Have you noticed the types of behaviour that some young children exhibit in order to establish their ‘place’ in the early childhood setting? And have you noticed they settle on what works best for them, but not necessarily what works for their peers? The failure of many young children to form harmonious and rewarding peer relationships is of increasing concern to early childhood educators, who identify ‘skills to foster social competence’ as a critical component of professional development (Elliott & Slee, 2005, p. 13).

Essential social skills focus on the central importance of positive peer relationships and include developing self-control, learning to reflect empathy, interacting positively with others, resisting peer pressure and expressing feelings sensitively. Socio-emotional competency is reached when a child independently exhibits these types of social and emotional skills at the appropriate time and place (Slee, 1985).

To assume that children enter early education knowing how to interact positively is equivalent to expecting them to be literate or numerate. We must teach for socio-emotional competencies, acknowledging that children learn from observation, curriculum-integrated social skill programs, guided performance and constructive feedback.

If we view antisocial behaviour objectively by asking whether it is deliberate, or the only tool in the box, it is likely to be the latter. Failure to take turns, listen, share, follow directions and join group activities appropriately often develops into aggressive actions such as verbal abuse, biting, hitting and kicking. These are in turn linked to poor academic performance and are possible antecedents to lifelong socio-emotional problems.

FOUR CORE STRATEGIES

In his very useful work The prepare curriculum: Teaching prosocial competencies, Arnold Goldstein (1999) identified four core strategies for teaching socio-emotional competencies: modelling, role-playing, performance feedback and generalisation training. These strategies were used successfully by four-year-old Maisie’s teacher to help Maisie develop social competency. A veteran of several centres across Australia, when she first arrived at her current centre Maisie would not take turns, listen, or follow instructions. She pushed, hit, bit and kicked her peers when ‘things did not go her way’.

i. Modelling - The teacher used this strategy, which involved praising desired behaviours in Maisie’s peers, to encourage her to take turns. The teacher used specific terms such as ‘Thank you Jude for waiting for your turn to use the paint’. Maisie learnt that in order to get the same quality attention as Jude she would need to develop and use the skill of taking turns. Formal words such as ‘good work’ or ‘well done’ were not used, as Maisie had to receive a clear message of what was expected of her.

Modelling should be accompanied by shaping, the technique of praising approximations of desired behaviour. For example, Maisie was standing in the queue for handwashing, but calling out ‘It’s my turn, it’s my turn’. Her teacher reminded her that although she was standing in the queue ‘nicely’, taking turns also meant waiting quietly. So instead of being ignored or spoken to for calling out, Maisie was praised for using a positive skill and reminded of how that could be improved upon. Shaping is an essential technique for building socio-emotional competencies in young children.
Small group role playing allows children to practise sequences of social skills mirroring real-life situations. If early childhood education is to prepare children for a society characterised by interdependence and cooperative effort, practitioners must provide children with frequent and meaningful experiences in functioning cooperatively in groups (Jones & Jones, 2001). Maisie role-played with three other children, all of whom were good role models. Her teacher took them through each component of the social skill until they gained mastery of the total skill.

Performance feedback should be given during role play as well as during real life performance of a skill. To do this, the teacher accompanied the small group to outdoors play and praised Maisie when she observed her waiting for her turn to have a swing. Unless social skills are reinforced during real life performances, they fail to have meaning and are not sustained.

Teaching for generalisation - Very often skills taught in the classroom stay in the classroom, as newly acquired skills tend to be situation specific. To avoid this, social skill acquisition must be taught to generalise. That is, also applied in other settings and with other personnel. Maisie’s teacher enlisted the support of adults and peers so that the newly acquired skills generalised to outdoor areas, to the local playground and the home.

Problem Solving

Children who have difficulties gaining social competency may lack the capacity to discern situations where appropriate social skills should be used. For example, what might be acceptable behaviour in the backyard at home is not necessarily acceptable at the centre.

The following problem-solving matrix works well with very young children:

1. What happened, Maisie? Wally pushed me over so I hit him.
2. What did you want to happen? I wanted a turn on the swing.
3. Did hitting help? [Did your response help?] No.
4. What should you have done? Asked if I could have a turn.
5. What will you do next time? Ask.
6. Is there something you do after you ask? Ask and wait quietly.

The Adult Role-Model

The power of the adult as a role-model cannot be underestimated. I challenge the bold to compare a list of socially unacceptable behaviours in their young children with a video recording of their own teaching. Are there any similarities? I used to wonder why the students I taught made faces when the grumpy principal left our room, until the wind changed one day.

June Slee
School of Education
Charles Darwin University

References


Guiding children’s social development theory to practice (5th edn) includes research and information covering the broad areas of enhancing relationships with children and managing behaviour.

It looks at the knowledge base of how professionals think about children’s social development and how they respond to it.

This book is available from Early Childhood Australia - to order or to find out more visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/sund196 or freecall 1800 356 900.