



PROMOTING THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES—Policy Brief 3

## Ready to Enter: What Research Tells Policymakers About Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness Among Three- and Four-Year-Old Children (JULY 2002)

### OVERVIEW

A recent and compelling study entitled *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, conducted by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the Institute of Medicine, calls attention to the importance of early emotional development in young children. Based on a careful review of neuroscience and developmental science, it highlights compelling evidence that a child's earliest experiences and relationships set the stage for how a child manages feelings and impulses, and relates to others. It also highlights emerging and perhaps surprising evidence that emotional development and academic learning are far more closely intertwined in the early years than has been previously understood. This policy paper focuses on what emerging research tells policymakers about why it is so important to intervene to help young children at risk for poor social, emotional, and behavioral development and what kinds of research-based interventions seem most effective. It addresses:

- the relationship between early academic learning and emotional development;
- the prevalence of emotional problems in preschool-aged young children and young children who are exposed to multiple family and environmental risk factors;
- the role of teachers and child care providers in reducing or exacerbating problems; and
- the emerging but still limited research on the efficacy of preventive and early interventions *explicitly* targeted to address the social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties of young children, particularly in the context of early care and education settings.

### WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT HOW EMOTIONS AND EARLY ACADEMIC LEARNING ARE LINKED

#### The Take-Home Research Message

- Young children who act in anti-social ways participate less in classroom activities and are less likely to be accepted by classmates and teachers. Even in preschool, teachers provide such children with less instruction and less positive feedback. These children like school less, learn less, and attend less.
- Young children who show signs of anti-social or aggressive behavior are more likely to do poorly on academic tasks and to be held back in the early years. In later childhood and adolescence, they are at greater risk of dropping out and engaging in delinquent acts.
- Across a range of studies, the emotional, social, and behavioral competence of young children (such as higher levels of self-control and lower levels of acting out) predict their academic performance in first grade, over and above their cognitive skills and family backgrounds.

### **The Take-Home Policy Message**

- Efforts to get young children who are at risk of early school failure on a positive school trajectory before negative attitudes and behaviors escalate is likely to pay off both in the short and long term.

## **WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT THE PREVALENCE OF SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN YOUNG CHILDREN**

### **The Take-Home Research Message**

- The majority of low-income young children succeed in making the transition to school.
- The prevalence of problematic behaviors in young children is about 10 percent. Studies focused on low-income children in kindergarten suggest a prevalence rate that is considerably higher—27 percent. Observational data on preschoolers suggest that between 4 and 6 percent have serious emotional and behavioral disorders, and between 16 and 30 percent pose on-going problems to classroom teachers.
- In general, the more chronic the economic, social, and psychological stressors that young children face, the greater the likelihood of poor social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes. For this reason, these stressors have been identified as “risks.” Over 32 percent of all young children are affected by one risk factor such as low income, low maternal education, or single-parent status, and 16 percent are in families with two or more socio-demographic risks.

### **The Take-Home Policy Message**

- Teachers and child care providers are likely to find that, while some children are doing very well despite exposure to these risks, other children are struggling with a range of emotional and behavioral difficulties that make the tasks of teaching and caregiving very tough. Teachers and child care providers need help in promoting greater social skills in these children and reducing challenging behavior in the classroom both to help individual children and to facilitate a positive learning climate. Sometimes the children and the families also need access to more specialized help.

## **WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND CHILD CARE PROVIDERS**

### **The Take-Home Research Message**

- Teachers in preschool classrooms are coping with a substantial number of young children who struggle with emotional and behavioral problems that pose a risk for early school success.
- How teachers interact with young children affects the children’s social and emotional outcomes negatively or positively.

### **The Take-Home Policy Message**

- The first line of defense in promoting school readiness across all developmental domains (including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical) is to ensure that all children whose parents request it have access to quality early care and learning experiences, marked by classrooms with warm teachers and a predictable, stimulating atmosphere.
- It is critical to provide early childhood teachers with training and access to help in dealing with the numbers of children experiencing or at risk for emotional and behavioral problems, even in high-quality settings, but especially where quality is problematic.

## WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT CLASSROOM-LINKED INTERVENTIONS THAT CAN HELP

### The Take-Home Research Message

- Preliminary research findings on the impact of social skills curricula targeted to all preschool children in a classroom are promising but involve very limited samples.
- For preschool-aged children at higher risk, research supports the use of interventions that target both parents and caregivers/teachers (and may also involve social skills curricula targeted to the children). New research combining behavioral strategies with reading and other more academically oriented interventions are also being evaluated.
- On-site mental health consultation is the dominant strategy emerging across the country. Yet research evaluating this strategy is limited. However, early findings from one national demonstration effort are promising, showing consistent cross-site effects of improved parenting and better child outcomes.

### The Take-Home Policy Message

- The urgent need to help young children succeed in school and the numbers of young children who are at risk for early school failure linked to emotional and behavioral difficulties point to the importance of implementing effective interventions earlier rather than later. Although still limited, emerging patterns from intervention research can help guide policymakers in developing these earlier intervention strategies.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy paper makes it clear that although there is still much more to learn about the effectiveness of preschool-aged interventions, the scientific evidence of the need for early intervention is compelling. Further, the intervention research that does exist is beginning to tell a sufficiently coherent story to enable policymakers to respond. Below are recommendations for policymakers and researchers to build on the knowledge base highlighted here.

Policymakers should:

- Invest in and evaluate interventions that improve the quality of early childhood classrooms and that provide teachers with the resources and training they need to maintain emotionally positive and cognitively enriching classrooms.
- Pay special attention to classroom-based strategies to promote social and emotional competence that combine child-focused strategies with strategies targeted to parents, teachers, and other caregivers.
- Consider interventions that simultaneously address cognitive, social, and emotional issues, recognizing the links between social and emotional development and successful academic learning, including early literacy.
- Invest in mental health and child development consultants who can help the children, the families, and the teachers implement evidence-based preventive and early intervention strategies related to social and emotional competence as well as enhance classroom quality and effective management practices.
- Focus special attention on children and families experiencing cumulative and multiple stressors.
- Invest at the state and community levels in strategies to ensure the timely dissemination of “research to practice” knowledge about how to promote social and emotional resilience in young children.

Researchers should:

- Design research to fill in gaps in the understanding of how quality child care and early educational practices affect the social and emotional development of young children.
- Pay more attention to issues of “treatment fidelity”—ask if the intervention was carried out as planned, and how this affects the results.
- Conduct multi-site investigations of promising approaches that now primarily involve relatively small samples in one or two sites.
- Conduct research on the cost-benefit ratio and tradeoffs of investing in different types of interventions.
- Convene networks of researchers in early childhood mental health to promote the use of shared measures and methodologies to maximize the learning from future research.

This policy paper is intended to serve as a call to action for researchers and policymakers. The urgency of the need, the growing knowledge base, coupled with the stake society has in addressing the social and emotional development of young children in a smart way, compels greater attention to this critical domain of development in the context of school readiness.

For more information about research findings on young children’s emotional development and school readiness, the role of teachers and child care providers, and the efficacy of preventive and early intervention strategies, particularly in early care and education settings, as well as research citations, please refer to **Promoting the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Families Policy Paper No. 3: Ready to Learn: What Research Tells Policymakers About Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness Among Three- and Four-Year-Old Children**, by Cybele Raver and Jane Knitzer. Copies of the full publication are available at the NCCP website—[www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org); E-mail: [info@nccp.org](mailto:info@nccp.org).

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