



First Friends:

Assisting Children to Develop Social and Emotional Competence

BY JUDITH S. BLOCH, ACSW

First Friends: Assisting Children to Develop Social and Emotional Competence

Early childhood programs have the opportunity to maximize the potential of the early years and provide the experiences that promote the social-emotional competencies that everyone needs in order to have a productive and successful school experience.

When my four-year-old daughter had another fight with the neighbor's boy and came home in tears complaining that Joseph was mean and she hated him, I decided enough was enough. To me, it was obvious that they should not play together anymore. I thought Joseph was too wild, noisy, and disobedient -- an unsuitable playmate for my gentle, sensitive child. Imagine my surprise the next afternoon when my daughter told me she wanted to invite Joseph to come to play and behaved as though nothing had happened the day before. Today, as a parent of three daughters, grandparent of seven, and director of Variety Child Learning Center (VCLC), a large center providing services to young children, I know that it is quite usual for young children to fight with each other, to make up, to complain to adults about age-mates and siblings, and to continue to master the basic ingredients required for friendship (e.g., to wait, take turns, and to share).

Friends, even in the toddler stage, help children feel good about themselves, adapt more easily to child care settings, and build self-confidence. Since social skills and the nature of a child's relationships will generate many moments of pleasure or pain in later

years, these abilities are critical. "Some kids seem to be born with distinct social talent that allows for friendship formation...others have to be taught how to relate" (Levine, 2002, p.10). In between are large numbers of young children who will benefit from opportunities to improve their ability to enjoy and play peacefully and cooperatively with age-mates.

Stages of Friendship Infants

There has been a growing understanding that social-emotional competence is of great value to people of all ages (Goleman, 1995). The nature of this process and the potential to improve social competence in the early years has been significantly advanced in the last decade (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Newborns, for example, are now thought to be interested in people in the very first months of life and prefer the human face to other sights and sounds (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999, p. 27). "Infants as young as four months seem to notice and respond appropriately to the emotions of adults" (Montague & Walker-Andrews, 2001, p. 826). By eight to 10 months, infants are interested in the activities of other children. Children 12 to 18 months are looking

Teaching and Parenting Suggestions

- Use pictures (photos/drawings) to identify feelings and moods
- Name and talk about emotions
- Expect and accept many different kinds of emotions (anger, sadness, happiness, etc.)
- Recognize and support the child's struggle to master unacceptable behaviors even as feelings are accepted
- Know when and how to intervene and when to watch and wait
- Choose appropriate friendship stories (See appended list)
- Read, re-read, and discuss favorite friendship stories
- Encourage twosomes
- Teach group entry skills
- Structure group activities that promote friendship, such as:
 - The compliment game
 - Conflict resolution discussions
- Encourage parents to set up play dates after school; start with twosomes

Competencies for First Friends Article



The Child Development Associates (CDA) competency that can be used for this article is

- To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance.

For more information on the CDA competency requirements, contact the Council for Early Childhood Recognition at (800) 424-4310.

This article helps meet the following Certified Childcare Professionals (CCP) professional ability area:

- The ability to enhance children's social and emotional development.

For more information on the CCP certification, contact the National Child Care Association at (800) 543-7163.

for interaction with other children, even though there may be conflicts, such as fights over toys, personal space, and adult attention. And a number of 18-month-old toddlers display the beginnings of cooperation (Talay-Ongan, 1998, p. 91). The early emergence of selective attention, social reciprocity, interest in the world, attachment to others, and purposeful communication are noted by astute observers (Greenspan, 1992). While there is a wide range of differences amongst children and the course of development is not always even, it is recognized that "human relationships and the effects of relationships are the building blocks of healthy development" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2002, p. 27).

Toddlers

Unfortunately, some of the delightful pro-social qualities that toddlers demonstrate were overlooked in earlier years (Piaget, J. [1932], 1967). A "sequential perspective" was the established rule. A rigid hierarchy described play that began with solitary activities, gradually moved on to parallel, and later cooperative play. For a long time, many believed that this was a linear and a predictable progression. This outdated perception, taught just a few short years ago, assumed that young children are too egocentric and negative to interact appropriately with peers or to behave empathetically. This concept has been revisited (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Now, it is understood that the progression to social play is more variable and rapid, perhaps because of the advent of preschool placements. Children in group settings such as child care spend more time interacting and communicating with other children their own age than they do with adults and through these interactions they develop the capacity for pro-social behavior. Adults familiar with the "terrible twos," for example, have seen that toddlers can become sad when a well-liked classmate or adult is sick or hurt. Those feelings are demonstrated in simple words, facial expressions, or with a gentle touch (Saarni, 1999, p. 173).

Preschoolers

You'll find that many preschoolers have already acquired some of the social skills

and knowledge needed to maintain relationships with other children, especially when they've been presented with proximity and opportunity. In fact, most three-year-olds have one or two friends. This is the age when a child's understanding of more complex emotional feelings (e.g., empathy), ability to self regulate, and language skills are more developed and integrated. Preschoolers are also beginning to demonstrate an ability to negotiate play roles, to share, to help, and to deal more effectively with aggression. During this stage, children show an increased awareness of their own desires and the intention of others (Bronson, 2000, p. 67). The child's increased ability to read the emotions of others and to control her own emotional expression leads to social emotional competence.

A basic understanding of these early stages will serve to guide staff as they start to help youngsters learn to share, wait, take turns, consider the feelings of others, solve problems, and, in the process, take the important steps required for initiating and maintaining friendships (Talay-Ongan, 1998, p. 117).

The Role of Teachers

The relationship between the teacher and child is critical if any effect on the child's social-emotional adjustment is to take place. However, everyone working with young children brings attitudes, expectations, and values that affect their own functioning. All of us who are deeply interested in children will want to better understand these forces, particularly when they interfere with our ability to attach or help the children in our care. Affection and appreciation for each child requires a sincere interest in her well-being. It shows by the way we view and respond to the child and the assumptions we make about their strengths and needs. Some assumptions are:

1. Children need to feel protected and valued and cannot always be expected to earn this with approved behavior (NAEYC, 1991).
2. A relationship with the child is deepened or qualitatively enhanced as a result of the adult's empathic response to the child's distress (NAEYC, 1991).
3. Children will give up unacceptable

behavior and even immediate gratification to please a significant adult.

4. Punishments work for the moment but don't necessarily lead the child to self-mastery. Punishment teaches a child what NOT to do, but not what TO DO.

The effective teacher knows that frequent criticism and disapproval may alienate the child and increase her dislike of school and learning (Ferber, 1996, p. 45). Children, on the other hand, will change their behavior for a beloved adult, but, they usually do this gradually and inconsistently. A set of basic guidelines and daily schedules are helpful:

- **Consistency:** Set clear and appropriate expectations about acceptable behavior.
- **Structure:** Develop routines and predictable schedules.
- **Priorities:** Focus on the important; ignore less important misbehavior.
- **Respond:** Give children choices to prevent problems and decrease misbehavior.
- **Humor:** Use to deflect conflict or defiance (Bloch, 1999).

The Pro-Social Classroom

We now have considerable support for conclusions already arrived at by experienced professionals: The brain is so malleable during the early years that good interventions in child care settings can undo and overcome bad starts (Guralnick, 1997). Since quality interventions in early education programs assist in offsetting the negatives associated with certain biological or environmental risks, there are powerful incentives to improve these services. Just as work is primary for adults, your program is the child's main experience in life after home. The child's response to this world, adults, peers, specific activities, and materials provides data which enables us to understand them better and take advantage of the opportunities to provide experiences and relationships which can alter and shape their behavior and future.

Promoting Pro-Social Classroom Behavior

Teachers can be successful in creating classes that promote kindness, empathy,

helpfulness, and generosity and assist children in learning how to resolve conflicts without undue stress (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This approach requires a teacher to understand early child development and appreciate the transformative power of relationships and personal attributes that include sensitivity to the needs and cues of youngsters (Honig & Witmer, 1996). The selection of activities and curriculum, the use of materials and space, and most importantly, the adult's approach and reaction to behavior are major considerations.

Emotions are now seen as central to human functioning, along with cognitive and language skills. Emotions serve to regulate internal behaviors as well as interpersonal interactions (Denham, 1998, p. 5). Even very young children are much more perceptive and sensitive than researchers ever imagined. As they get older, their emotional and social abilities change as do the ways in which they express and manage their feelings. Just watch the way an upset infant can be comforted by the touch and voice of a familiar adult!

Infants and toddlers may seem aggressive when they grab or push someone else to get what they want. But, usually, there is little intention to hurt. Their behavior is more likely designed to explore or obtain a desired and interesting object. This is the kind of situation that requires adult attention. Children can be shown how to ask for a toy and told how another child feels when a toy is taken away. In a gentle voice you can say, "You really wanted this toy and tried to get it, but you pushed your friend, and he is hurt, unhappy and crying." Modeled with appropriate voice tones and body movements, this type of interaction helps each child recognize his own feelings and suggests the need to control and regulate responses. Young children strive for an understanding of their own emotions as well as the perceptions and thoughts of others. Children come to realize that others with whom they interact can feel and think differently than they do. (Freye & Moore, 1991; Mitchell, 1997; Wellman & Gelman, 1992).

Enhancement of these abilities is addressed by Martha Bronson (2000).

who is particularly perceptive in the way she presents and discusses one of her central tenets; namely, the connection between intention and regulation. Or, in other words, the child's ability to self-regulate and control his behavior and thoughts and the important and separate idea of intent or the desire to do so. She points out that these two separate factors need to be addressed if the adult is to successfully promote the child's intentional and voluntary control over his own behavior.

Finding a way to reconcile our affection for and relationship with the children while setting reasonable expectations for good behavior is sometimes a difficult task. Behavior management dilemmas have a way of making adults feel less adequate and confident. While we know that we can control a child's behavior with reprimands and punishments, we also know that these tactics do not always lead the child to develop the necessary inner control. How then to accomplish this purpose?

Examples of Teacher Interventions

The principal of VCLC's program for young children with disabilities, suggests an approach to "sharing" that captures an important kind of learning. Danny wants Suzie's dollhouse. Suzie says "No!" A conflict is brewing. The adult quickly intervenes, acknowledging Danny's feelings and saying, "I know you want the dollhouse, but it's Suzie's time to play with it now. When she is finished, you will have a turn. When it is your turn, you, too, will play with it until you are finished. Then you will decide when to let another child have a turn." At this point, the adult directs her attention to Danny to help him wait or perhaps find a different toy that they can play with together until Suzie is finished. In this example, we see several different strategies operating. What are they? First, decision-making has been assigned to the child expected to share. Suzie has been given permission to truly enjoy the dollhouse and not worry about having to give it up before she is finished and ready, or because the adult requires her to do so. This suggestion helped Suzie satisfy her own play needs and timetable. At the same time, the

teacher proposed an alternative and attractive activity to Danny. Her suggestion avoided a potential conflict by offering each child a valued option. It gave Suzie, who was expected to share, some control over her own behavior and a chance to take responsibility for her own response. It helped her master any impulse to deny and, instead, gently prompted and increased the likelihood she would share. Issues of power and control did not muddy the exchange.

As a result, Suzie seemed to take a reasonable amount of time to play and finish. And, indeed, once finished with the dollhouse, she loudly and generously offered it to her classmate who accepted it with great pleasure as the teacher beamed her approval. This outcome provided the adult with an additional opportunity to further reinforce the desired behavior by saying, "Good for you, Suzie. You finished playing with the dollhouse and now you want to share it with Danny." Sharing, in this instance, was not imposed by an adult but given freely by the child. Child-initiated, rather than adult-directed, interactions carry a potential for a longer lasting impact, especially for the child who is learning how to increase her ability for self-regulation and sharing. Even though intentional behavioral self-regulation is an ongoing process in childhood, precursors of these important abilities appear at earlier stages.

Other, more usual adult interventions, are also useful. These include the provision of an adequate number of duplicates of favorite toys and sometimes time limits for the use of each, particularly for two- and three-year-olds. There are also already many established procedures in place in nursery schools that use our knowledge of child development and age-related activities that serve to promote friendships. We know that block building, water and sand play, and arts and crafts lend themselves to side-by-side activities, and this kind of self-initiated parallel play may easily lead to cooperative exchanges.

Storybooks, arts and crafts, free play time, and puppets all offer ways for the teacher to stop, note the way a character feels, and talk about that particular quality, and its connection to friendship.

These activities also create opportunities for the teacher and group to enjoy each other's company.

With the selection of stories, certain ideas are introduced that can have a profound impact on children. There are classics that have engaged and fascinated young children for years because they deal with basic longings, fears, and conflicts, many of which have long-term emotional and psychological consequences. Good stories identify themes that help children understand what is expected, permitted, disallowed or dangerous. A rich discussion of selected materials can be found in *Inside Picture Books* (Spitz, 1999). She underscores the importance of "conversational reading," an approach that gives children the opportunity to discuss issues identified in the stories (e.g., separation, loss, curiosity, fear, and disobedience). The addition of friendship stories in the same discussion format will also implant ideas and help shape behaviors.

The Importance of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Adults need to remember to gear their expectations to the child's developmental stage and age. During the two- to five-year-old ages, this means that expectations for behavior are linked to the child's cognition, language capacity as well as emotional state and ability to self regulate (Denham, 1998, p. 9). And, by the time children are three- and four-years-old, they can benefit from a problem-solving process that helps them resolve interpersonal conflicts (Adams & Wittmer, 2001, p. 10).

A videotaped study of preschoolers focused on acts of peer rejection in preschool settings. It found that children became targets of rejection shortly after exhibiting aggressive acts (Arnold, Homrok, Ortiz, & Stowe, 1999, p. 183). The results of this study reaffirms the importance of anticipating problems and developing interventions that could prevent a cycle of aggression and rejection acts. A social problem-solving model includes a number of basic steps (Adams & Wittmer, 2001, p. 10; Shure, 1994). The following suggestions can help two children in conflict. The adult asks them

to first stop their fighting, then to listen, and try to use their words to:

- Identify the problem
- Examine it (from each child's point of view)
- Discuss optional ways to resolve it (Raise questions instead of offering solutions, e.g., "What else do you think you could do?")
- Evaluate solutions ("How would you feel?" "Is this suggestion fair?")
- Consider consequences ("What do you think could happen if you did that?")

A game that can help young children learn how to become a good friend is suggested by a VCLC Supervisor. During a sit-down circle time, she introduces and explains the concept of compliments. She then shows the children a large, beautifully decorated, "gold" treasure chest, which will be used to collect compliments. Anyone in the class, she says, teachers or children, can give another child a compliment. They can write, say, or draw something "nice" or "positive" about another child in the group. She gives examples and uses circle time to periodically read the compliments aloud on Friday afternoons. The complimented child takes home the paper with a drawing or compliment. The teacher is careful to make sure that each child receives a compliment and that important friendship qualities are noted and appreciated. These identify the traits of popular children, such as kindness, helpfulness, the ability to accept the behaviors of others in a non-critical way, the tendency to enjoy, have fun, play with others, and demonstrate a sense of humor.

Summary and Conclusion

Early childhood programs have the opportunity to maximize the potential of the early years and provide the experiences that promote the social-emotional competencies that everyone needs in order to have a productive and successful school experience. Bronfenbrenner's early work on the ecological system (1979) and the more recent reports in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) emphasize the importance of paying attention to the child's contextual setting. Young children

learn best through their interactions with the people in their natural environment and exposure to ongoing activities. An approach that provides frequent and appropriate interactions during daily routines increases the likelihood that the child will learn, generalize, maintain skills, and make friends.

This article concludes with a mild word of caution. All of us need to also remember not to become too rigid, over-invested, or prematurely involved in "teaching" conflict resolution and "good behavior." After all, some "rough and tumble" play, such as chasing, and hitting and wrestling, especially by two-, three-, and four-year-old boys, may be expressions of simple exuberance. Even though this play seems too aggressive, children may experience it as pure fun with no harm done. Such age-appropriate exchanges do sometimes result in physical and emotional attachments, as children become "friends." Do not forget that we do not want to take childhood away from preschoolers as we enter their world to be of assistance when needed.

Judith S. Bloch, ACSW, is Founder/CEO of Variety Child Learning Center (VCLC), formerly Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW). Established in 1966, VCLC was one of the first preschools on the eastern seaboard to identify and educate youngsters with serious learning, language and/or behavior problems.

References

- Adams, S. K., & Wittmer, D. S. (2001). I had it first: Teaching young children to solve problems peacefully. *Childhood Education*, 78(1), 10-16.
- Arnold, D. H., Homrok, S., Ortiz, C., & Stowe, R. M. (1999). Direct observation of peer rejection acts and their temporal relation with aggressive acts. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 14(2), 183-196.
- Bloch, J. S. (1999, October). Troubled preschoolers could make trouble later. *Early Childhood News*, 11(5), 6-15.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Bronson, M. B. (2002). *Self-regulation in early childhood: Nature and nurture*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Denham, S. A. (1998). *Emotional development in young children*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Ferber, J. (1996). Therapeutic teacher, therapeutic classroom. In L. Koplow (Ed.), *Unsmiling faces: How preschools can heal* (pp. 45-63). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freye, D., & Moore, C. (Eds.). (1991). *Children's theories of mind: Mental states and social understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. N., & Kuhl, P. K. (1999). *The scientist in the crib: Minds, brains, and how children learn*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Greenspan, S. I. (1992). *Infancy and early childhood: The practice of clinical assessment and intervention with emotional and developmental challenges*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press, Inc.
- Guralnick, M. J. (1997). *The effectiveness of early intervention*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Honig, A. S., & Wittmer, D. S. (1996). Helping children become more prosocial: Ideas for classrooms, families, schools, and communities. *Young Children*, 51(2), pp. 62-70.
- Levine, M. (2002). *A mind at a time: How adults can identify different learning patterns in children*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Excerpt retrieved March 30, 2002 from <http://www.msnbc.com/news/728090.asp?cpl=1>.
- Mitchell, P. (1997). *Introduction to theory of mind*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Montague, D. P. F., & Walker-Andrews, A. S. (2001). Peekaboo: A new look at infants' perception of emotion expressions. *Developmental Psychology*, 37(6), 826-838.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (1991). Position statement on guidelines for appropriate curriculum content and assessment in programs serving children ages 3 through 8. *Young Children*, 46(3), 21-38.
- Piaget, J. (1967). *The origins of intelligence in children* (M. Cook., Trans.). Reprint, New York: W. & W. Norton Co. Inc. (Original work published 1932.)
- Saarni, C. (1999). *The development of emotional competence*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Shure, M. B. (1994). *Raising a thinking child*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.
- Spitz, E. H. (1999). *Inside picture books*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Talay-Ongan, A. (1998). *Typical and atypical development in early childhood: The fundamentals*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wellman, H. M., & Gelman, S. A. (1992). Cognitive development: Foundational theories of core domains. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 43, 337-375.

For further information, please contact Judith S. Bloch or Janice L. Friedman at Variety Child Learning Center (VCLC), 47 Humphrey Drive, Syosset, NY 11791; or call (516) 921-7171, ext. 2126; outside New York call, 800-933-8779, ext. 2126; Fax: (516) 921-8130; e-mail: jfriedman@vclc.org. You can also visit the VCLC Website at www.vclc.org

Children ages 18-60 months, are needed to participate in VCLC's national normalization study of The Five P's by Judith Bloch. Free materials. Teacher stipends. Parent gifts. For more information, please contact Janice Friedman by phone at (516) 921-7171, ext. 2126; outside New York call, 800-933-8779, ext. 2126; by fax at (516) 921-8130; or e-mail at jfriedman@vclc.org

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Bourgeois, P. (1993). *Franklin is bossy*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.
- Cohen, M. (1967). *Will I have a friend?* New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Crary, E. (1982). *I want to play. A children's problem solving book*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.
- de Regniers, B. S. (1964). *May I bring a friend?* New York: Athencum, Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Henkes, K. (1989). *Jessica*. New York: Greenwillow, an imprint of Harper Collins Children's Books.
- Kasza, K. (1993). *The rat and the tiger*. New York: Scholastic Inc.
- Kellogg, S. (1986). *Best friends*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, A Division of Penguin Books USA Inc.
- McBratney, S. (1995). *Guess how much I love you*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, A Division of Walker Books.
- Marshall, J. (1972). *George and Martha. Five stories about two great friends*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Pfister, M. (1992). *The rainbow fish*. (Translated by J. Alison James). New York: North-South Books.
- Rabe, B. (1981). *The balancing girl*. New York: E. P. Dutton, A Division of Penguin Books USA Inc.
- Raschka, C. (1993). *Yo! Yes?* New York: Orchard Books.
- Walsh, E. S. (1993). *Hop jump*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.