

Social-Emotional Development in Pre-kindergarteners and Kindergarteners

Pathways to Success Partnership | Shelby County Schools | The Urban Child Institute

1/3

The Pathways to Success Partnership recently joined with PeopleFirst and the Early Success Coalition to look at the influence of social and emotional development on school readiness.

Positive early childhood development is both a characteristic and foundation of healthy families and healthy communities.

When young children grow up with positive early experiences, healthy families, and nurturing homes and environments, they are set upon a positive trajectory for healthy development and a healthy life course.

Positive early development serves as a predictor of later measures of success:

Kindergarten readiness, subsequent academic achievement, graduating from high school, and leading healthy, productive adult lives are outcomes all rooted in healthy early childhood development. Physical and cognitive skills, such as development of early motor, language, mathematical, reasoning, and problem-solving skills, are fundamentally important for children's well-being and learning.

However, children's social and emotional development is also an important aspect of a child's well-being, especially for children and families who face economic and other challenges.¹

Many families in Shelby County face economic and social disadvantages. Children raised in poverty often encounter greater challenges to their early development, resulting in reduced school readiness, poorer academic achievement, greater risk for grade retention and dropout, and negative adult outcomes – leading to considerable costs to individuals and society.²

However, research has shown that positive early socio-emotional development is associated with greater academic outcomes,³ whereas children who are less socio-emotionally developed often have more behavioral problems.⁴

For these reasons, learning more about the constellation of factors involved in early socio-emotional development is an important policy matter for families with young children, for schools and school districts, and for our community at large.

To better understand the factors involved in socio-emotional development, in the fall of 2014, the study group asked parents of children registering for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten at six schools in Shelby County to complete a one-page questionnaire about their children's behaviors that were associated with positive socio-emotional development.

The questions centered on behaviors regarding three sub-scales of socio-emotional development: attachment, initiative, and self-control.

Attachment behaviors included items such as the children's ability to seek out others, gain positive attention, or respond to adult comfort. Questions about initiative regarded children's independence, active learning, and problem solving. Items regarding self-control were children's ability to manage frustration, or cooperate with and respect others.

Parents were asked to rate the frequency of their children's behaviors in the previous four weeks on a scale of one to five, with one being "never" and five being "very frequently." Parents were also asked their current educational level and the number of children in the home. Completed surveys were received for 168 incoming pre-kindergarten students and 449 incoming kindergarten students. Overall results on the three sub-scales are shown in Table 1.

As we see in Table 1, parents of both the incoming pre-kindergartners and kindergartners indicated that their children most frequently engaged in behaviors associated with attachment, followed by initiative, and then self-control.

¹ Duncan et al., 2007

² Braveman, Sadegh-Nobari, & Egarter, 2008; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Duncan et al., 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2002

³ Dobbs, Doctoroff, Fisher, & Arnold, 2006; Smith, 2010

⁴ Qi & Kaiser, 2003; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1998



Pathways
to Success
PARTNERSHIP

Social-Emotional Development in Pre-kindergarteners and Kindergarteners

Pathways to Success Partnership | Shelby County Schools | The Urban Child Institute

2/3

Table 1: Overall (mean) raw scale scores corresponding to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten parent responses, fall 2014 registration.

Measure of socio-emotional development	Pre-K	Kindergarten
Attachment	4.34	4.46
Initiative	4.14	4.32
Self-control	3.96	4.09

Note: Average scores ranged from one to five for each sub-scale.

Overall, the ratings were relatively high, indicating that, as a group, the parents believed their children frequently engage in behaviors associated with positive socio-emotional development.

However, looking at the information based on demographics, meaningful differences were seen among the students:

- Parents of kindergarteners reported greater frequency of positive behaviors than did parents of pre-kindergarteners, which is not surprising. Older children would be expected to score higher on areas of socio-emotional development due to being developmentally more mature than the younger students.⁵

- There were differences in ratings for boys compared to girls, which is typical for early childhood development.⁶ In both the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten groups, boys had significantly lower scores than girls on all behavioral areas with one exception among pre-kindergartners – self-control – where there was no difference in ratings.

- In the pre-kindergarten group, children who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were rated significantly lower than their pre-kindergarten peers on the initiative subscale. However, among the kindergarten group, economic disadvantage was not associated with the scores. This result was surprising given the entrenched associations between low income and poorer developmental outcomes.⁷ Other factors, including pre-kindergarten at-

tendance, could explain these findings. As our current cohort of children progresses through the school year, we will study how socio-emotional development is related to other factors like economic disadvantage and pre-kindergarten experience, and how these support children's performance in school.

- Parents' education level is a factor known to influence children's development and kindergarten readiness.⁸ Of both the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten parents who answered the questionnaire, almost 60% of the parents indicated some college, a college degree, or graduate-level work.

- In the pre-kindergarten group, parents with a higher education level rated their children higher on initiative behaviors. In the kindergarten group, parents with a higher education level rated their children higher on all three socio-emotional sub-scales. Parents who reported having at least some college were more likely than parents with less education to indicate that their child was displaying behaviors associated with positive socio-emotional development. Parents with higher educational attainment may have more resources to engage their children with experiences that encourage positive socio-emotional growth.

⁵ Center on the Developing Child

⁶ Geary, 1998

⁷ Cooper, Masi, & Vick, 2009

⁸ Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010



Social-Emotional Development in Pre-kindergarteners and Kindergarteners

Pathways to Success Partnership | Shelby County Schools | The Urban Child Institute

3/3

Students who enter school with healthy social and emotional skills are better able to participate and thrive within a classroom environment.

Supporting children's early development is certainly not limited to particular domains such as the physical or cognitive. Research supports that our community's children need holistic support to ensure that they have every opportunity for optimal development to help them reach school, and begin their life courses, ready to learn and thrive.

These findings help illustrate how young students entering school are fairing in terms of socio-emotional development in Shelby County.

The research partnership that makes this work possible allowed the opportunity to collect information on factors associated with children's early development, kindergarten readiness, and early success during school registration.

These results provide baseline information with which to compare these students' progress as they make their way through pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and early elementary schooling, and ultimately, continue the effort to identify experiences and factors that promote early success among our community's young children.

References

- Braveman, P., Sadegh-Nobari, T., & Egerter, S. (2008, June). *Early childhood experiences: Laying the foundation for health across a lifetime* (Issue Brief No. 1). Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- Center on the Developing Child. *Inbrief: The science of early childhood development*. Retrieved from http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/download_file/-/view/64/
- Cooper, J.L., Masi, R., & Vick, J. (2009). *Socio-emotional Development in Early Childhood: What Every Policymaker Should Know*. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_882.pdf
- Crosnoe, R., & Cooper, C.E. (2010). Economically disadvantaged children's transition into elementary school: Linking family process, school contexts, and educational policy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47(2), 258-291.
- Dobbs, J., Doctoroff, G.L., Fisher, P.H., & Arnold, D.H. (2006). The association between preschool children's socio-emotional functioning and their mathematical skills. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 27, 97-108.
- Duncan, G.J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). Family poverty, welfare reform, and child development. *Child Development*, 71(1), 188-196.
- Duncan, G.J., Dowsett, C.J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Claessens, A., Duckworth, K., Engel, M., . . . Sexton, H. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(6), 1428-1446.
- Geary, D.C. (1998). Developmental Sex Differences. In D.C. Geary, *Male, female: The evolution of human sex differences*. (pp. 209-258). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Lee, V.E., & Burkam, D.T. (2002). *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement at Children Begin School*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- Qi, C., & Kaiser, A.P. (2003). Behavior problems of preschool children from low-income families. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 23, 188-216.
- Smith, B. (2010). *Recommended Practices: Linking Social Development and Behavior to School Readiness. Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior*. Retrieved from <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/inftodd/mod4/4.3.pdf>
- Webster-Stratton, C., & Hammond, M. (1998). Conduct problems and level of social competence in Head Start children: Prevalence, pervasiveness, and associated risk factors. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 1, 101-124.

Contributing Authors:
Shahin Samiei, Marie Sell, and Doug Imig



Pathways
to Success
PARTNERSHIP