

## 5 Questions with Dr. Mary Louise Hemmeter

### Social-Emotional Learning

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Jennifer Boss: Hi, I'm Jennifer Boss, director of the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. Social and emotional development skills are so critical for children's success in school and in life. Let's listen in as my friend and colleague, Dr. Mary Louise Hemmeter, one of the country's leading experts in this area, talks about what you can do to promote children's healthy social and emotional development.

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Dr. Mary Louise Hemmeter: Hi, I'm Mary Louise Hemmeter, and I'm a professor at Vanderbilt University.

Woman: How do education managers make the case that social and emotional skills are needed for school success?

Dr. Hemmeter: I think we make the case about the importance of social-emotional development by thinking about the research. So, we know that the research says that children who are rated as having better social skills during kindergarten do better in school, and they do better in later life outcomes as well. We know that when we ask kindergarten teachers, what is it you want children to do when they come to kindergarten? They want children to be able to follow directions. They want children to be able to engage with their peers. They want children to be able to persist at difficult tasks, manage their emotions. And those are the things we teach when we teach social-emotional skills. The other thing we know is that, for children to engage in the learning environment, they have to have good social skills and good emotional competencies, meaning they have to be able to interact with their friends. They have to be able to interact with adults. They need to be able to engage in the environment. And they have to be able to do all of those things to benefit from the literacy, math, science, social-emotional instruction that they receive.

Woman: How does this focus change the way we think about challenging behavior?

Dr. Hemmeter: Often children who have delays in their social skills or who don't have more sophisticated emotional competencies will engage in behaviors that look challenging to adults. So, when they don't know how to take turns, they'll take toys from kids, or when they don't know how to communicate that they're angry, they'll have a temper tantrum and throw something. And our response to those behaviors should be to say, "What skill is the child missing, and how can I help them learn that skill?" So, if a child's hitting his friend when he wants to play with a toy, how can I teach him to ask for the toy? So, we can say to a child, "Sherman, you look like you're really frustrated right now. Let's practice what we can do when we're frustrated." And actually model for the child, have the child do it, give the child some

feedback, so that when their emotions are really escalated, it's just a matter of reminding them to do it. But we have to give them those practice opportunities a lot. We have to remember that learning social skills is no different than reading, learning to read or write or count. We have to give them lots of opportunities for practice, lots of opportunities where they get feedback and lots of opportunities to do it in the context in which we really want them to be able to do it.

Woman: How can an education manager ensure these skills don't get overlooked?

Dr. Hemmeter: I think education managers, administrators need to be sure that teachers, education staff see social-emotional as a priority in the program. So, if it appears to the staff that really what's important is math and literacy, and when you have time do social-emotional, then teachers aren't going to see it as a priority. So, I think the first thing is that administrators, education managers need to make it a priority. They need to verbally say, "This is a priority in our program." They need to be sure it's embedded into other initiatives. They need to be sure that teachers get the support they need to learn effective teaching strategies around social-emotional skills. They need to be sure social-emotional development is included in their school readiness goals. They need to be sure that social-emotional is seen as something that you have to teach, not just as something that happens by putting children in social settings. And I think, ultimately, just like everything else teachers are expected to do, they need to see social-emotional development as a priority in the professional development that the program provides. And then when it's integrated into the priorities of the program, it's integrated into school readiness goals, it's integrated into professional development, then it will be seen as something that's important for teachers to do.

Woman: What does the literature tell us about creating learning environments that promote social and emotional development?

Dr. Hemmeter: So, the literature gives us a lot of information about creating supportive environments to promote children's social-emotional development. The literature clearly tells us that relationships matter, that having good, positive interactions with adults matters in how children learn. The literature tells us that consistency and predictability is really important for children, that children are more likely to learn when they know what to do, know how to do it, when there's a consistent and predictable schedule in the classroom. The literature tells us that children are more likely to engage in appropriate social behaviors when they know what those appropriate social behaviors are, when we've taught them how to do those things. We know that children are more likely to learn in a classroom where they feel like they belong. So, we know that environments that promote positive relationships, that are consistent and predictable for children, that promote a sense of belonging are environments in which children are more likely to thrive, are more likely to develop the social-emotional competencies they need, and more likely, ultimately, to learn and be ready to go to school.

Woman: How can we help parents support social-emotional learning at home?

Dr. Hemmeter: I think that children are most likely to learn social-emotional competencies when everybody's working on it, right? But we also have to be careful not to assume that just because people are parents, they know how to teach social skills, or they know about the importance of consistency and predictability or they know about teaching children to calm down. And so, I think that a really important part of our job is as we're working on social-emotional skills at school, that we're helping parents understand how to work on those at home. So, if we think consistency and predictability and a daily routine is important, and that's what we're doing at the beginning of the school year, we need to be sharing information with parents about why it's important to have a consistent and predictable morning routine. We have to be sure we're sharing that information with families in a way that they can use it, that they can do it as a part of their daily routine, and that doesn't put pressure on them to do something more than they're already doing, just helping their child through their daily activities.

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