

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Supporting Head Start Staff to Address Children's Social Skills

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Failure to promote preschoolers' social competence can lead to significant difficulties in social skills development, school readiness, and academic success. While early childhood professionals play a critical role in developing children's social and emotional skills, there is limited research available about the value teachers place on social skill instruction and the instructional strategies they use. Surveys and interviews were used to investigate the practices used by five Head Start (HS) programs to promote children's social and emotional skills. Results indicated that respondents: (a) identified peer interaction and friendship skills most often as important social skills to teach; (b) described using classwide and naturalistic social skill instruction strategies most frequently; and (c) described challenges to addressing children's social skill needs. Implications of these findings for preschool programs are discussed in terms of professional development to support teachers to implement evidence-based social skill methods.

*Keywords:* social skills, Head Start, social competence

Social competence is a construct that includes peer interactions, emotional and behavioral control, and the use of appropriate behavior during conflict (Brown, Odom, McConnell, & Rathel, 2008). Children's level of social competence has been shown to affect school readiness and future academic success (Denham, 2006). Unfortunately, children with social competence difficulties are often expelled from programs or are at-risk for being removed due to their challenging behavior (Gilliam, 2005). Given that Head Start (HS) programs were started to help low-income preschool children be ready for kindergarten, it is important to look at how HS teachers feel about and teach social competence in their classrooms and to identify ways HS teachers can be assisted in the teaching of social-emotional skills to their students.

Prior research states that preschool teachers value the teaching of social competence skills in the classroom (West, Brown, Grego, & Johnson, 2007), but it is difficult to teach due to increased pressure to focus on more academic skills such as literacy and math (Cople & Bredekamp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). Evidence-based social skill interventions are not extensively used in early childhood classrooms (e.g., Brown & Conroy, 2001). This is troublesome as children with poor social competence skills are at-risk for: a) difficulties in adult and peer relationships; b) peer rejection and c) expulsion (Gilliam, 2005; Mize, 2005). HS teachers are

uniquely positioned to support children's social competence development in the classroom. In the current study, surveys and interviews were conducted to examine the practices HS programs used to reduce children's problem behavior and teach social competence skills with the purpose of designing effective professional development activities to assist HS staff to implement research-based practices.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 108 early childhood (EC) educators, early childhood special educators (ECSE), assistant teachers, and other program staff (e.g., mental behavior specialists, program directors) agreed to participate in the study. Seventy-eight of these participants completed the survey. The participants were primarily females between 36 and 55 years old with over six years of experience working with young children (45%). The majority of survey participants described themselves as White/Non-Hispanic (58%) or African-American/Black (33%). Forty-five participants were interviewed; only 15 participants completed both the survey and interview components of the study. Demographic information was not collected for interview participants.

### Procedure

**Surveys.** Survey participants completed the Social Competence in Preschool Survey (Berlin, Hadden, & Voorhees, 2008) which gathered information on their opinions of discipline and social skills in the EC classroom. Surveys took 20 to 45 minutes to complete. This paper reports only on one open-ended question, *give two examples of what you do to encourage positive interactions between children in your classroom*, and two conflict scenarios which provided information on how staff encourage peer interactions and would respond to children's social skills difficulties.

**Interviews.** Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were done individually. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and all responses were transcribed word-for-word. The primary focus of interviews was to gather more in-depth information about HS staff views regarding social skills instruction. The two main questions were: a) *What are the most important social skills taught in the classroom?*; and b) *Tell me about any specific social skills curricula that are used in your classroom.* Follow-up questions asked about additional social skill instruction methods and implementation challenges.

### Data Analysis

**Open-ended Survey Questions.** The open-ended survey questions were coded at the word or phrase level to capture the social skills the respondents were describing (e.g., sharing toys, positive interactions). To sort similar responses into categories, one researcher reviewed 20 answers for each open-ended question and noted key ideas from the responses and sorted them

into similar categories. Once this step was complete, the 78 survey responses were coded using NVivo (QSR International, 2008).

*Conflict Scenario Survey Questions.* A scoring rubric was used to rate conflict scenario survey responses. Survey responses were rated as low (e.g., answer was more reactive or did not answer the question), medium (e.g., response addresses the immediate problem only), or high (e.g., response shows thought and reflection about the child's behavior that goes beyond the immediate problem).

*Interviews.* Each interview was first transcribed word-for-word and then coded using NVivo for further analysis. Coding categories that emerged from the data included: a) *social skills*: most important social to teach; b) *universal strategies*: methods that are used to support social-emotional development for all children in the classroom; c) *challenges*: barriers to supporting children's social-emotional skills.

## RESULTS

HS staff identified peer interaction and friendship skills as the most important social skills to teach followed by behavioral control and social problem-solving skills. Methods described most frequently to teach social skills were similar on the survey and interview. Naturalistic interventions were identified as being used most often to promote peer interaction skills during teachable moments such as a) helping children while they interact with peers and encouraging children to talk, b) role playing and modeling, c) encouraging children to use words and talking about their feelings). Classwide strategies were also described to teach peer interaction skills such as, making sure the physical environment encourages social interaction, providing small group or planned activities to promote social interaction, using the social skills curriculum and reading books and having discussions about friendships. The majority of the responses on the conflict scenarios received a medium rating showing that suggested strategies addressed the immediate concern using primarily naturalistic strategies.

Respondents from all programs described the use of a social skills curriculum (e.g., Al's Pals) to provide whole group instruction with scripted lessons to teach behavior control and social problem-solving. Strategies from the curriculum were mentioned most often (e.g., calm down steps) to teach behavioral control during class activities. A challenge described to social skills instruction included the training requirements and a lack of flexibility when implementing their required social skills curriculum. The pressure to teach academics also impeded their ability to provide social skills instruction. Staff also noted the challenge of meeting the needs of children with significant social skill difficulties or behavior problems.

## DISCUSSION AND APLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Social skills difficulties are common in HS classrooms and it is critical to address these during the early childhood years. HS staff in this study recognized the importance of social skill instruction and used classwide and naturalistic interventions most often to teach social skills. Staff did not feel their current methods addressed the needs of children with more significant social skill difficulties and noted the necessity for additional specialized strategies.

Rather than having teachers rely solely on a scripted curriculum and classwide strategies to teach social skills, it is important that they are able to use a wide range of evidence-based methods to teach social skills throughout the day during classroom routines. The use of a tiered *Program-Wide Positive Behavior Support* (PWPBS) approach holds promise for promoting the social competence of all children within the classroom. Classwide universal interventions (tier 1 PWPBS) that are commonly used in early childhood classrooms provide the foundation for supporting children's social-emotional development and include strategies such as establishing classroom rules, teaching behavioral expectations, and planning for smooth transitions (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Gail, & Strain, 2003). However, it is imperative for teachers to be able to use explicit instructional techniques (tier 2 and 3) when universal methods are not effective and children continue to repeatedly make the same social competence errors. Tier 2 uses ongoing assessment of children's social skill development and a systematic approach to plan and embed targeted social skill instruction throughout daily classroom routines for children who need additional support (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2009). Effective tier 2 instructional practices such as providing prompts to target children, teaching peers to play with target children, and using specific and descriptive positive reinforcement are essential to use with children who have more intensive support needs. For example, a teacher may provide teach a small group of children a lesson on sharing by defining what sharing means, modeling the sharing process with the children, showing the children examples and non-examples of sharing, and allowing them time to practice sharing with one another while providing positive praise and constructive feedback.

Tier 3 strategies are necessary for children with more intensive support needs who do not respond to tier 1 and 2 supports. Tier 3 interventions are individualized, based on the results of a functional behavior assessment, and matched to the function of a child's challenging behavior. A written support plan is developed that includes strategies to prevent the challenging behavior, to teach the child to use a functionally equivalent replacement behavior, and to respond by reinforcing the replacement behavior rather than the challenging behavior. For example, if the perceived function of a child's challenging behavior (e.g., hitting or kicking peers) is to gain a tangible (e.g., another child's toy), then a support plan might include strategies such as the use of a first-then card to teach the child (first Mary's turn, then your turn), a "my turn" cue card for the child to use to show she wants a turn, or the use of a timer or counting so a child will know when her turn comes up (Lentini, Vaughn Fox, 2004). These types of tier 2 and 3 strategies were not mentioned by respondents.

HS administrators can support program staff by arranging for training and coaching on the use of this tiered intervention approach to help teachers to expand their skills to include more specialized strategies to meet the needs of children who require more intensive and targeted support. Teacher educators and trainers must focus their efforts on designing and implementing more effective training methods to assist teachers to apply these strategies. Providing a workshop alone is not sufficient; follow-up support (e.g., coaching to support classroom application of practice and the use of videotaped examples of desired instruction) are effective professional development methods (Ramey & Ramey, 2006; Snyder & Wolfe, 2008).

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