030 and beyond than are needed today. Sledd, a futurist, developed a list (2015) including eight skills he thinks children will need in the workplace to come. This list includes:

- leadership.
- digital literacy.
- communication.
- emotional intelligence.
- entrepreneurship.
- global citizenship.
- problem solving.
- teamwork.

Rather than the traditional emphasis on academics only, a broader range of skills will be necessary in the workplace of the future, including emotional intelligence. In particular, emotional intelligence and communication together are critical for building relationships with coworkers and for being an effective, contributing member of a team.

Intentional Teaching of Social-emotional Skills

> A child in a toddler room was biting other children on a regular basis. The center assigned an extra adult to 'shadow' him: in other words, to stay nearby to prevent more biting. They also added extra support. The shadowing teacher encouraged a second child to be with her and the child who was biting to build and model interactions with other children. After a month, the child was no longer biting and was interacting more positively with his peers.

Social and emotional learning and development is best not left to chance. While these experiences can be woven into the fabric of a child's day, social and emotional learning is important enough to be an intentional component of early childhood classrooms as in the example above. What is unique about the example above is the intentional addition of another child to model for and interact with the child who was biting. Biting can be one of the most challenging situations experienced by early childhood teachers. With thoughtful planning, positive results can be achieved.

In addition to organic opportunities to strengthen social-emotional learning through modeling, teachers can be intentional about teaching skills in this area of development. The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) provides 'scripted stories' to help children learn skills like 'using their words' (see Resource). Teachers are encouraged to use the scripted stories provided or create their own maybe assisted by puppets (see http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/scripted-stories/tips.html). (Editor's note: Also, see Ruth Wilson's article "The Power of Puppets" on page 74). CSEFEL's extensive compilation of resources also offers details on specific tasks such as:

- helping children express their wants and needs.
- strategies for increasing peer social interactions.
- using choice and preference to promote positive behavior.

While teachers spontaneously respond with caring to children's needs, using language to model and help children gain emotional literacy and encouraging friendships among preschoolers, it is also important to set social-emotional goals for individual children and plan opportunities to practice and master these skills throughout the day. Children may need a teacher's or parent's guidance to learn skills such as asking for a turn, listening to others, getting someone's attention, taking another's perspective, or helping a friend (Bruce & Cairone, 2011; CSEFEL; Rice, 1995). Following the philosophy that social-emotional learning is best not left to chance, it is recommended that these skills be taught directly or indirectly through activities in the dramatic play

area, on the playground, or almost anywhere.

Researchers at the University of Virginia developed the concept of "Banking Time" (Bell, 2011). Children who tend to show challenging behaviors are given short amounts of the teacher's one-on-one undivided attention where she follows the child's lead. This special time between a teacher and a child builds a relationship of mutual trust and respect and puts 'money in the bank.' Based on the idea that children want to cooperate with those who are good to them and whom they trust, the child later remembers his positive experience with the teacher and is more likely to follow classroom directions. While more research is being done, the idea of building on positive relationships to achieve other goals, academic or otherwise, seems promising.

Some educators are using the term 'social and emotional learning' (SEL) to describe the interrelatedness of understanding our emotions with success in learning for school-agers. Schools that promote SEL tend to have improved teacher-child relationships, fewer incidents of challenging behaviors, and stronger academic scores (Brackett & Rivers, n.d.).

Technology as an Intentional Tool for Social-emotional Learning

Children's increased interactions with the digital world can mean fewer opportunities for nurturing social-emotional development. On the other hand, technology is here to stay; so how can the early childhood field embrace it as a tool for social-emotional learning?

The 2015 South by Southwest Education Conference (Hill, 2015), which focused on innovative advances in education, included social-emotional learning as an important topic on the agenda. Speaking about teen and adult learners, presenters predicted that if social skills aren't mastered, challenging peer relationships including bullying may result, which could distract and interfere with learning at any age. Researchers speculate that young people might not have adequate opportunities to develop social skills as some become more focused on primarily solitary activities like interacting with mobile devices.

Rather than seeing technology as an obstacle, use it as a tool for social-emotional learning. Fred Rogers was a master at using technology (in his case, television) to teach social-emotional skills. His show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,* helped many children identify feelings, become comfortable with and articulate the language of feelings, learn their own value, and have empathy for others. Sharapan (2015), a colleague of Fred Rogers, discusses how children can learn persistence, self-control, and collaboration, and learn to respect limits through technology (e.g. two children sit side by side at computers working together on the same problem). Sharapan offers several examples for using technology to help children cope with their own feelings:

- Offer a child who had difficulty separating from her parent the opportunity to dictate and/or write an email or text to her mom after she leaves.

- Help children create a photo book of feelings pictures to help increase their emotional literacy in reading and labeling others' emotions.

Using technology as an intentional tool to build social-emotional skills, particularly in the areas of sharing and collaboration, include:

- two kindergarten children build an elaborate block structure. A visitor to the classroom comments, "That looks like the Taj Mahal." Neither child is familiar with the Taj Mahal. Their teacher guides them to use the classroom tablet to find out more about the Taj Mahal.

- A small group of preschoolers worked cooperatively to build a 'fort' outside and wanted to tell their families about it before an impending storm blew it down. They used the classroom tablet to take photos and then worked together to make a short book about their building experience.

- The children in a pre-kindergarten class loved the book, *That is Not A Good Idea* (Willems, 2013). Three of the children were so excited about the book that with their teachers' guidance they used their classroom tablet to research the author and learn what else he had written. They also dictated a story to their teacher about what they thought wasn't a good idea in their classroom.

- Preschool and pre-kindergarten children were learning about emotions. Children used the classroom tablet to take 'selfies' as well as pictures of their friends. The teacher printed these and used them at group time to lead a discussion about identifying feelings.

- Luke and Denisha enjoyed the hummus served at snack. When they finished, they hurried over to the technology learning center (where there are always two chairs) to search on the laptop for a recipe so they could make their own.

Fred Rogers cautioned us not to overstate what technology can do. In his words, "A computer can help you learn to spell 'HUG,' but it can never know the risk or the joy of actually giving or receiving one" (Sharapan, 2015; used with permission from The Fred Rogers Company).

Closing Thoughts

Consider the ways technology is a tool for social-emotional development in the digital age: to collaborate and research answers to children's questions, to learn feelings vocabulary, to make a record of their work, and as a communication tool.

It can be challenging to balance the many competing priorities in the early childhood curriculum, but no aspect of the curriculum is more important than social-emotional learning. All indications are that the need for social-emotional skills will be just as strong in the workplace of 2030 and beyond as it is today. It is imperative that we use all of the tools available to us, including technology, to prepare children for what lies ahead.

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Bright Horizons, a large early education and care organization with over 700 centers in North America, places great value on how social-emotional development contributes to a child's overall healthy growth. For that reason, the Education and Development department recently released *Caring Matters* (Whitehead & Christensen, 2015), a component of their curriculum on social-emotional development and positive guidance exclusively for Bright Horizons' internal distribution. *Caring Matters* utilizes both spontaneous and planned activities and projects to nurture children's social-emotional development. For example, skills like asking to join someone's play or learning to say something positive can be taught.

Resource

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu

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