Social-Emotional Development in Low-Income Elementary-Aged Children: a Literature Review

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**Introduction**

Social and emotional development is a critical aspect of the elementary school-aged years for children—as much, even, as academic and cognitive development (Child Trends, 2014). For children of low-income backgrounds, though, a review of current literature indicates that such development may be hindered by circumstances engendered by the socioeconomic status. How can parents and educators work together to improve the social and emotional development in children with low-income status? Research indicates that issues with social-emotional development with lower-income children can be mitigated by parents and caregivers, educational interventions, and something as simple and as powerful as play (Cooper, 2009).

**Social-Emotional Development and Impact of Poverty**

Literature presents a thorough look at what, precisely, social-emotional development is and why it is so important for young children to develop. “Social and Emotional Development in Children,” an article published by Bright Tots, part of an autism publication, defines social and emotional development as having the capacity to understand others’ feelings, control one’s own feelings and behavior, and act cooperatively with peers and adults (Bright Tots, n.d.)., C. Webster-Stratton, in an article published in *Infants and Young* Children, describes it in similar fashion as the ability of a child to manage his/her emotions and behaviors and make meaningful friendships (Child Trends, 2014). Child Trends, in a collaborative study with the Tauck Family Foundation aimed at measuring children’s development and well-being, conducted a systematic literature review of different social and emotional skills. This original review identified approximately 15 different skills linked to academic and/or future adult success, such as self-control, responsibility, attentiveness, prosocial behavior, and mastery orientation. Child Trends further narrowed the list of skills to those which the literature suggested were: self-control, persistence, mastery orientation, social competence, and academic self-efficacy (Child Trends, 2014).

This type of development is essential for healthy development in not only promoting school readiness and academic success, but also in preventing serious problems later in life.

“Social and emotional difficulties persist over time and are very resistant to change. If left untreated, early-onset conduct problems (aggression, rebellion, oppositional behaviors and emotional disturbances) place children at high risk for frequent social and emotional difficulties, under achievement, school drop-out, finally delinquency, and later criminal offenses.” (Bright Tots, n.d.)

This early development of self-control and social awareness is key in shaping how children think, learn, react to problems, and form relationships throughout their lives. Some children, more so than others, are at increased risk for emotional and behavioral disorders as a result of biological, behavioral, and environmental factors that shape this social-emotional development. Studies show that nearly 21 percent of children ages 9 to 17 fall within the guidelines for a mental health diagnosis (Bright Tots, n.d.). Poverty is one of these factors.

As many as 32 percent of preschoolers in Head Start programs exhibit problems with social-emotional development, leading Bright Tots to examine the idea that potential social and emotional problems must be identified before children enter kindergarten. After this point, children with these issues enter school essentially unable to learn. They are unable to focus, relate cause and effect, or manage on a social basis. They have trouble getting along with peers, following directions, and managing impulsivity.

These types of behaviors present problems of their own within the classroom environment, creating, in essence, a catch-22 that reduces the child’s chance of developing socially or emotionally in an educational setting. Teachers, for example, find it more difficult to teach children who present troublesome, disorderly behavior, and are less able to provide the positive feedback these students need. Peers, not wanting to deal with them, reject them. These children, “faced with this rejection from peers and teachers, tend to dislike school and learning, which leads to lower school attendance and poorer outcomes” (Bright Tots, n.d.).

**Positive Forces on Social Emotional Development**

**School**

There are several forces, according to research, that play a positive role in the social and emotional development of children during elementary school years. Schools play a primary role, simply because most children between the ages of five and 18 attend school for lengthy periods of time each day. Schools can integrate curricular focus on social-emotional learning, in order to assist students in more appropriate resolution of problems, social interaction, and prevention of antisocial behavior.

Educational goals for improving social-emotional development include:•        Helping the child understand and verbalize his or her feelings.  
•        Helping the child come to awareness that other people have feelings and that they may be

different from his/her own feelings.  
•        Showing the child how to establish relationships with adults and peers (Bright Tots, n.d.).

**Positive Parent-Child Relationships**

The relationship between parent and child also plays an important role in developing a child’s social and emotional outlook and behaviors, according to many sources. The *Harvard Family Research Project*, for example, states definitively that

“Through interactions with parents and other caregivers, children learn to develop social skills that they transfer from the home to the school context. One study of kindergarteners found that a positive mother–child interaction—one that is sensitive and elicits prosocial behavior—is associated with children’s social and academic performance in middle school.” (Weiss, 2006)

Positive parent-child relationships can be characterized in terms of support, warmth, sensitivity to the child’s needs and emotions, respect, and encouragement. Weiss also recognizes that positive parent-child relationships are more than just these characteristics; they are, in fact, parents that are involved in the lives of their children, participating in leadership opportunities, community events, and school decision-making (Weiss, 2006).

Nokali and Bachman concur in terms of the significance of parent involvement as pertaining to children’s academic and social development during elementary school years. Their article on the same topic gives attention to the fact that until recent years, research on parent involvement has “been more heavily focused on associations with student achievement, with less attention to social and emotional domains of children’s development” (Nokali and Bachman, 2011). Their explanation for this is that many quantifiable parent behaviors are largely academic in nature, such as “helping with homework” as opposed to “lending a listening ear”.

To assist more specifically with social-emotional development, Nokali and Bachman recommend teachers and parents discussing children’s behavior in the classroom, as behavior or social issues can impact a child’s academic success. They further recommend that parents practice consistent discipline methods between home and school, as research correlates such to higher academic success and improved socioemotional outcomes (Nokali and Bachman, 2011).

**Linked Learning Supports**

A third influence shown by research to be a positive force in social-emotional development is complementary learning, or linked learning supports. Weiss, for the *Harvard Family Research Project,* identified an array of linked learning supports, such as families, early childhood programs, school, after-school programs and activities, health and social service agencies, libraries, museums, and similar institutions as necessary presences in the lives of children and youth. “Complementary learning is characterized by discrete linkages that work together to encourage consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children” (Weiss, 2006).

**Play**

Finally, play is of utmost importance in promoting healthy social-emotional development in children. Milteer and Ginsburg, in *Pediatrics*, argue that “…active play is so central to child development that it should be included in the very definition of childhood. Play offers more than cherished memories of growing up, it allows children to develop creativity and imagination while developing physical, cognitive, and emotional strengths” (Milteer and Ginsburg, 2012). Play is deemed critical to developing social and emotional ties, as it provides a very different sort of interaction between caregiver and child. When engaged in play with their child, for example, or even observing them, parents have the opportunity of communicating and guiding with more effective, child-driven verbiage. Play can help non-verbal children express themselves and their needs more effectively, and assist children in connecting more meaningfully with one another. It teaches sharing, negotiation, and conflict resolution, among many other skills (Milteer and Ginsburg, 2012).

**Improving Social-Emotional Development for Low-Income Children**

According to “The Effects of Poverty on Children’s Socioemotional Development: an Ecological Systems Analysis,” one in five children in the United States is poor. “Specific family and environmental factors can make a child more vulnerable to social, emotional, and behavioral problems” (Cooper, 2009). Compared with other children, children of low-income parents have a greater risk of developing socioemotional problems, among them depression, anti-sociability, problems with peers, and behavioral problems at school (Eamon, 2001). Solutions for improving socioemotional development are much the same for low-income children as they are for others.

**Family Involvement**

Cooper, in her article “Social Emotional Development in Early Childhood,” discusses the importance of identifying and dealing with potential problems with social-emotional delays *prior* to elementary school. Statistics show, she reports, that between ten and 15 percent of infants to five year old children experience some form of social-emotional problem that will impact their readiness for school. Additionally, approximately ten percent of the children receiving mental health services in the United States were under the age of six in 2009. Focusing on what takes place prior to school, though—i.e., parenting—have the potential to significantly and positively change these statistics. “Research indicates that up to 50 percent of the impact of income on children’s development can be mediated by interventions that target parenting” (Cooper, 2009).

According to the *Harvard Family Research Project*, elementary schools are mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act to provide parents with the necessary resources to support their children effectively in the home (Weiss, 2006). One such resource is providing parents with positive parenting strategies that will help them to build their children’s social competencies along with school preparedness. Frequently, the lack of such is correlated to families with parents who are unreceptive and conflict-happy (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Economic, emotional, and social stressors, as well as ignorance related to parenting strategies, can impact how parents interact with their children.

**Play**

Play, as well, remains another significant intervention in improving social-emotional development in low-income children. Particularly for children of lower-income parents who are, by necessity, dealing with extra emotional, social, and economic stressors in their everyday lives, play is not always a large aspect of everyday routines. Parents do not always have the time, energy, or resources needed to give their children fun and creative playtimes at parks, play areas, or even in their own homes. Regrettably, many school districts have reduced resources such as recess in efforts to decrease disparities in academic scores (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012).

“It remains important, however, that what is known about child development, including social and emotional learning, remains at the forefront of consideration as policies to raise academic standards and performance for children are created and implemented. Play, in all its forms, needs to be considered as the ideal educational and developmental milieu for children is created. Because poorer children are most dramatically affected by these policies, stakeholders must remain vigilant in ensuring that children do not inadvertently suffer from the diminution of play in their lives while exploring potential solutions to benefit them academically.” (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012)

**Educational Interventions**

There are, as well, educational interventions that can assist with social-emotional development for lower-income children. One such model is the Teaching Pyramid, in which teaching practices are drawn from classroom-based research that focuses on promoting social-emotional development and solving challenging behaviors (Fox & Hemmeter, 2009). Instruction occurs on universal and relational levels. At the universal level, instructors focus on building positive relationships with children, families, and colleagues, as this becomes the foundation for all else. On the relational level, instructors focus on practice, such as supporting play, responding affirmatively, praising, and collaboration (Fox & Hemmeter, 2009).

Other means of promoting social-emotional development is to train teachers in classroom management strategies that promote such, and reduce problem behaviors. Skills include social, cognitive, and emotional management skills such as friendly peer communication, problem solving abilities, and anger management (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Intentional curriculum, as well, is recommended by Klein in “Promoting Effective Early Learning: What Every Policymaker and Educator Should Know,” as it emphasizes being actively engaged with the children and including attention to social skills, all while being responsive and sensitive to cultural and socio-economic differences (Klein, 2007).

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