

Getting to the **HEART** of Learning

**Social-Emotional Skills
across the Early
Childhood
Curriculum**

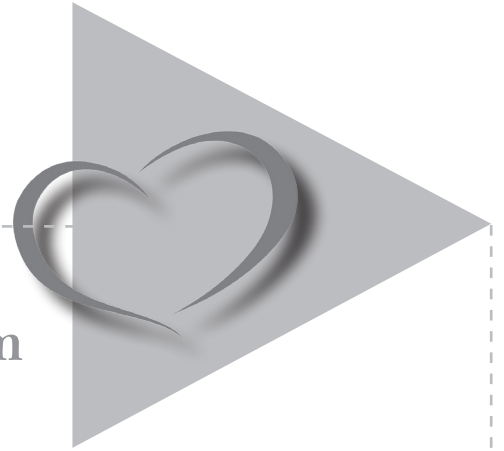


ELLEN BOOTH CHURCH

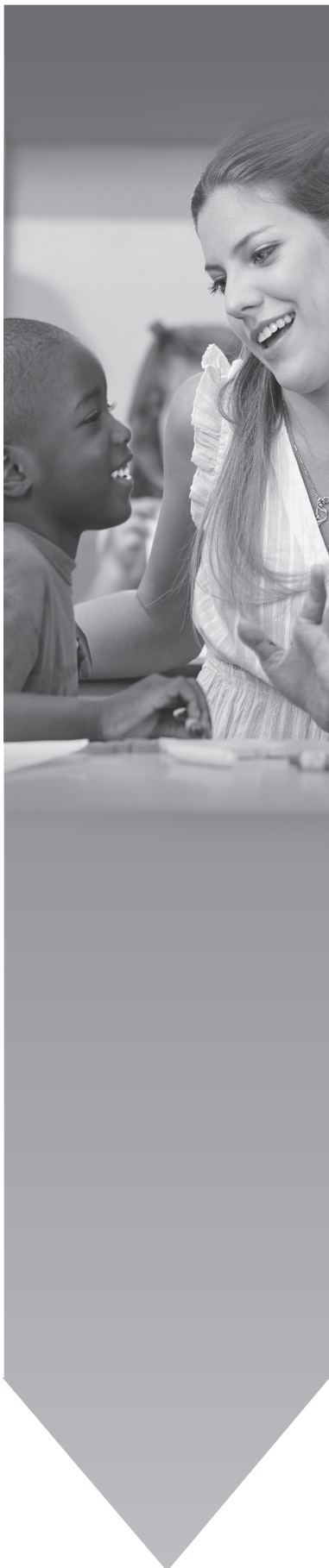
Getting to the Heart of Learning

Social-Emotional Skills across
the Early Childhood Curriculum

Ellen Booth Church



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Dedication

To my parents and first teachers, Francesca and Norval Church. They taught me not to just teach a subject but to teach the child.

Bulk Purchase

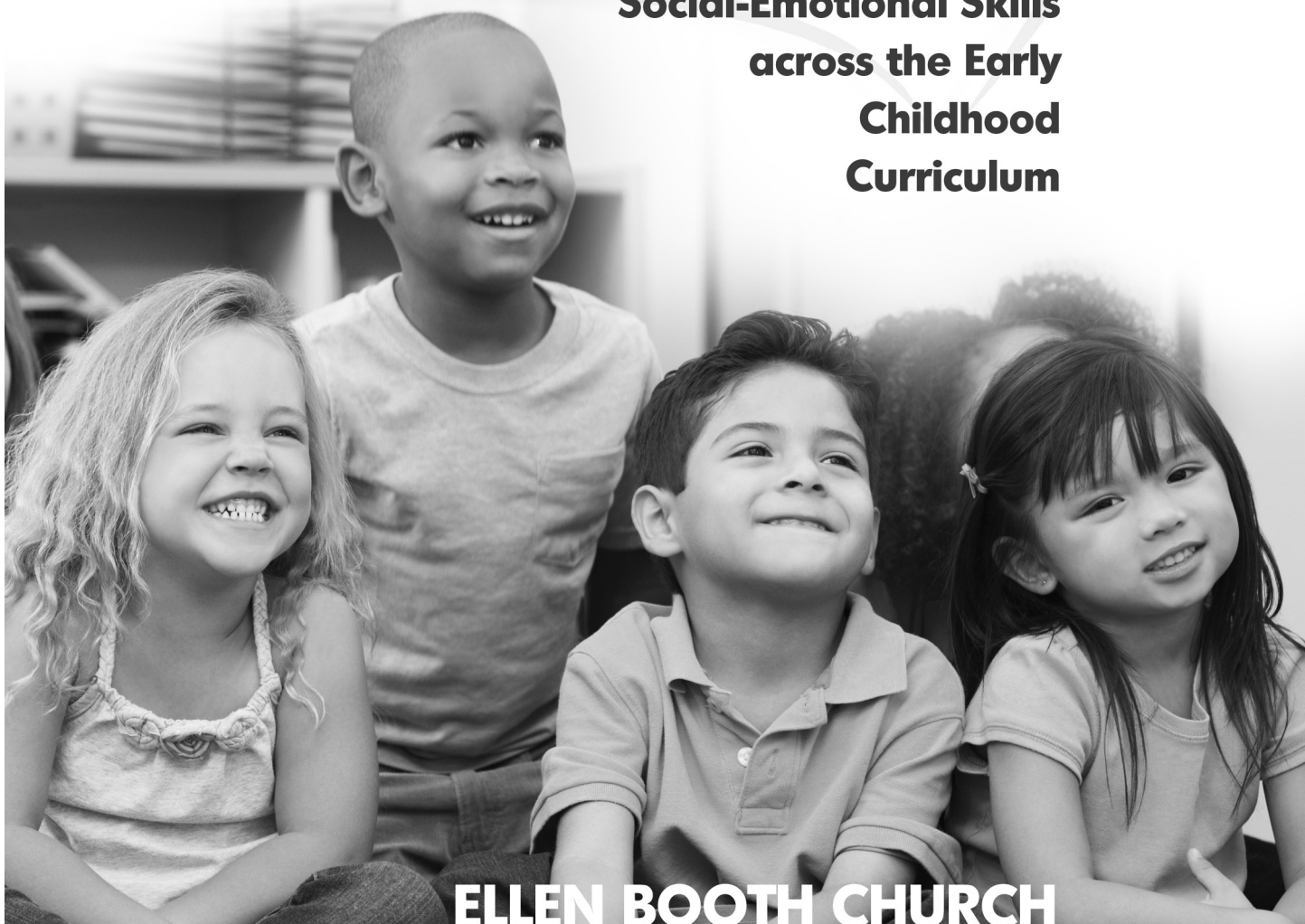
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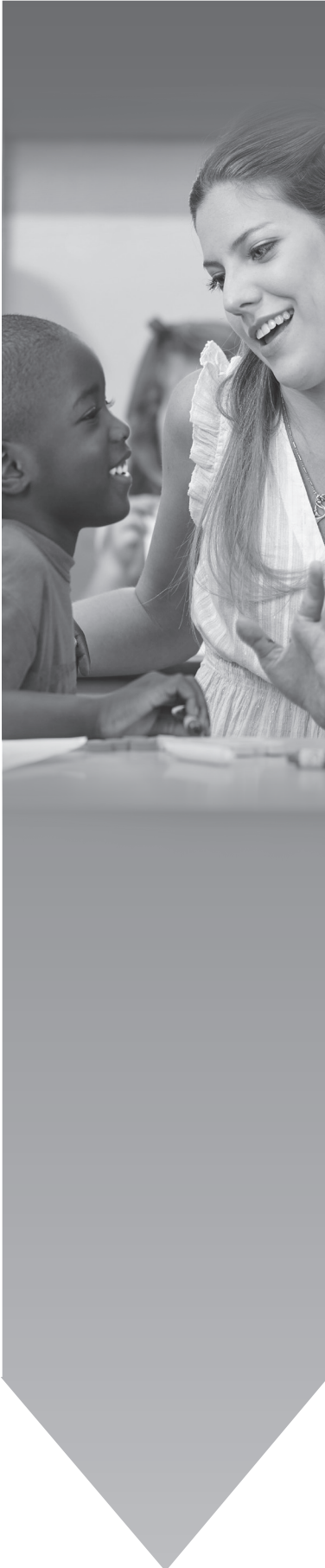


ELLEN BOOTH CHURCH

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**I think, at a child's birth, if
a mother could ask
a fairy godmother
to endow it with
the most useful gift,
that gift should be
curiosity.**

**—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT,
first lady of the United
States, author, and
politician**

Introduction

All learning is social-emotional learning. Children do not learn skills in isolation but through social connection and interconnection to the real world—their world. It is their curiosity about the world that stimulates their desire to learn and to share what they have learned. We all learn best when we care about what we are learning and whom we are learning it with. Children live their lives with their hearts and minds open and connected. From that union of heart and mind, they develop into people who are balanced, happy, and successful.

Take a quick look at what is being presented in the news, and you will see the need in our culture for social-emotional development. Preschool and kindergarten teachers recognize both the need to address social development in their students and with their students' families and the need to teach the basic skills that are essential to learning. These two things do not need to be separate; in fact, they truly are inseparable. Perhaps the trick is to recognize the connection and emphasize it in our interactions with children. It is one thing to know a concept and another to apply it to everyday life.

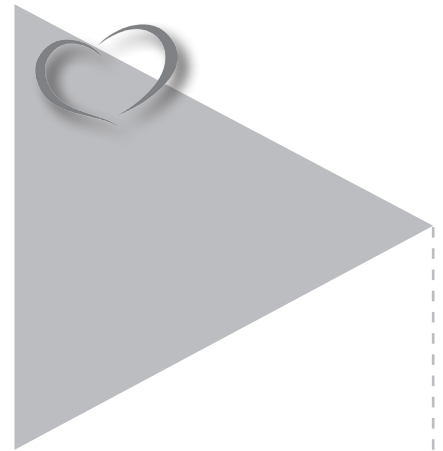
How to Use This Book

Each section—math, science, language, literacy, and motor skills—is designed to offer easy and interesting ways for the children to explore and develop their understandings. The activities list the subject-area skills the children will be learning, as well as the social-emotional skills that they will develop as they work together.

- **Let's Get Involved:** Begin a new topic with engaging circle-time activities. Introduce the concepts that you will explore, and get the children involved and interested. Group involvement builds social skills while creating a broader experience.
- **Let's Explore Together:** Broaden and deepen their explorations with activities designed to lead them to new discoveries. The activities can be done in centers or as large-group explorations and encourage teamwork, communication, sharing, listening, and other social-emotional skills that support children's success in the classroom and beyond.

- **Learning Extensions and Building Community:** Learning is an ongoing process that deepens when children revisit a concept in many different ways. This section provides activities that expand the learning both inside and outside the classroom. Playground and home activities help the children see how to apply the learning to the world around them. Family involvement helps children apply the social skills they are learning in school to their family relationships. And, activities with writing, art, music, and movement help children see the arts in all learning.

This book is much more than an activity book. It connects the reader both to curriculum content and to the deeper meaning of shared activities. Each activity is designed for building academic skills and social-emotional learning. Please join me as we explore some basic understandings and then dive into fun and learning that will create community as well as knowledge.



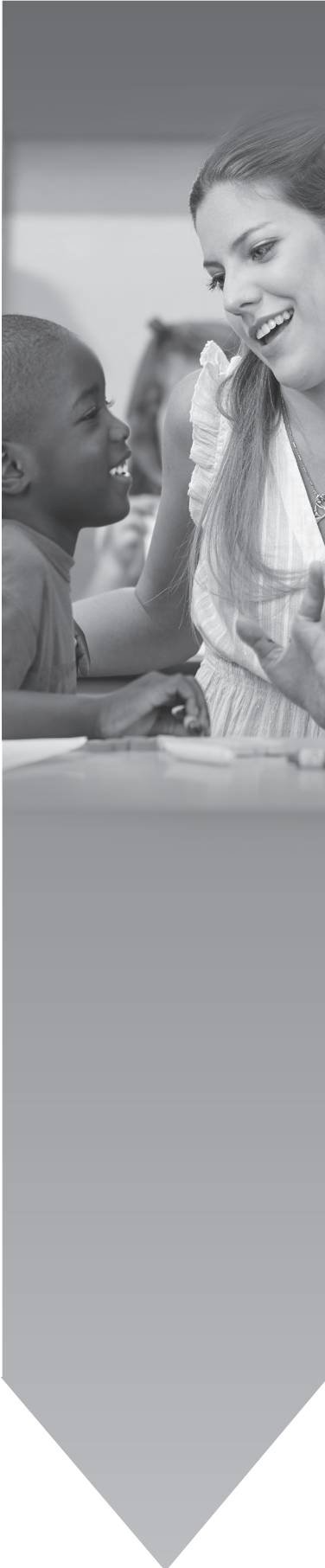


All Learning Is Social-Emotional Learning

CHAPTER 1

Social and emotional learning starts with you. Our own self-awareness is one of the most important ways we can assist children as they grow and learn socially and emotionally. By exploring your own feelings and approaches, you develop an understanding that can help you see how you view and respond to children. Take a few minutes to ask yourself some questions. You might want to explore a question a day. Write your thoughts in a notebook or journal, and revisit them throughout the year.

- How did I feel about school as a young child?
- What was my social style in preschool and kindergarten?
- What were my social challenges and successes in the early years?
- How can I use these memories to build awareness about the children I teach?
- As a teacher, how do I feel about going to school most days?
- What are the challenges of working with young children?
- What are the gifts of working with young children?
- How do I feel my group functions as a community?
- What do I do to build strong and meaningful relationships with my students?
- Do I listen and acknowledge feelings?
- Do I create an environment of trust and support that encourages children to share their feelings? How do I motivate children to solve their own problems?
- Does the classroom environment support individual styles and positive social behaviors?
- How much do we laugh and smile in our class?



Defining Social-Emotional Learning

If you take a look at recent writings about schools and programs, you will see these three letters: *SEL*. But what is SEL? Why is it so important? SEL is social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning can be described as the development of the skills children need to understand and manage emotions, become self-aware and self-regulated, develop an understanding of others, create positive relationships, and problem solve.

Studies are showing that children are more able to learn basic academic skills when their social and emotional skills are positive and strong. In fact, a report from the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network indicates that the key to success in kindergarten and later schooling is not whether children know their ABCs and 123s but the quality of their people skills. Being ready for school means being friendly, confident, cooperative, focused, and curious. This makes sense. Children are more able to concentrate on learning the basic skills if they feel successful, appreciated, and accepted in the group. Think of the young children entering your classroom for the first time. They are navigating a new environment with multiple expectations, rules, and children. Young children need an amazing combination of cognitive, motor, creative, and social-emotional skills to function in a classroom—and that is even before they learn their first letter or number. Often, a classroom full of children is the largest group of other children they have ever encountered. In the early childhood years, children are learning how to be themselves and be a part of a group, how to interpret others' feelings while trying to control their own. Wow!

Early childhood teachers are currently dealing with an increased need to address social and emotional issues in their classrooms. Challenging behaviors such as bullying and violence, which were once associated with older children, are now occurring in the younger children. At the same time, teachers are seeing people-pleasing behaviors and neutrality, which can be indicators of low self-esteem. There are many programs available to focus on and deal with these SEL issues directly. But at the same time, teachers must teach the basic skills in the domains of literacy and language, math, science, creative explorations, and physical development. This book is designed to do both! It helps teachers engage children in activities that will support social-skill development while also reinforcing skills in a variety

of other domains. This approach offers ideas to help teachers teach from a viewpoint of creating joy in the classroom: the joy of learning, the joy of interacting, and the joy of being!

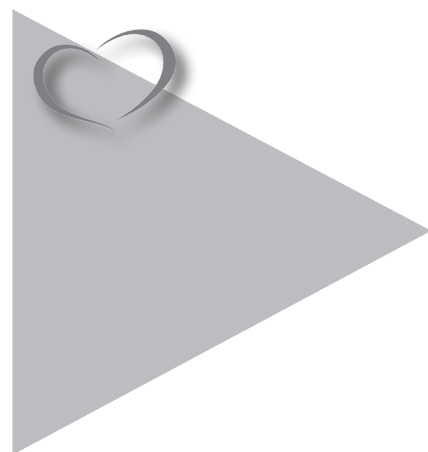
The Research Base

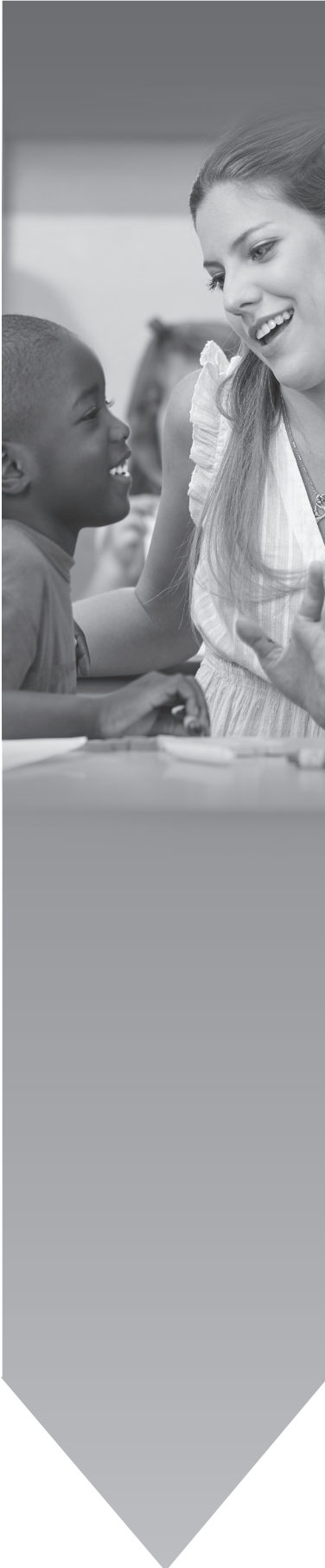
There has been abundant research in the area of social-skill development in preschoolers. One important study, the Tools of the Mind project conducted by Elena Bodrova and Deborah Leong, is based on the work of Lev Vygotsky. Interestingly but not surprisingly, their research supports children's use of their own mental tools, including social and emotional skills, to further develop their cognitive skills.

Similarly, the book *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, edited by Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips, cites recent research in early childhood development, underscoring the importance of social-skill development:

Establishing relationships with other children is one of the major developmental tasks of early childhood. How well children fare at this task appears to matter. It matters to the children themselves, creating a context in which they evaluate their self-worth, competence, and view of the world as pleasant or hostile. It matters to their future, as the patterns of peer interaction in early childhood increasingly predict whether children will walk pathways to competence or deviance in the tasks of middle childhood and adolescence. And it matters to the other children a child comes into contact with, as the experience of children in peer groups depends in good measure on the nature of the other children with whom they interact. Yet playing nicely, making friends, and being a good friend are not all that easy for young children. These tasks confront them with increasing demands on their developing cognitive and emotional capacities.

We can look to recent brain research to see the importance of social-interaction skills. Studies are showing that a child's ability to interact with others, control and express her feelings, and take care of basic self-help tasks independently are as important for success in school as any academic skills. But perhaps most important, research shows that the neural pathways needed for learning are actually constructed through positive interactions with others!





This is not news to early childhood teachers. We have always known the importance of positive interactions with children. However, these studies give us support for what we have seen, felt, and experienced in our wonderful group times and activities with children. All those special projects you share have actually helped prepare the children for learning. Each time you present a shared activity, sit in a group, or create something together, you are helping children make connections with others in the class, to share and care, to listen and speak in a group, and to feel confident when taking on new challenges.

Great Groups Set the SEL Stage

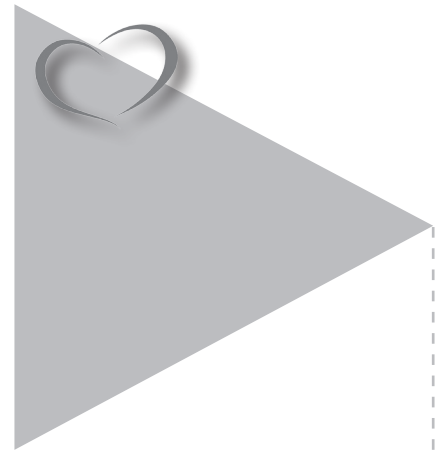
How many times have you heard an adult tell a child to “use your words” during emotional situations? The problem is that young children often do not have the words to use! Each of the activities in this book starts with a circle time. Circle time is one of the best places to set the stage for social and emotional learning through activities. Perhaps more than any other part of your day, your circle is the place for building community and collectively expressing thoughts and feelings. It takes a number of social skills to be able to just sit, listen, and take turns in a group, making circle time the perfect place to get started for the day. Consider your group time as a microcosm where prosocial awareness and growth can develop. The social dynamics of sharing, listening, taking turns, and respect are practiced every day in your meetings together. By helping children focus on cooperation and collaboration, you will be creating connections that will assist them in working together in the small group activities of this book. In fact, you can introduce each activity at circle time. This way you will be creating a focus not only on academic skills but also on social-emotional learning.

Your group gathering is also a wonderful place to introduce the vocabulary the children need to express feelings and name the social skills they are learning. Here are a few things to consider:

- **Focus on emotions:** Children often can talk about a book character’s feelings better than they can talk about their own. Choose books to read that depict characters who are experiencing a particular emotion. Point out the emotion word, and use it in the discussion. For example, you might choose a book with a character who is angry. You might ask, “How is he feeling? How do you know this?” Then invite children to think

about whether they have ever felt the same way. This simple process encourages the children to build a vocabulary of emotions that will help them use their words when a problem arises. You might want to focus on one emotion word a week, using literature, songs, and examples to keep the conversation going.

- **Focus on social skills:** Choose a social-emotional skill word each week to highlight with your group. Then, when you are sharing activities together, you can reinforce the vocabulary and the concept throughout the day. For example, you might want to talk about the word *listen*. An important part of feeling welcome in a group is the feeling of being listened to. Listening skills are essential to social and emotional development and are key to a good circle time together. Consider using reflective listening as a staple of your shared circle. By taking the time to focus on this skill, it will quickly become a natural part of your classroom community. In reflective listening, children are asked to remember and share what they have heard someone say. This is incredibly validating for children. You can model this in circle time by repeating what you heard a child say and asking if you are correct. Then, you can ask others to share as well.
- **Use gerunds to introduce social-emotional concepts:** Gerunds are verbal nouns that end in *ing*, such as *running* or *hopping*. The late, wise, and wonderful early childhood educator Clare Cherry suggests in her book *Please Don't Sit on the Kids* that teachers use gerunds to give simple directions in a positive way. This is a tried-and-true technique that really works. When you want children to remember what they are supposed to be doing, use one gerund as a short-and-sweet reminder of appropriate behavior. This is so much more effective than all the sentences of directions in the world. If, for example, children are not looking at you or listening, you could say, "Looking," or "Listening." Or, when children are running down the hall, you could say, "Walking." The one simple word is easy for children to hear and respond to, is empowering, and builds vocabulary. Plus, a gerund is a positive reminder instead of a big *no* or *do not*.





**Education is not
preparation for life;
education is life itself.
—JOHN DEWEY,
American philosopher and
educator**

Developmental Milestones of Social and Emotional Learning

Children meet social and emotional learning opportunities based on their experiences and their developmental levels. To better understand the ways children respond to these learning opportunities, it is helpful to know children's social-emotional tendencies at each age and stage. This knowledge helps us to have appropriate expectations and to create engaging activities that fit their needs.

Three-year-olds might:

- appear eager to please but may not always understand the rules;
- be hesitant to join in large-group activities and games;
- not always be willing to take turns and share;
- defend toys, space, and themselves physically with hitting, grabbing, and pushing; or
- observe others in play, play parallel with other children, or join in for short periods of time.

You can support them by:

- verbalizing, modeling, and reviewing the class rules for clarity and encouragement;
- offering short, simple social-interaction activities that provide an immediate sense of success;
- stopping an activity that is falling apart and positively redirecting them to another activity;
- allowing children to watch large-group activities without pressure to participate;
- finding simple ways for children to participate as a helper or as your partner;
- giving reluctant or disruptive children a job to do during circle time;
- understanding that they may not be able to share easily and providing multiples of toys and options that help children have a sense of success with sharing;
- starting out small and simple by counting out equal numbers of snacks or blocks to use and introducing the word *same* in terms of having the same number of items;

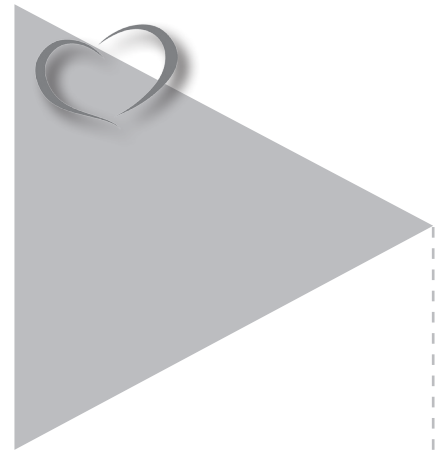
- playing simple turn-taking games and emphasizing turn taking in all activities, such as songs, dances, and board games;
- providing positive options for dealing with conflict by demonstrating actions a child can do to protect himself and his toys; and
- allowing children to find their own play styles while encouraging them to participate with others, such as by modeling interactive play with the children in the dramatic-play area.

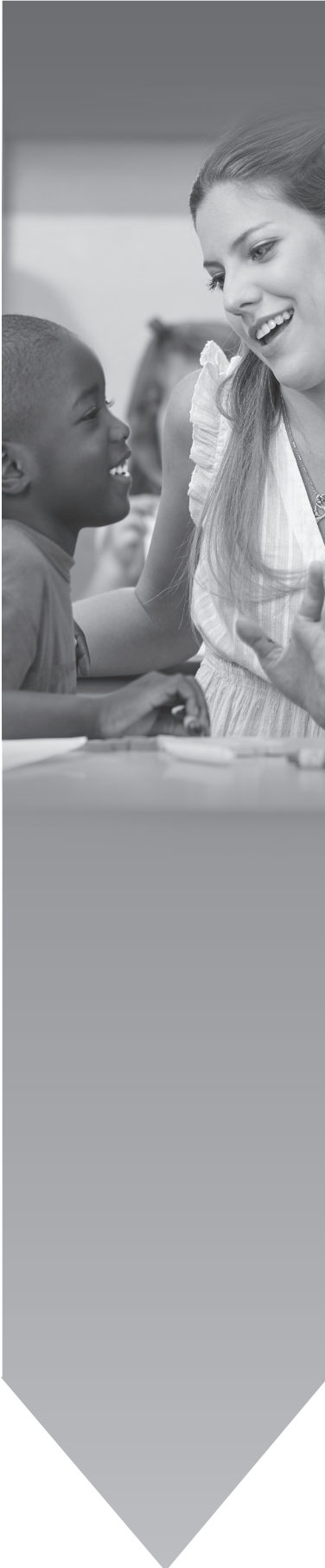
Four-year-olds might:

- look for approval and support from adults and can be overly enthusiastic at times;
- want to be told what to do and be proud of doing so;
- like to help the teacher and sometimes other children but may tattletale on other children if they think the rules are not being followed;
- start to use words instead of physical aggression but can be punitive and threatening;
- participate cooperatively in dramatic play, role-playing, and make-believe, and have an imaginary friend; or
- be able to sit and participate in large-group activities for longer periods of time but may still try to monopolize the conversation with exaggerated tales.

You can support them by:

- providing support that is specific to the behavior you want to encourage, such as telling the child you are proud of the way he is sharing a toy or putting something away;
- ignoring excessive enthusiasm if it is not disruptive to the class;
- encouraging a sense of cooperation among the children by letting them participate in creating class rules;
- inviting the children to share what they know of the class routines and rules;
- recognizing that the children may be very literal about the rules and may tattletale for small infractions;
- helping the children understand the difference between tattling and asking for help;
- modeling conflict-resolution skills and providing appropriate words and phrases to use in conflict;
- valuing dramatic-play interactions throughout the day, encouraging make-believe and creative thinking;





- understanding that the children can sit longer in a group but being aware of when they are getting distracted and losing attention; and
- using listening and turn-taking activities to build awareness of sharing the group's attention with others.

Five-year-olds might:

- cooperate in group activities without needing constant direction;
- follow directions but test the limits and authority of adults;
- enjoy making friends and have a special playmate or best friend;
- have better self-control of emotions and actions but still have difficulty in stressful situations;
- use laughter and comic behavior and words to gain attention and make friends;
- need adult support, attention, and comfort with challenges; or
- recognize other children's feelings and needs.

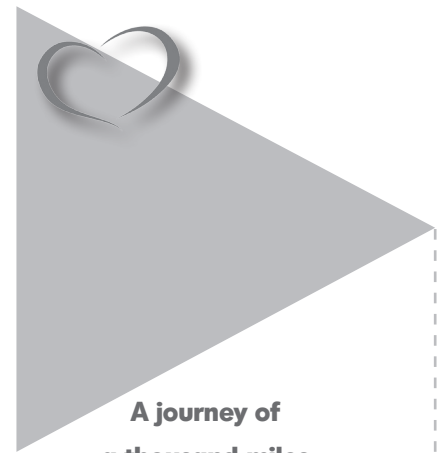
You can support them by:

- gradually extending group-activity times by carefully monitoring children's interest and capabilities;
- being aware that the children are developing their individuated selves and will naturally test limits;
- being flexible with the rules and directions to empower the children to begin to take responsibility for themselves and each other;
- understanding that a best friend one day may not be a friend the next day;
- setting up activities that encourage children to play with a wide variety of their classmates;
- watching for children who start to exclude others or create cliques;
- helping children notice when they are using self-control;
- using specific language so that children can understand what behavior it is that you are supporting;
- creating a joyful classroom filled with shared laughter and warmth;
- ignoring and redirecting children who use inappropriate humor to gain attention;
- remembering that, even though children are seemingly more socially and emotionally competent, they are still young children and will come to you for loving support and comfort;
- being the island of support they can return to when they feel challenged by waves of emotion and interaction;

- sharing words for emotions that children can relate to; and
- talking about the feelings and needs of characters in literature as a means for reflection and empathy.

Sailing the Seven Cs: Using Learning Activities to Build Social-Emotional Skills

Young children who come to your class are embarking on a voyage of school that could last them more than fourteen years. Along the way, they will meet a variety of children, teachers, and people. How do we prepare children for this journey? We teach them with social and emotional skills that will support them as they learn the content inherent in each level of schooling. We cannot predict everything young children will have to learn by the time they get to high school and college; the world is constantly changing. But one of the constants in the changing journey is the child's ability to be a happy, confident, and contributing member of the group. In the early years, we know that children who have the basic social-interaction skills are ready and able to concentrate on the task of learning academic skills. But a focus on SEL does not mean that children will have rich experiences that lead to reading, writing, and arithmetic. In fact, the approach in this book focuses not only on learning skills in the social and emotional areas but also on the academic realm as well. The activities are designed to invite children to think and problem solve on all levels from social to academic. It is simple: if a child is not able to take turns, listen, and sit in a group, she will struggle to learn what is being taught in the group.



**A journey of
a thousand miles
must begin with
a single step.**

—LAO-TZU,

Chinese philosopher and poet



THE SEVEN Cs OF SOCIAL- EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Cooperation

Communication

Curiosity

Caring

Contemplation

Confidence

Competence

Cooperation

As an early childhood teacher, you know the importance of building cooperation skills in your classroom. The activities you plan and the games and songs you use all teach children how to work cooperatively with others. In many ways, any activity you present to your group is a cooperative activity because the children must share, take turns, and listen. You can also choose activities that present even more obvious opportunities to build cooperation skills, helping the children learn how to empathize, work with, and get along with others. It is in the area of cooperation where children's self-regulation skills can be most tested. Through the challenge of working in a group, children learn how to regulate their feelings, behaviors, and attention. From these cooperative experiences, collaboration and great ideas are born. As a four-year-old once asked me, "Can't we all be nice and do it together?"

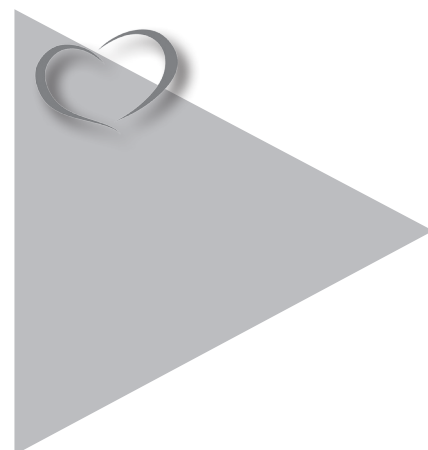
Communication

From cooperation comes communication. To truly be a member of a cooperative group, you have to be able to communicate with others. This is an interesting skill to develop in the early years because of the widely divergent language abilities of our children. Some children come to school with a vast vocabulary and are very self-expressive. Others might just look at you with big, wide eyes and say little or nothing! One of the key skills children can learn in your classroom is the ability to express themselves, to communicate and represent their ideas, feelings, and knowledge about the world. By creating an environment of acceptance for all, you send the message that children's voices will be heard and respected. When the children feel comfortable expressing an idea or opinion, they will be more open to learning in all areas of the curriculum. They will be willing to take the risks of thinking and problem solving that build higher-order thinking skills. Communication is an essential skill at the core of all reading, writing, math, and science skills. It is a great gift to be able to communicate ideas!

Curiosity

Children are naturally curious. The smallest pebble on the sidewalk can open doors of wonder and experimentation in a second. Science, math, art, and language can occur simultaneously in that moment of wonder. But, curiosity is also an important skill for social and emotional learning, because curiosity can help children take a more expanded view of the world around

them and all that inhabits it. How many times have you heard a child ask, “Why does she look different? Why does he walk funny?” and similar questions? These curious observations create the right moment to discuss acceptance and understanding of those with similarities and differences. Perhaps one of the most important skills to develop at this age and stage is a true curiosity of learning with each other. Through your small- and large-group activities, children learn to share their curiosity with others. We are always learning from each other!

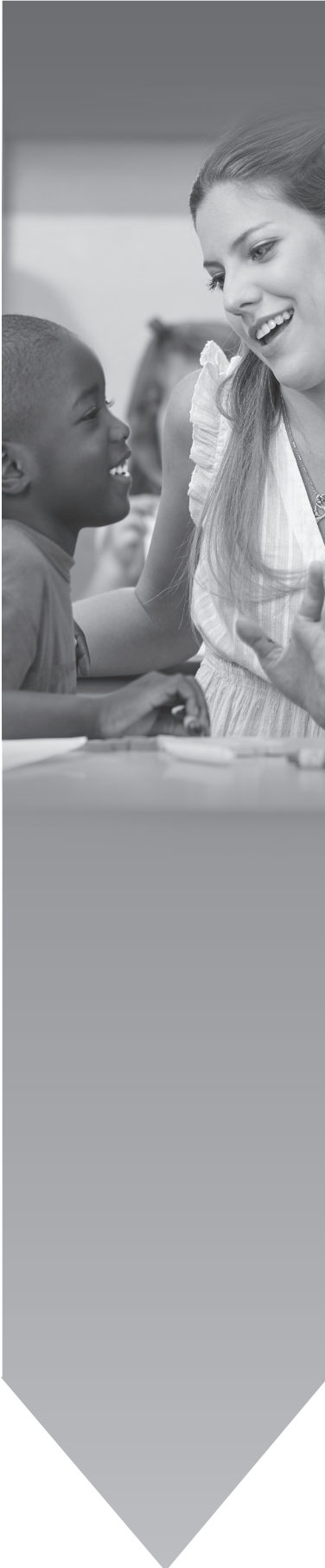


Caring

Curiosity can lead to caring, compassion, and empathy. When children notice the similarities and differences among their friends, they also learn to accept that we are not all alike but we all have feelings that can be hurt or helped by our caring interactions. It is amazing to watch children care for a new child in the class or offer to help someone who is struggling. Your shared activities help children to see how to support and actively care for each other. Children learn the joy of helping, listening, and supporting. As children develop out of the egocentric stage, they begin to see themselves as part of a larger whole. Children understand that sharing the world with others is not only a responsibility but also a gift!

Contemplation

This might seem like an unusual *C* to have in this list for young children, but it is actually a skill that children can learn at a young age. They just need to be encouraged to do it! Contemplation is the art of listening to our hearts and learning how to relax with our interplay with the world. More and more schools are offering opportunities in the day to stop, relax, rest, and reflect. Reflection time does not have to be a formal time. It can be a reminder for children to take a breath and stop before they react or respond to something. The good news is that children love these opportunities to reflect and are becoming more joyful. Plus, teachers are noticing a positive shift in the social and emotional climates of their classrooms. Just by taking a breath, we all can create space in the day that will let the jumbles settle and the clarity arise.



Confidence

Developing children's senses of confidence and self-esteem are essential. Your interactions help children feel good about their identities both individually and in relationship to others. This is an enduring skill that will help children feel it is safe to express an opinion, try something new, or make a mistake. If children believe in themselves, they will tackle more and more difficult learning challenges in all areas of the curriculum. Confidence helps children develop persistence and resilience. These are all skills that will assist children as they progress through school.

Competence

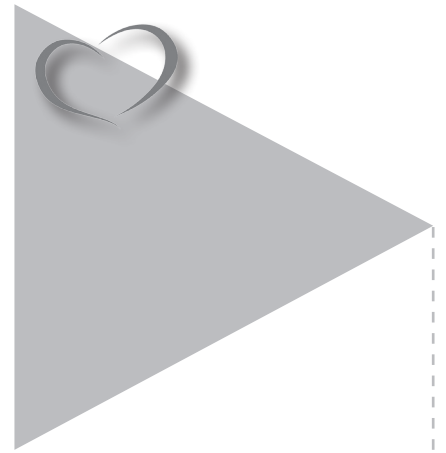
The journey brings us to the final C: competence. It is where all the others are leading us. Through our warm, nurturing acceptance, children develop confidence in themselves and trust that they are competent to handle the challenges of the world. While competence is related to confidence, it is different. Confidence can be viewed as a child's belief in his abilities. Competence is the child's perceived ease in participating in small- and large-group learning activities. Competence is the shore we are arriving at with a sense of joy in our sails.

Play Is the Vehicle for the Learning Journey

The activities here are based on interactions with real-world materials and with each other. They are open ended and play based in that they are designed to invite children to express creatively their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. One child's project will not look like another child's. We have heard it said before: play is important work for young children. Many of the skills children are learning in your class are best learned in play situations. Allow children to "mess around" with concepts, apply them to new situations, and construct their own knowledge. Children learn by investigating the world through interacting with it. Our first job as teachers is to set out the materials and concept and watch them engage. But that isn't enough. We also have to be prepared with questions that invite children to think about their play and what they are doing. Through your communications with children, you

fortify and honor their play. In the activities, I suggest questions you can ask children to take them deeper into understanding and reflecting about their play. Through sequences of questions and communications, you open the door to higher levels of thinking and build on the children's innate sense of wonder.

So, before you turn the page and read on, take a moment just for you. Rest and imagine you are floating on the sea. Take a deep breath, and smell the salt air. Hear the sounds of gulls and waves. Breathe and know that what you are doing for the welfare of the children really does make a difference. Thank you for your commitment to children.







Getting to the **HEART** of Learning

Seamlessly incorporate social-emotional learning into everyday explorations.



The best learning emerges in a classroom community where children feel accepted and appreciated for their ideas and actions. Through the activities in **Getting to the Heart of Learning**, Ellen Booth Church shows teachers and caregivers how easy it is to foster children's sense of curiosity through group explorations that promote social connection and positive development. With step-by-step instructions, **Getting to the Heart of Learning** weaves social-emotional learning into activities that support math, science, literacy, and motor skills. Rather than adding in activities throughout the day, these explorations integrate social-emotional learning across the curriculum through group involvement and building community. Learn how to strengthen home-to-school connections, too, with easy strategies that help families develop a shared vision for students' social-emotional and academic success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen Booth Church, a former associate professor of early childhood at Farmingdale State College, a campus of the State University of New York, has shared her unusual approach of combining cognitive learning experiences with creative play in a variety of books, magazines, and articles for early childhood educators. Ellen is currently writing and consulting for Scholastic's *Parent and Child* magazine. She lives in Durham, North Carolina.



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