

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE

ENVIRONMENTS

Companion Document for

Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning,

and Approaches to Play and Learning

clip art design

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# Introduction

There is a wealth of research on how social and emotional learning and approaches to play and learning impact school achievement, as well as long-term life success. A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted as part of this project and can be found at <http://learningstandards.wikispaces.com/Literature+Review>. This research illustrates that the ideal conditions for social and emotional learning occur when children begin to spend time out of their homes engaged with other children and adults. This usually takes place in early education and care settings, when there are positive classroom relationships between adults and children, children and children, and adults and adults; when there are focused opportunities for increasing social and emotional understanding; when there are connections to academic curriculum; and when these elements are used along with rich play experiences and constructive use of resources and materials.

By developing Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning and Approaches to Play and Learning, Massachusetts strives to have all children from birth through third grade develop and maintain trusting, healthy, positive interactions and relationships with both adults and peers; develop a positive sense of self and self-efficacy; express a healthy range of emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; understand the role of social interactions and develop the skills needed to regulate attention, impulse and behavior.

The Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning and Approaches to Play and Learning give the field a framework for supporting the development of these important competencies and should be considered in the context of the larger developmental continuum for these two domains. Supporting children’s social and emotional learning and approaches to play and learning should be embedded across all developmental domains and all curriculum areas throughout the day, and should be connected to the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks* for preschool and kindergarten. Social and emotional learning skills are easily and logically integrated with academic learning. Adults can build activities from children’s interests or units of study that address objectives from multiple standards and curriculum areas.

# The Environment

A supportive environment includes physical space, equipment and materials, daily structure and planning, as well as the relationships between adults and children. The environment needs to be carefully planned based on knowledge of typical development of children, as well as the specific developmental needs of the population. Many factors influence children’s learning and behavior. Thus, the environment should be thoughtfully designed to be responsive to children’s needs, and should provide opportunities for learning and growth in all developmental domains and curriculum areas.

Since classroom quality and teacher-child interactions are key, schools and programs should ensure that teachers have adequate training and professional development, and utilize tools that are available to ensure the quality of classroom environments and interactions, including but not limited to the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the Caregiver Interaction Scale (Arnett, 1989), and the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT). The CSEFEL Pyramid Model takes a

proactive approach to development in these areas and considers the environment as a foundation for success. The CLASS “is an observation instrument developed to assess classroom quality in preschool through third grade classrooms. It focuses on the interactions between teachers and students and what teachers do with the materials they have. The CLASS was designed to create a common metric and vocabulary that could be used to describe various aspects of quality across the early childhood and elementary grades” (Pianta, 2008).

# The Learning Environment

Whether the “learning environment” is in a school, center, or home, the adults who interact with children play a key role in what children do, accomplish, or learn from any experience. Adult communication and relationships with children are critical elements of the “climate” or environment, as are children’s relationships/communication with their peers.

The learning environment, which includes both indoors and outdoors, should promote the development of children’s critical thinking skills; foster children’s awareness of diversity and multiculturalism; and support children’s enthusiasm and engagement as key dispositions in their approaches to learning. These dispositions are nurtured as children engage in in-depth investigations and explorations of their environment and with a wide variety of materials, individually and with others.

“Early childhood education must strive to involve young children in reciprocal learning interactions with teachers and peers rather than isolated ‘pre-academic’ work, and it should capitalize on children’s natural interests and intrinsic drive to learn, rather than follow an adult-determined agenda. Stated simply, young children learn best in an interactive, relational mode rather than through an education model that focuses on rote instruction” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Active, experience-based learning is crucial. A rich and supportive learning environment provides materials and activities that support children’s

interests, promotes purposeful play, and facilitates learning within and across all developmental domains (cognitive, physical, social, and emotional needs) and all curriculum content areas.

Additionally, “effective teaching in early childhood care and education settings requires skillful combinations of explicit instruction, sensitive and warm interactions, responsive feedback, and verbal engagement/stimulation intentionally directed to ensure children’s learning while embedding these interactions in a classroom environment that is not overly structured or regimented" (Downer et.al., 2010).

# The Social Environment

Children’s relationships with significant adults help to build trust, and the feedback children get from trusted adults impacts their learning and behavior, as well as their self-perception. Adults can help children to build relationships with others, and in turn children support one another in learning, as well as play.

A significant adult may be any person who has an important impact on the child’s early development (family member, teacher, caregiver, coach, etc.). It is important for all those adults to be mindful of the way they interact with children and the potential impact of these interactions on their future.

Adults who work together in a classroom should use a team approach that promotes mutual understanding of children’s developmental and learning needs, as well as mutual understanding of each adult’s strengths, needs, and roles. Other staff who interact with children (e.g., family support professional, librarian, nurse, specialists, etc.), as well as auxiliary program personnel (e.g., bus driver, cafeteria staff, etc.), also help to build a strong and caring environment, and should be included in professional development related to social and emotional learning.

“Young children benefit from opportunities to develop ongoing, trusting relationships with adults outside the family and with other children. Notably, positive teacher- child relationships promote children’s learning and achievement, as well as social competence and emotional development.”(NAEYC, 2009).

Research shows that “one of the most consistent findings in the early childhood literature is that an emotionally warm and positive approach in learning situations leads to constructive behavior in children” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Positive relationships can be promoted when adults:

* model good listening skills.
* acknowledge when children are caring or helpful toward others.
* address children and adults the way they would like others to address them.
* support children’s growing independence as well as a spirit of cooperation and community.
* support children in communicating their individual ideas, feelings, and preferences, and promote acceptance of multiple perspectives.
* recognize and accommodate a wide range of ways for children to demonstrate their understanding, skills, and abilities to communicate.
* acknowledge children’s successes, accomplishments, and appropriate behavior with specific feedback.
* use children’s literature to support social and emotional development and to teach about specific themes.
* interact respectfully with children and other adults; show genuine interest in their lives, ideas, experiences, and feelings, and demonstrate enjoyment of their time together.

# The Physical Environment

The physical environment includes the types and arrangement of furniture and equipment, as well as the creation and organization of learning centers. Adults are key in arranging the physical environment, acquiring equipment and materials, and planning activities for centers that contribute to children’s purposeful play.

A supportive physical environment includes:

* well-defined, distinct learning centers with a variety of materials to integrate content areas (e.g., library area includes soft furniture, picture books, big books, books for adults to read aloud, books on current topics of study of children’s interests, and headsets with audiotapes or CDs; block area includes unit blocks, hollow blocks, vehicles, street signs, pencil, paper, books, people, pictures, etc.).
* arrangement of space and equipment to promote children’s interaction (to work or play face to face, or side by side) and a variety of surface heights for floor play, standing, etc.
* selection and arrangement of equipment and materials to ensure access by all children, including those with disabilities.
* materials that support awareness of diversity and multiculturalism (e.g., dolls that represent different races/ethnicities, musical instruments from various cultures, costumes and props for dramatic play, photographs representative of the children, families, and community).
* active and quiet centers that promote uninterrupted play and work (e.g., avoid having the block and dramatic play areas, which allow for interactive/noisy play and movement, located near quiet areas such as library, writing center, or technology).
* “alone space” (that is visible to adults) for one child to go that is distinct and separate from other learning centers, with books, small puzzles, sensory materials, and “fidget toys” that may support children in calming themselves.

# The Temporal Environment

The temporal environment encompasses all parts of the day: the time children spend in learning, resting, socializing, and transitioning from one activity to another. Intentional planning, teaching, and supporting routines and schedules help children to understand what is happening and for how long, what will come next, and when and how to change activities (e.g., snack, circle time, center activities, outdoor play).

The daily structure of routines/activities should accommodate planned and unplanned, as well as structured and unstructured experiences. There should be blocks of time for children to delve deeply into their play, solve problems that arise, and build focus and attention. A predictable schedule and routines are important, but flexibility is also important to accommodate individual needs and foster success for all children (e.g., varying attention spans,

“Good programs for young children must have structure. . . . Good teachers structure the program at every moment — through the materials they select, the questions they choose to challenge the children, the order and rhythm of the day” (Hyson, 2001).

developmental disabilities, etc.), spontaneous teachable moments, and unexpected opportunities for laughter and sharing.

A balance of active and quiet activities is another key element of the temporal environment. This balance helps support children throughout the day, providing opportunities to work out stress, for quiet reflection, and to ultimately support higher level attention and learning. Movement and active exercise throughout the day help children to concentrate and self-regulate and should be provided through unstructured times when children can both socialize and self-select their physical activities. Gross motor activity for all children, regardless of physical ability, woven into both indoor and outdoor learning experiences, addresses children’s need for movement and facilitates their large muscle development as well.

The temporal environment works best to support social and emotional learning and approaches to play and learning skills when:

* the daily schedule reflects integrated learning opportunities and incorporates time for play, self-initiated learning, creative expression, and large-group and small-group learning opportunities.
* a significant portion of the day is focused on curricular goals that are met through rich

and intentional learning opportunities, including play.

* staff teach children the recurring schedule of routines and make them aware of changes that may occur, such as fire drills, special visitors, or field trips.
* time is allowed within the schedule for children to revisit things that need further attention, or are not finished.
* transitions are structured so that children do not have to spend excessive time waiting between activities; are supported by visual or auditory reminders, and are used as opportunities to reinforce learning goals by engaging children in fun or interesting activities.

# Play

Given the societal changes that children face in today’s world, it is especially important that play be seen as an important component of education and lifelong learning, and that adults have a basic understanding of how they can facilitate development and learning through play.

Play, a voluntary activity done for its own sake, offers involvement in an enjoyable activity in which the play itself is more valuable than the outcome. In the process, the player may engage in imagination, exploration, problem-solving, self-discovery, negotiation, and a host of other important learning experiences. Through play, young children construct and represent their knowledge of the world.

Young children’s play has specific functions and takes many forms. By exploring various materials, children develop knowledge about their nature, characteristics, and capabilities, and discover ways they might use them. As children practice skills, and recreate and revisit experiences, they grow to understand them.

Scaffolding means “providing just enough assistance to enable each child to perform at a skill level just beyond what the child can do on his or her own, then gradually reducing the support as the child begins to master the skill, and setting the stage for the next challenge. Scaffolding can take a variety of forms; for example, giving the child a hint, adding a cue, modeling the skill, or adapting the materials and activities.” (NAEYC, 2009)

This might take place through dramatization, visual arts, movement and dance, constructions, storytelling, writing, and may or may not result in a “product.” Observing children’s words and actions during play provides teachers with important information

about children’s understanding of concepts, which helps teachers to set goals and plan future learning experiences to advance children’s cognitive, social-emotional, or relationship skills.

In recent years, kindergarten teachers nationwide have expressed increasing concern that time for play experiences is often set aside to maintain focus on academics and standardized testing.

Kindergarten classrooms should be rich in child-initiated play, while also supporting focused learning. Time for intentional play allows children to become deeply engaged at a complex level that supports every content area in the curriculum.

As children experience success with social and emotional problem-solving, they become better at self-regulating and “reading” emotions. Five- and six-year-olds are highly motivated to stay

within the roles and rules of play and act out their self-regulation abilities. They practice inhibiting impulses, acting in coordination with others, and making plans (NAEYC, 2009). Children of this age still need guidance and support from teachers to help them engage in the sustained, complex play that is most beneficial to their development.

Within a rich play-based curriculum, early childhood educators can implement the expectations of early learning standards, including language, literacy, and other academic content (Hyson, 2003, NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2002). Play can produce a powerful blending of enjoyment with academic learning when intentionally structured and facilitated by teachers who provide scaffolding (e.g., modeling, coaching, or prompting skills in reading, writing, mathematical or scientific thinking), and who observe and reflect on children’s development and learning in play. Strong early childhood teachers understand how to differentiate the level and nature of support for each child based on individual learning goals and development.

# Relationships with Families

A positive social environment is one that partners with families and community members and recognizes the contributions of each. It is welcoming to families, respecting and supporting their role as their child’s primary teacher. Social and emotional skills develop every time a child interacts with parents, peers, teachers, and others. Enhancing

“Skill sets (whether social, emotional, or academic) are enhanced when they are mutually supported and reinforced at home and at school.” (Albright, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011)

parents’ and teachers’ social and emotional knowledge, skills, and dispositions empowers them to effectively model and apply the skills children need to learn. Moreover, when parents and teachers use similar strategies to foster social and emotional learning, it eases the transition between home and school and creates consistency and continuity in expectations for behavior, which enhances not only children’s developing skill sets, but also the relationships between children and their parents, teachers, siblings, and peers.

There are two key elements to creating partnership with families. First, home-school communication provides an avenue to inform families about children’s progress, skills, and strengths, and to share strategies on how to promote learning and pro-social behavior at home. Second, teachers are influential in creating a classroom climate that supports family involvement. Parents who are invited and feel welcomed are more likely to be actively involved in their children’s education both at home and in school. (Albright, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011)

To support children’s social and emotional learning, and approaches to play and learning through family engagement, it is important to promote consistency between the home and the program.

This could include learning specific language that families use in behavior management or daily routines, and sharing the language and visual cues for behaviors that are used in the program, or to help families to build on children’s development and learning outside of school. Programs and schools can welcome, communicate with, and encourage families to participate in ways that are appropriate to and comfortable for each family and culture (e.g., using blogs, social media, newsletters, bulletin boards, volunteer opportunities, parent-child activities, parenting education, making space and time for families to interact with one another, parent advisory groups, etc.).

School districts and community programs can coordinate in designing transition policies and

activities from preschool to kindergarten.

Family engagement includes inviting families to share knowledge about their culture and incorporating children’s home culture into the curriculum, and it is a reciprocal sharing of information about children’s development and progress.

# The Impact of Culture

When discussing the impact of culture on children’s development of competencies in social and emotional learning and approaches to play and learning, culture can be defined as “a shared system of meaning, which includes values, beliefs, and assumptions expressed in daily interactions of individuals within a group through a definite pattern of language, behavior, customs, attitudes, and practices” (Mashinot, 2008).

Anthropological research highlights differences among cultural groups with perspectives ranging from individualistic to interdependent. The goal in cultures labeled “individualistic” is individual fulfillment where children are encouraged to make choices and to strive assertively to achieve them. The goal in “interdependent” cultures is the well-being of the group, and personal assertiveness can be frowned on to the degree that it upsets group harmony (Mashinot, 2008).

Both perspectives contribute to a healthy society and can be incorporated into early childhood programs.

Cultural beliefs, perspectives, and values may be handed down from generation to generation, internalized by families and children, and exhibited in behaviors or attitudes that may be perceived as “good/not good.” Educators can help children to understand, accept, and embrace a variety of perspectives and values without judgment, therefore, adults also need to be aware of their own cultural perspective and how it influences their interactions and teaching.

Understanding cultural perspectives is necessary to build and maintain interpersonal relationships at all levels.

All the elements of the environment, play, culture, and connections with families contribute to the adult’s ability to support competencies in academic areas, social and emotional learning, and approaches to play and learning.

**Moving Forward**

Children's competencies in the domains of social and emotional learning, and approaches to play and learning are critical to their success as learners. Equally important are the learning opportunities that adults provide to young children to help them build the foundations of these skills and competencies. As a next step in supporting administrators, educators and families in guiding children's development, ESE, in collaboration with EEC, is working to revise the *Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences* and the *Kindergarten Learning Experiences*. As part of this revision process, guidance for implementation of supportive environments and learning opportunities that help children to build social and emotional learning competencies as well as approaches to play and learning will be included.

# References

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# Resources

Listing of websites, books or resources are simply intended to be useful resources and should not be interpreted as endorsement or recommendations, nor assumed that these are the only or best resources.

* Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning: [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/)
* Responsive Classroom[: http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/)
* Reader’s Workshop
* Tools of the Mind: [*http://www.toolsofthemind.org/*](http://www.toolsofthemind.org/)
* Mind in the Making <http://www.mindinthemaking.org/>
* Open Circle <http://www.open-circle.org/>
* Brain Gym <http://braingym.org/>
* Second Step Curriculum <http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step>
* HighScope Early Childhood Curriculum: <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=1>
* PBIS: Positive Behavior Interventions and Support: [https://www.pbis.org](https://www.pbis.org/)
* SECURe (Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Understanding and Regulation) is a program for students and educators in grades pre-K to 3. See website: <http://carss.umich.edu/school-reform-secure/>
* The Classroom Assessment Scoring System(CLASS) can be used to assess teachers’ use of emotional support <http://teachstone.com/>
* The Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) can be used to measure implementation of the Pyramid Model in the classroom and guide teachers in supporting children’s social- emotional development ([http://ecdc.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/TPOT-](http://ecdc.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/TPOT-Manual.pdf)  [Manual.pdf](http://ecdc.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/TPOT-Manual.pdf))
* PATHS: Promoting, alternative, thinking strategies curriculum (2012). Retrieved from ([http://www.pathstraining.com](http://www.pathstraining.com/))
* The National Crime Prevention center has curriculum online for k-elementary [http://www.ncpc.org/topics/by-audience/law-enforcement/teaching-children/activities-](http://www.ncpc.org/topics/by-audience/law-enforcement/teaching-children/activities-and-lesson-plans/strangers-grades-k-1)  [and-lesson-plans/strangers-grades-k-1](http://www.ncpc.org/topics/by-audience/law-enforcement/teaching-children/activities-and-lesson-plans/strangers-grades-k-1) ,
* The Center for Missing and Exploited children has a safety information; <http://www.missingkids.com/Safety>,
* The Committee for Children supports the use of Second Step (violence prevention) and Talking about Touching curriculum for pre k -elementary school children <http://www.cfchildren.org/child-protection/talking-about-touching>
* CASEL outlines various SEL curriculum and their content. <http://www.casel.org/guide>
* Link to SE curriculum, Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation <http://www.ecmhc.org/tools/curricula.html>
* Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework for K-12 [http://www.tolerance.org/anti-bias-](http://www.tolerance.org/anti-bias-framework)  [framework](http://www.tolerance.org/anti-bias-framework)

**Social stories**  <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html> <https://depts.washington.edu/hscenter/social_stories>

**Visual schedule & Daily Schedule**  <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/module3b/handout2.pdf> <http://depts.washington.edu/hscenter/teacher-tools>

**CSEFEL Resources**  <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/modules-archive.html> <http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/teaching_tools>

# Book lists

* Booklist see: <http://learningstandards.wikispaces.com/Booklists>
* NAEYC book list on Health, Safety, and Nutrition <https://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/ChildrensBooks_Health_Nutrition_Safety.pdf>
* CSEFEL’s book nook list includes suggestions for teaching strategies to accompany many children’s books. CSEFEL also has social stories (pre made and directions) with instructions and examples for visual schedules
* <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/booklist.pdf>
* <http://www.state.nj.us/education/holocaust/resources/ToleranceBookListPK8.pdf>

**Information and resources for teachers and other adults:** Teachers and other adults may benefit from programs or strategies that focus on their own self-awareness, particularly awareness of their reactions to situations that are challenging or stressful (e.g., learning to be reflective, responsive and flexible; mindfulness programs for educators). Some strategies for building mindfulness include deep breathing, reflection, yoga, and secular meditation.

* + CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) <http://www.care4teachers.org/>
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  + Webster-Stratton, C. (2012). *Incredible years: Dina dinosaur’s social skills and problem- solving classroom curriculum*. Available from [http://www.incredibleyears.com](http://www.incredibleyears.com/)
  + Montessori has strategies that support self control: [www.infomontessori.com/practical-](http://www.infomontessori.com/practical-life/control-of-movement-walking-on-the-line.htm)  [life/control-of-movement-walking-on-the-line.htm](http://www.infomontessori.com/practical-life/control-of-movement-walking-on-the-line.htm)
  + Songs: <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/games/songs/index.htm>