

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Keep Calm and Carry on: The importance of children's emotional positivity and regulation for success in Head Start

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Young children's emotional competence plays a significant role in their ability to thrive in school. Specifically, the ability to regulate their emotions according to situational demands, while remaining emotionally positive towards others, are very important contributors to children's social success (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010; Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001; Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007). These skills are particularly important for children in Head Start programs who already demonstrate a significant achievement gap as early as kindergarten (e.g., Campbell & Stauffenberg, 2008; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). In light of these findings, the present study focused on the relations between positive emotion/engagement and emotion regulation of Head Start preschoolers and both their school adjustment and academic readiness during Head Start and in kindergarten.

The social emotional skills of children attending Head Start programs were observed and directly assessed, and their teachers provided information regarding via questionnaires. The results indicated that emotion regulation and positive emotion/engagement observed during challenging regulatory tasks were related in interpretable ways with both behavior with peers and school success. Nevertheless, being positive emotionally and socially during these emotionally taxing situations was associated with poorer self-regulation under these circumstances. Implications for practice in terms of assessment, social-emotional teaching and teachers' emotional competence are discussed.

Young children's emotional competence has been found to play a significant role in their school readiness (Denham et al., 2010; Raver et al., 2007). Learning how to regulate emotions and behaviors in socially appropriate ways is one of the main developmental achievements in the early years (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2002; Halberstadt et al., 2001). Being positively oriented towards others is another important milestone during this period (Parker & Gottman, 1989). Preschool is a busy and important time in children's lives, because they now have the opportunity to practice and improve their developing ability to regulate emotions in a variety of social situations, while engaging positively with their teachers and peers (Shields et al., 2001). The preschool and kindergarten contexts can be particularly challenging for young children because they present new challenges such as sitting still, following directions, attending, and participating in organized group activities while getting along with others

(Denham, 2006).

Based on the core developmental tasks of the preschool years, two aspects of emotional competence, emotional expressiveness and emotional regulation, emerge as being particularly important skills for children to master to successfully adapt to social contexts. For young children to initiate and carry out successful social interactions with others, they must learn how to express their emotions in accordance with their goals and in socially appropriate ways (Halberstadt et al., 2001).

Positive emotion is an important contributor to children's social success. Children who express more positive emotions towards others exhibit less internalizing and externalizing non-adaptive behavior in preschool, are more liked by their peers, and are perceived as more socially competent by their teachers (Arsenio & Lover, 1997; Denham et al., 1990; Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 1993; Miller, Seifer, Stroud, Sheinkopf, & Dickstein, 2006; Walden, Lemerise, & Smith, 1999).

Positive emotional expressiveness is important not only because it supports children's social skills, but also because it can help moderate negative emotions and facilitates recovery from arousal (Izard, Stark, Trentacosta, & Schultz, 2008). Consequently, it may explain in part why emotionally positive children are more successful in classroom tasks: they are seen as better-adjusted to the demands of a classroom (e.g., they demonstrate abilities to adjust to routines, comply with limits, participate with enthusiasm and focus in structured activities, along with forming positive relationships with teachers and peers; Shin et al., 2011).

Emotion regulation, the ability to regulate the experience and expression of emotions in socially appropriate manners (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994), is another aspect of emotional competence that has been shown to contribute to children's social skills (Blair, Denham, Kochanoff, & Whipple, 2004; Denham et al., 2003). Moreover, even more strongly than emotional expressiveness, emotion regulation is closely related to children's school adjustment and academic success.

Specifically, children who are able to regulate their emotions in accordance with situational and social demands, deal more appropriately with disappointments, frustrations, and hurt feelings. As a result, they have better social skills, are more popular among their peers, and will be able to learn more easily in early schooling (Denham, 1998, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 1993, 1996, Fabes et al., 1999; Garber, Braafladt, & Zeman, 1991; Walden, Lemerise, & Smith, 1999). In contrast, children who have difficulties regulating their emotions, may find the academic environment more challenging and thus have fewer resources left for learning (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Miller et al., 2006; Shields et al., 2001).

These aspects of emotional competence may be particularly important for children attending Head Start. Children living in poverty and inequity already demonstrate a significant achievement gap as early as kindergarten (e.g., Campbell & Stauffenberg, 2008; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Specifically, Head Start students tend to exhibit more social-emotional deficits (e.g., less emotional knowledge and social information processing) (Denham et al., 2012). Subsequently, kindergarten teachers considered them less socially competent and adjusted in the classroom in terms of learning behaviors and attitudes. Thus, it is particularly important to identify, track, and maximize Head Start students' positive expressiveness and positive engagement in the classroom, as well as their emotion regulation. Doing so could benefit their early school success.

In light of these findings, in the present study, the researchers explored the relations between positive emotion/engagement and emotion regulation of Head Start preschoolers and both their school adjustment and academic readiness during Head Start and in kindergarten.

## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHOD

The study involved working with 138 4-year-old children in Head Start programs. Of the 86% of families reporting, 60.1% were African-American and 19.6% Caucasian; 17.4% of families identified as Hispanic. Data for positive emotion/engagement and emotion regulation ratings, as well as the directly assessed or observed validity measures, were collected during fall of children's last preschool year, and teacher measures were completed at the end of children's last preschool and kindergarten years.

Positive emotion/engagement and emotion regulation were assessed via assessor's observations of the children's behaviors during self-regulation performance tasks (see PSRA below). In addition, a 28-item Assessor Report was completed by the assessor afterwards, which addressed children's behavior, emotions, and attention during assessor-child interaction.

The Preschool Self-Regulation Assessment (PSRA, Smith-Donald et al., 2007) was utilized to directly assess children's self-regulation. It addressed the emotional, attentional, and behavioral components of self-regulation by using a brief, structured battery of tasks, followed by a global report of children's behavior during the assessment. Minnesota Preschool Affect Checklist-Revised/Shortened (MPAC-R/S) was used to assess children's positive emotion expression and their emotion dysregulation via observations, as validity checks for the positive emotion/engagement and regulation scores (see Denham et al., in press; Denham & Burton, 1996; Denham, Zahn-Waxler, Cummings, & Iannotti, 1991).

Three different assessment tools were used to capture emotional, social, behavioral, attitudinal, and learning-related aspects of school adjustment. The Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation-30 (SCBE-30, LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996) questionnaire was used to assess preschooler's social competence and behavior. Additionally, teachers rated children's approaches to learning using the Preschool Learning Behaviors Scale (PLBS, McDermott, Leigh, & Perry, 2002), and they rated classroom adjustment in preschool and kindergarten via the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA, Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Scores from these questionnaires were aggregated to form a broader index of school adjustment.

Preschool academic readiness was assessed with the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Preschool (PALS-PreK, Invernizzi, Sullivan, & Meier, 2001). This tool was designed to assess emerging literacy skills in children prior to beginning kindergarten. Also, kindergarten academic readiness was assessed via ECLS-K Academic Rating Scale (ARS, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education statistics, 2002). The questionnaire completed by teachers, addresses language and literacy, general knowledge, and mathematical thinking aspects of kindergarten academic readiness.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

Children who remained positive and engaged, as well as emotionally regulated, during one-on-one activities (PSRA) that challenged their self-regulation, were also more likely to display

similar skills during free-play in the classroom. For example, children who were able to keep their cool during these somewhat frustrating tasks were able to refrain from aggression during social encounters with their peers. Further, children's ability to stay positive in these emotionally taxing situations also translated to similar positivity during social play with classmates.

Emotion regulation and positive emotion/engagement also contributed to aspects of school success. Emotion regulation made unique contributions to teachers' views of the children's classroom adjustment, such as their motivation to learn and belief in their competence, cooperation with others and classroom routines, and positive attitude toward learning. Moreover, the ability to remain positive and engaged was related to their emerging academic skills, as rated by teachers both concurrently and in kindergarten.

Hence, being more positively engaged during emotionally challenging situations contributed to children's social skills, as well as their attainment of relatively complex pre-literacy skills. However, this same positive emotion/engagement was related to lower self-regulation during these emotionally taxing situations. In other words, children who were in a more positive mood during challenging regulatory tasks were found to be *less* self-regulated, in terms of behaviors like paying attention, refraining from impulsive behaviors, sustaining concentration, and waiting for desired outcomes. This initially counterintuitive outcome may stem from reduced mental resources available for the task due to the positive mood of the child. In other words, children with more positive mood are less focused on the task itself (Phillips, Bull, Adams, & Fraser, 2002). Alternatively, perhaps children are more focused on the person they are interacting with, rather than on the assignment.

In general, then, emotion regulation and positive emotion/engagement observed during challenging regulatory tasks were related in interpretable ways with both behavior with peers and school success. Nevertheless, being positive emotionally and socially during these emotionally taxing situations was associated with poorer self-regulation under these circumstances.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on these findings regarding the relations between emotional competence and academic adjustment among Head Start preschoolers, several useful lessons emerge for future program planning and teachers' instruction strategies. Specifically, this research has implications for assessment, the importance of social emotional teaching, and teachers' own emotional competence.

### Assessments

1. Children's academic skills are closely related to their social and emotional development and therefore their acquisition of social-emotional skills must also be monitored. These skills are constantly evolving and should therefore be assessed on an ongoing basis. This assessment can be done via questionnaires filled out by the teachers and/or the child's caregivers, observations in the classroom, and/or direct assessment, as in the present study.
2. This assessment should take place at different times during the school day (e.g., circle time, center time, lunch, and other transition times) as children's social and emotional

capacities are challenged differently throughout the day.

3. Information from such monitoring assessments can inform teachers' lesson plans either for specific children or their class as a whole.

## Social Emotional Teaching

1. Teachers should dedicate part of their curriculum to talking about emotions, since emotional coaching is an important contributor to the development of emotional competence (Denham, 1998).
2. Teachers should strive to provide children with opportunities to practice their regulatory skills and provide feedback on their behavior. Praising the children when they successfully regulate their emotions will be an important contributor to further development of this skill.
3. Teachers can organize their teaching routines based on the results of children's individual assessments. Specifically, children who need more assistance with their social-emotional skills can be grouped together with children who exhibit more efficient social-emotional capacities. In this way, a more productive learning environment can be achieved with the goal of promoting children's social-emotional skills in order to maximize their academic abilities.

## Teacher Emotional Competence

1. Teachers should keep in mind that in addition to direct teaching about emotions during structured lessons, they teach children about emotions through normal daily interactions. Their own modeling of expression of emotions and the ways in which they respond to children's emotions will shape future emotional experiences and their expression. In other words, if a child is discouraged when expressing anger ("Stop that screaming"), she will learn that such emotion is not accepted. Consequently, her future emotional experience can hinder her social experiences (Denham, 1998). Moreover, children who understand emotions better are able to remain more positive during challenging interactions and hence are seen as more competent by their teachers (Denham, 1998). Therefore, tailoring these ways of interaction with the children to their emerging emotional skills will contribute to their academic abilities (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012).
2. Teachers are not alone in their efforts to promote children's social, emotional and academic readiness. By including parents in their plans, a developing child will benefit if all the adults she interacts with will tailor their interactions to her developing abilities and promotion of her emotional competence. Hence, teachers ought to share their observations, assessments and educational plans with the parents in order to apply the individually tailored plans across the environments the child is experiencing.

By examining the contributions of emotion expression and emotion regulation to children's successful navigation of preschool, we have drawn important guidelines for teachers to use in

their classrooms in order to promote children's emotional and social skills. Children who were positively engaged and regulated their emotions better during emotionally challenging situations demonstrated similar abilities during social play with classmates. Moreover, preschool teachers in this study rated these children as also more proficient in mastering more complex pre-literacy skills and adjusting to the Head Start classroom.

Preschool teachers are charged with the ever important task of promoting young children's pre-academic skills. The results of the current study underscore the importance of evaluation of emotional expressiveness and emotion regulation in the program planning and support of these skills by the Head Start teachers in their classrooms.

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