



SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Social-Emotional Learning for Early Learning

Introduction

Second Step SEL for Early Learning is a universal, classroom-based program designed to increase children's school readiness and social success by building their social-emotional competence and self-regulation skills. It supports skill development in four key areas of social-emotional competence: empathy and compassion, emotion management, friendship skills and problem solving, and skills for learning. Equipping children with Second Step skills helps ease their transition to kindergarten and sets them up for success in school and life.

Social-Emotional Competence and Self-Regulation

Social-Emotional Competence

Socially and emotionally competent children are skilled at managing their emotions and behavior, cooperating with others, forming positive relationships, and making responsible, ethical decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007). They can identify how they and others are feeling, make friends, and handle disagreements. Children who learn these social-emotional skills early in life are more self-confident, empathic, competent in using language to communicate, and able to relate well to others (Cohen, Onunaku, Clothier, & Poppe, 2005). They enjoy more positive interactions and relationships with peers and adults (Han & Kemple, 2006; Mo t et al., 2011). Children able to make friends and get along with peers and adults are less likely to be rejected, isolated, and bullied (Wilson, 2003). They are also happier and more successful in school (Duncan et al., 2007).

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Barkley, 2004; McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith, & Tominey, 2010). Children need self-regulation to delay gratification, control impulses, pay attention, and stay on task. Self-regulation is a key to school readiness that can be taught in early learning settings and benefit all children, not just those with challenging behaviors (McClelland & Cameron, 2011). Self-regulation skills provide a foundation for the development of social-emotional competence, helping prepare children to be successful in school and life.

Social-Emotional Competence, Self-Regulation, and School Readiness

The goal of early childhood education is to support young children's development of the skills and abilities required for school and life success. Children need more than literacy and numeracy skills to be ready to start school. School readiness also requires that children can get along with teachers and peers, manage strong feelings and have empathy, and work independently and cooperatively in the classroom (Thompson & Raikes, 2007). There is strong evidence that these skills predict early academic achievement; promoting them in preschoolers is critical for preparing them for a successful transition to school (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010; McClelland et al., 2007).

Unfortunately many children do not have the basic social-emotional and self-regulatory skills necessary for successful transition to school, or even to be successful in preschool (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, & Gomby, 2005; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; McClelland, Acock,

& Morrison, 2006). Not only do children lacking these basic skills face more challenges when transitioning to school, they are at increased risk for low academic achievement, emotional and behavioral problems, peer rejection, and later school dropout (Duncan et al., 2007; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006; Moffit et al., 2011; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003; Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Tremblay, 2005). Children with social-emotional skill deficits also have high rates of expulsion from preschool classrooms (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Early learning settings can support children's school readiness and help prepare them for higher levels of academic success by promoting the development of social-emotional and self-regulatory skills (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005).

Early Learning SEL Program Units

Second Step SEL for Early Learning promotes the development of children's social-emotional competence and self-regulation skills through activities and games across its five units of instruction. The following is a brief overview of program content.

Skills for Learning

The first unit focuses on four skills: listening, focusing attention, using self-talk, and being assertive. These skills for learning help prepare preschoolers for a successful transition to kindergarten and promote academic achievement in the early school years. The skills taught in the Skills for Learning Unit also support the rest of the program content because they provide a foundation for the development of socialemotional competence.

Empathy

In the Empathy Unit, children build their emotional literacy by developing skills for identifying and labeling a variety of emotions in themselves and others. Young children with high levels of empathy tend to be less aggressive, better liked, and more socially skilled, and they make better progress in school (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010; Eisenberg, 2000; Izard et al., 2001). The skills to identify emotions taught in this unit prepare children to learn how to cope with their

own strong emotions and think about how others feel in order to make friends and solve interpersonal problems.

Emotion Management

In the Emotion-Management Unit, children expand their feelings vocabulary and learn strategies to cope with strong feelings, reduce stress, and stay in control in emotional situations. Children who can manage their strong feelings are more successful in the transition to formal schooling (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). When feelings are not managed well, thinking and learning can be impaired (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010). Children can learn to reduce stress and stay in control by learning strategies to stop themselves, name their feeling, and take deep belly breaths. Having the skills to manage strong emotions such as anger, disappointment, frustration, worry, and excitement can improve children's ability to learn, get along with their peers, and make good choices.

Friendship Skills and Problem Solving

Positive social connections with peers support children's school readiness and are important for their happiness and successful development. In the Friendship Skills and Problem-Solving Unit, children learn steps for solving interpersonal problems with peers and skills for making and keeping friends. Based on research on effective patterns of thinking in social situations, children are taught first to calm down and then to follow two problem-solving steps: say the problem and think of solutions. Teaching children to use these steps can help reduce impulsive behavior, improve social adjustment, and prevent aggression and other problems that affect the success of children and youth (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010). Lessons in this unit also focus on friendship skills. These include using Fair Ways to Play (play together, trade, take turns), asking to join in play, and inviting others to play. Children able to solve problems and interact positively with peers will experience a more successful transition to school (McClelland et al., 2007).

Transitioning to Kindergarten

The fifth unit in Second Step SEL for Early Learning provides a review of the previous four units while encouraging children to think about how the skills will help them in kindergarten.

Brain Builders

Brain Builders are simple, fun games teachers can use to help reinforce skills children are learning in the Second Step Early Learning Weekly Themes. They are designed to increase children's ability to focus their attention, remember directions and other information, and control their behavior. These are sometimes known as executive-function skills and are an important part of self-regulation (Blair, 2002; Blair & Razza, 2007). These skills are connected to children's early math, reading, and cognitive skills. Playing the program's Brain Builder games one or more times per day and with increasing challenge will help children develop the self-regulation skills necessary for school readiness and success in life.

Conclusion

Second Step SEL for Early Learning teaches children the skills they need for school readiness and social and life success. With each unit of instruction, children build the social-emotional competence and self-regulation that will help them be successful in the early learning setting and ease their transition to kindergarten. They improve their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, solve problems, and make and keep friends. These socially and emotionally competent children are prepared for success in school and life.

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