

Mary Louise Hemmeter: Social and Emotional Development – Research to Practice

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Claire Lerner: Welcome to the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning podcast series, that is focusing on the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. In this podcast, we will hear from Mary Louise Hemmeter about social-emotional development in young children. We hope you enjoy this broadcast.

Announcer 2: From the ELOF — "Positive social and emotional development in the early years provides a critical foundation for lifelong development and learning."

Claire: Hello, Mary Louise. Thank you so much for coming in today to talk about the social-emotional development of young children — one of the key domains in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, fondly known as the ELOF, which describes the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that programs should be fostering in all children.

Mary Louise Hemmeter: Thank you for having me.

Claire: Okay, well, we're thrilled you're here. I think it might be helpful to start by talking about your background.

Mary Louise: Okay. I have been in early-childhood education my whole career. I've worked in a variety of settings, from childcare to Head Start to public-school pre-K.

I've done research, for the last 30 years, around issues related to young children, supporting teachers to implement effective practices, strategies for teaching children with disabilities, strategies for supporting children's social-emotional development. And I've also, for many years, been involved in work around supporting and training and coaching providers to implement the effective practices that we've been studying in our research.

Claire: I wonder if there is any recent research that you think would be helpful to highlight in this area of social-emotional development that impacts practice.

Mary Louise: I think that there are actually several pieces of recent research that are relevant to this topic. One interesting piece of research that came out last year was a study that looked at children 19 years after kindergarten. And when they looked back at how their teachers rated their social skills during kindergarten, that children who were able to get along with others, children who could problem-solve were actually doing better 19 years later. And so, I think that says a lot about what we need to be focusing on when children are young. And in fact, the things that they found made a difference when children were younger are things that we can teach.

Claire: So, what about this goal, that children will show interest and interact with and develop personal relationships with other children?

Mary Louise: I think we need to be more systematic in how we teach children to play with other children, how we teach children to — to do basic friendship skills, like, "How do you share? What does it mean to share? How do you take turns? What does it mean to take turns? What do you do when a friend needs help? How do you help a friend?"

Claire: This is hard work, and there's a lot of providers can do to scaffold and support those skills. So, can you describe one or two specific strategies that providers can use to really support those skills?

Mary Louise: One of the ways that we teach young children about social skills is through children's literature. Children's literature is generally rich with examples of how children get along with each other or don't get along with each other. And so, one of the things we often do is have teachers think about, "How can I read this book that demonstrates or models some examples of good social skills?" and then, "How can they use that book as an opportunity to teach?" And so, while they're reading the book, they can ask questions.

They can point out that children are helping each other or that children are taking turns or that children are sharing. After they read the book, they can do some activities around role-playing, where they actually practice those things. They can come back the next day and reread the book and ask children what are some ways that they helped other children the day before. They can talk about, "What are some ways you can help your friends today?"

And then they can use that language in their interactions with children across the day. I think sometimes we read children's books, and we think that children are gonna just absorb the messages from those books. But when we really want children to get something out of the book that has to do with specific skills, we have to think about not just reading the book and pointing those things out, but giving children opportunities to practice, to get feedback about those things, and then to be able to talk about the ways that they practice those skills with their friends.

Claire: Okay, great. So, what about when there's a challenge, when in vivo, in the classroom, children in the moment are having a hard time sharing? What are some strategies that providers could use to help children navigate that and problem-solve and resolve those kinds of differences and learn the skill of sharing, since it's such a biggie in group care?

Mary Louise: We have to be careful about sharing, based on the age of the child. So, we don't expect toddlers to share. And so, what do we do with toddlers around that?

We're careful to have multiple examples of high-priority toys. So, if all the children are into playing with the ramp with the balls that go down it, then we have multiple ramps with multiple balls that go down it, so that multiple children can be playing with it at the same time. So, for young children who aren't even ready to share, we try to prevent any problems we might have by just having multiple material.

Claire: So, let's move on to a skill that falls under the domain of emotional functioning, which is children learn to express a range of emotions. So how can providers support that in the young children in their classrooms?

Mary Louise: So, this is one of my favorite things to talk about, because I think that young children experience a range of emotions, and often we're not intentional about teaching them to express those emotions. So, children feel jealous and they feel scared and they feel frustrated and they feel proud and they feel happy and they feel excited. They feel all those things, and too often we're not intentional about teaching them what to do when they feel those ways. And so, when we don't teach them what to do, they often express those emotions in inappropriate ways like hitting or kicking or grabbing a toy or running away or not following directions. If children had ways to communicate emotions appropriately, they'd be less likely to engage in problem behavior. We teach children emotions by modeling how we're feeling and how other children are feeling throughout the day.

Claire: Thank you so much again for coming in today.

Mary Louise: Well, thank you.

Claire: We hope you've enjoyed this podcast featuring Mary Louise Hemmeter on how the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework applies to social-emotional development in young children. Have a great day.

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