Social and Emotional Development

This alternate view of developmental domains has the following components:

Domain Element: Self-Concept

Domain Element: Self-Control

Domain Element: Cooperation

Domain Element: Social Relationships

Domain Element: Knowledge of Families and Communities

Domain Element: Self-Concept

One of the most important goals of the early development is helping children develop a positive self-concept and sense of self-esteem. Self-concept is a far deeper and more important notion that the often light weight activities justified in this area, e.g. making "*books about me*" or reasons why "*I am special.*"

Self-concept (children's stable perceptions about themselves despite variations in their behaviour) is forming rapidly during the early years as children gain in reasoning and the ability to make comparisons among themselves and others. Their self-esteem, which comes in part from their perception of their own worth, is also in its formative stages during these years.

Children are often overconfident about their own abilities in these years because their skills are developing rapidly. They often misjudge their capabilities in relation to others. Every child in the preschool class may state confidently, "*I am the smartest*" or "*I am the fastest runner*."

At the same time, their developing egos are fragile. Young children quickly become discouraged if they experience too much frustration or failure. During this time, children develop a positive self-concept not by being told they are special, but by taking initiative and succeeding at challenging tasks and by receiving specific adult encouragement related to a task or accomplishment. It is important for the teaching/learning team to observe children and track their progress in order to provide learning experiences that are appropriately challenging and that instil genuine feelings of success.

Self-Concept Indicators

- Begins to develop and express awareness of self in terms of specific abilities, characteristics, and preferences.
- Develops growing capacity for independence in a range of activities, routines, and tasks.
- Demonstrates growing confidence in a range of abilities and expresses pride in accomplishments.

Self-Concept Strategies

To promote positive self-concept and self-esteem

- Have a welcoming learning environment. Use photos of children and family members, displays of children's work, and their names for functional purposes like taking attendance, storing belongings, or assigning jobs.

- Structure the environment to offer opportunities for children to share information about themselves, their families, and experiences.
- Provide appropriate levels of challenge to work at something and feel a sense of accomplishment.
- Make the study of self and families part of in-depth projects that are integrated with other areas of learning.
- Observe each child's individual strengths and plan opportunities for each child to demonstrate her capabilities.
- Organize the environment so children can independently choose their own activities for part of each day. If children have difficulty making wise use of choice time, limit their choices at first and gradually add more offerings.
- Let children do for themselves what they are capable of doing, whether it is dressing, serving a snack, cleaning up, writing their names, solving a problem, or any of the myriad of opportunities for developing and demonstrating growing competence.
- In planning curriculum, provide opportunities for children to succeed in both practicing newly acquired skills and working on more difficult, challenging tasks.
- Acknowledge and encourage children's efforts and accomplishments using specific feedback. Example: say, "*You wrote your M*" or "*Thank you for helping Keisha with her coat*", rather than offering nonspecific praise such as, *"That's really nice"*.
- Provide children with evidence of their increasing skills and abilities by showing them examples of their previous work and allowing them to compare it to current work. Example: "*Look at this. In October, you were writing an 'A' and now you can write your whole name, AMY.*"

Domain Element: Self-Control

The early years are the prime time for children to acquire self-control, the ability to recognize and regulate their own emotions and behaviours. When starting school, most children have acquired sufficient language to begin using speaking and listening skills to solve social problems. However, the early years are also the time when children's behaviour tends to become more aggressive. Issues with aggression are more likely to arise when children are living in violent circumstances.

The most challenging issue for teaching/learning teams is dealing with children exhibiting challenging behaviours. Examples: Children who are hostile, physically aggressive, and do not follow the classroom rules.

When children exhibit these behaviours, it is very easy for team members/adults to automatically react. This impatience and frustration can undermine your ability to think strategically about how to support pro-social behaviour and self-control.

Reacting to children's challenging behaviour is not an effective way to decrease challenging behaviour. In fact, in most cases it causes the behaviour to get worse!

So what do you do?

Research has shown that adults can structure the physical arrangement of the classroom, the schedule and transitions, the planned experiences, and the interactions they have with young people to simultaneously decrease challenging behaviour and increase pro-social skills such as self-control.

Without a doubt, the physical arrangement of the classroom can affect children's behaviour. When the physical arrangement of the classroom is carefully planned, it can go a long way in preventing challenging behaviours from occurring. Here are a few ways that the physical classroom can be structured to prevent challenging behaviours:

- The classroom is divided into learning centres with boundaries that are easily viewed.
- An adult can see all of the children at one time with a sweeping glance.
- In turn, the children can see the adult.
- Noisy activities are away from more quiet activities.
- Visual reminders as to where the areas are and what to do there are posted for children to read.
- Bottleneck openings to areas are avoided.
- Wide open spaces (or runways) are eliminated to decrease the likelihood of a child running from one area to the next.
- When areas are not open to children, they are visually closed with stop signs, sheets over areas, and lids over sand tables.

Having a well-designed, consistently implemented daily schedule can go a long way toward preventing challenging behaviours. When children know what to do and where to go next, they are less likely to exhibit disruptive behaviour. A predictable schedule provides children with comfort in knowing what to expect next. In addition to having a schedule and following it consistently, posting the schedule in a manner that children can follow, such as using pictures and symbols, can double the impact.

Transitions can be difficult times in the day. These times are difficult for a few key reasons.

- First, there are often too many of them. Teachers may schedule many unnecessary transitions, causing children to stop their activity and change every 15 minutes or so.
- Second, during most transitions, children are left waiting and waiting with nothing to do. Young children should not be expected to wait with nothing to do for long periods of time, and typically, they won't. Many young children will "*entertain themselves*" during these waiting times with behaviour adults may find challenging.
- A third reason transitions can be difficult is that it is harder for children to read the contextual cues. During transition times, most directions are provided verbally and often children are moving in all different directions. For a new child, or a child who has a difficult time understanding language, transitions can feel chaotic.
- Finally, the fourth reason transitions can be difficult is that they are almost always adult-directed. This means that children who have a difficult time with compliance are "set up" for challenging behaviours several times throughout the day.

For all of these reasons, transitions are difficult. Yet it is still possible to structure transitions to prevent a lot of challenging behaviour from occurring. Here are some ideas:

- Decrease wait time during transitions by decreasing "whole group" transitions.
- Make transitions active times by saying "*Hop to your cubby like a rabbit*" or "Let's sing *Wheels on the Bus*."
- Use a consistent cue to signal a transition such as, clapping your hands, singing a song, or ringing a bell.
- Plan learning experiences that do not require an adult to get the child started.
- Provide choices.
- Communicate clearly and directly with children about what behaviour is expected. Often we present children with options when we really mean to give directions. It is better to state, "*It is time to clean up*" than it is to ask, "*Do you want to help clean up?*" However, allowing children to make real choices can help reduce challenging and protesting behaviour. Rephrase directions in terms of real choices that children can make. Instead of saying, "*Do you want to clean up?*" ask, "*Do you want to clean up the blocks or the puzzles first?*" Instead of saying, "*Would you like to go outside?*" ask, "*Should we gallop like a horse or fly like an eagle out to the playground today?*" With choices like these, children are more likely to be compliant while allowing adults to maintain control. And they gain important experience in making decisions about their own actions.
- Use visuals such as pictures or symbols to show children where they are going next.

- Eliminate unnecessary transitions.

Increasing active engagement is a sure way to prevent challenging behaviour. Research demonstrates that children are less likely to engage in challenging behaviour when they are actively engaged in meaningful learning experiences.

- Plan open-ended activities.
- Plan challenging experiences.
- Rotate high-preference toys and materials so they remain novel.
- Plan different activities during whole time together. Consistency is key but that does not mean the same "weather song" should be sung every day.
- Integrate child preferences into learning centres and small group activities.
- Provide modifications and adaptations for children with special needs so that they can access and participate fully in the learning experiences.

Finally, "*catch children being good!*" When teachers give their time and attention to children who are engaged in appropriate behaviours, the child's appropriate behaviours increase.

Providing time and attention is different from praise. Providing time and attention simply means noticing and attending to children by commenting, describing, or smiling when they are demonstrating positive behaviours, like self-control. In classrooms where teachers "catch children being good" four times more often than they react to children's challenging behaviours, the children spend more time actively engaged in learning experiences, they demonstrate far fewer challenging behaviours, and they demonstrate more positive, pro-social behaviours.

Self-Control Indicators

- Shows progress in expressing feelings, needs, and opinions in difficult situations and conflicts without harming themselves, others, or property.
- Develops growing understanding of how their actions affect others and begins to accept the consequences of their actions.
- Demonstrates increasing capacity to follow rules and routines and use materials purposefully, safely, and respectfully.

Self-Control Strategies

To help children develop self-control:

- Provide a sufficiently engaging curriculum and variety of learning experiences to ensure that children are not bored or aimlessly wandering. Young children are very good at creating diversion when none is available. Often teachers think they cannot provide interesting learning experiences until the children are under control, when, in fact, the real problem is that the children are out-of-control because there is nothing interesting to do.
- Arrange the environment to help children do their best. For example, make sure block building has enough space and is protected from traffic; avoid arrangements that invite children to run or fight, such as long corridors or large open spaces.
- Get to know each child, establish relationships with parents, and support their strengths as well as their needs.
- Establish positive, warm, caring relationships with each child, especially those children whose behaviour is difficult because they are in greatest need of positive support.
- Set clear limits for unacceptable behaviour and enforce them with rational explanations in a climate of mutual respect and caring.
- Work with children to establish a few simple group rules: Take care of other people, take care of yourself, and take care of the classroom. Systematically teach and reinforce these rules throughout the year.
- Evaluate and change your own behaviour if needed. Give time and attention to children when they are behaving appropriately, not just when they are causing a disturbance or breaking a rule. Especially for the few children with the most challenging behaviours, be sure to "catch them doing something right" and those desirable behaviours will increase. Behaviour is maintained by the attention it receives.
- Remember to use the child's home language as often as possible for purposes beyond giving the child directions such as "*sit down*" or "*be quiet*".
- Do not try to reason with children who are having temper tantrums or are out of control. Protect them from hurting themselves or others and wait until they have calmed down to discuss the situation.
- Coach children to express their feelings verbally, using either home language or English, and solve social problems with others using words. For many children, this will mean not only providing the words and offering some possible solutions, but being there to assist when situations arise.
- Model self-control by using self-talk: "*Oh, I can't get this lid off the paint. I am feeling frustrated [take a deep breath]. Now I'll try again.*"

Domain Element: Cooperation

Teachers often cite children's ability to cooperate with their teachers and other children as one of the most important elements of readiness for school. The ability to cooperate is necessary for two basic reasons: To build positive relationships and friendships and to learn from and work constructively with other people.

These skills are necessary for school success and beyond. The foundation for cooperation is laid during early childhood.

Cooperation Indicators

- Increases abilities to sustain interactions with peers by helping, sharing, and discussion.
- Shows increasing abilities to use compromise and discussion in working, playing, and resolving conflicts with peers.
- Develops increasing abilities to give and take in interactions; to take turns in games or using materials; and to interact without being overly submissive or directive.

Cooperation Strategies

To help children develop cooperation

- Provide time, materials, and support for children to engage in many kinds of play including block play, dramatic play, simple games, and rough and tumble play.
- Take a role in children's play as needed without becoming intrusive or taking over. Observe, provide props or a theme, and play with children who need extra help becoming successful players. Become a patient in the doctor's office or a customer in the store. Withdraw from the play as soon as possible so it becomes the children's own.
- Model the language of cooperation for children—"*I would like to have a turn*" or "*May I play in your car?*"
- Coach individual children who need help playing cooperatively with others. Give the child specific words to say or strategies for entering a play situation, demonstrating how to share a toy or how to take on a role.
- Engage children in group discussions and role play how to resolve conflicts or negotiate social problems before they arise.
- Read books that include conflicts or problems requiring cooperation. Ask children to predict what will happen in advance, or after reading, ask them to provide alternative solutions.
- Play turn-taking games in small groups, modelling and encouraging cooperation with others.
- Plan projects or play experiences where two or more children must collaborate together. Occasionally pair children who are less socially skilled with more popular peers.
- Select toys that encourage social interaction, such as puppets, wagons, or simple board games.
- Encourage partners or teamwork: "*Look what Jim and Mary built together.*" "*All four of you worked on this beautiful mural.*"

Domain Element: Social Relationships

The ability to develop and maintain positive social relationships is an essential aspect of healthy human development. The early years of schooling provide a prime window of opportunity for their development.

At this point, most children need to move beyond their families and learn to establish relationships with new, unfamiliar adults such as teachers. Likewise, this is the time when children are first learning to make real friends, although their friendships are often capricious and short-lived. Because social relationships seem to come naturally for many children, we may not realize that, as in every area of their development, adult support is needed.

While establishing positive social relationships is an important outcome, perhaps more important is preventing social isolation. Research shows that it is possible to predict as early as preschool those children who will have later social and academic problems, because they are already either ignored or rejected by other children. Teachers must pay attention to each child's social development, and especially work to support children who are struggling with relationships even though these are often the most difficult children for teachers to build a relationship with.

Research shows that children with disabilities may need help from adults in forming friendships with typically developing peers (Odom 2001). Research also shows that such relationships benefit both children with special needs and their typically developing peers, so such adult intervention is essential (Guralnik 1990).

Social Relationships Indicators

- Demonstrates increasing confidence and acceptance in talking with and accepting guidance/directions from a range of familiar adults.
- Shows progress in developing friendships with peers.
- Progresses in responding sympathetically to peers who are in need, upset, hurt, or angry; and in expressing empathy or caring for others.

Social Relationships Strategies

To develop positive social relationships

- Build relationships with parents so that children feel safe, secure, and comfortable with their teachers.
- Build a caring community within the program so that children come to know and feel comfortable with administrators, other teachers, staff, and parents.
- Provide opportunities for children to work and play together. Successful relationships need both time and content: Something to do or think about together.
- Draw children's attention to the feelings or experiences of others by saying, "*Look at her face. Can you tell how she feels?*". Help them to develop empathy by reminding them of their own similar feelings or experiences: "*You know what it feels like when someone says you can't play.*"
- Model caring, positive regard for others. When a child is absent, remind the others of the friend who is missed. If absences are prolonged, have children make cards or gifts to convey feelings of regard.
- Help children who are having difficulty making friendships with others by planning co-operative activities like paired painting or other activities. Teach these children how to initiate and sustain peer interactions.
- Intervene when children are repeatedly rejected by others. Coach these children with specific strategies for entering play. Asking, "*Can I play?*" is not as effective as watching, getting close, and playing with the same thing or bringing a toy over to a peer. Help children identify common ground or shared preferences with others as ways to begin relationships. "*Your mom said you have a new book about fish. Why don't you bring it to school? I know the other children would like to see it!*"
- Teach alternatives to teasing and other socially unacceptable behaviour.

Domain Element: Knowledge of Families and Communities

Young children best learn through their personal experiences and in the context of their developing social skills and knowledge.

Knowledge of Families and Communities Indicators

- Develops ability to identify personal characteristics, including gender and family composition.
- Progresses in understanding similarities and respecting differences among people, such as genders, race, special needs, culture, language, and family structures.
- Develops growing awareness of jobs and what is required to perform them.
- Begins to express and understand concepts and language of geography in the contexts of the classroom, home, and community.

Knowledge of Families and Communities Strategies

To help children acquire knowledge of families and communities

- Involve children's families in every aspect of the program so that children can learn about and compare each other's personal characteristics, experiences, and cultures.
- Demonstrate respect for various cultures and languages, making sure that children's home languages and cultures are reflected in books, signs, and learning experiences.
- Write class books about the children's families, their homes, their mealtimes, their pets, and other aspects of their lives. Discuss what is the same and different about the children's families.
- Engage children in long-term projects or in-depth studies of their communities. Begin with children describing what they already know and then identifying what questions they have and ways to find answers.
- Take trips, invite visitors, make observations, gather and record data about what they learn.
- Use various media such as blocks, clay, drawings, or photos to represent and map the classroom, neighbourhood, or community.

The early years are critical for social-emotional development. Teaching/learning teams must support children as they develop a strong sense of self, make friends, and learn about the social world. As they grow in these areas, children are building a foundation for success in school and for life-long learning.