

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

Early childhood is a period of both great opportunity and vulnerability. Early childhood experiences set the stage for later health, well-being and learning. In the past, most of the focus was on building young children's academic skills in an effort to ensure they were prepared for school. **However, in recent years a growing body of research has demonstrated the strong link between young children's social-emotional competence and their cognitive development, language skills, mental health and school success.** The dimensions of social-emotional competence in early childhood include:

- **self-esteem** - good feelings about oneself
- **self-confidence** - being open to new challenges and willing to explore new environments
- **self-efficacy** - believing that one is capable of performing an action
- **self-regulation/self-control** - following rules, controlling impulses, acting appropriately based on the context
- **personal agency** - planning and carrying out purposeful actions
- **executive functioning** - staying focused on a task and avoiding distractions
- **patience** - learning to wait
- **persistence** - willingness to try again when first attempts are not successful
- **conflict resolution** - resolving disagreements in a peaceful way
- **communication skills** - understanding and expressing a range of positive and negative emotions
- **empathy** - understanding and responding to the emotions and rights of others
- **social skills** - making friends and getting along with others
- **morality** - learning a sense of right and wrong

These dimensions of social-emotional competence do not evolve naturally. The course of social-emotional development—whether healthy or unhealthy—depends on the quality of nurturing attachment and stimulation that a child experiences. Numerous research studies show that a relationship with a consistent, caring and attuned adult who actively promotes the

development of these dimensions is essential for healthy social-emotional outcomes in young children. Actively promoting social-emotional competence includes activities such as:

- Creating an environment in which children feel safe to express their emotions
- Being emotionally responsive to children and modeling empathy
- Setting clear expectations and limits (e.g., "People in our family don't hurt each other.")
- Separating emotions from actions (e.g., "It's okay to be angry, but we don't hit someone when we are angry.")
- Encouraging and reinforcing social skills such as greeting others and taking turns
- Creating opportunities for children to solve problems (e.g., "What do you think you should do if another child calls you a bad name?")

Children who have experiences such as these are able to recognize their and others' emotions, take the perspective of others and use their emerging cognitive skills to think about appropriate and inappropriate ways of acting. Conversely, research shows children who do not have adults in their lives who actively promote social-emotional competence may not be able to feel remorse or show empathy and may lack secure attachments, have limited language and cognitive skills and have a difficult time interacting effectively with their peers. Evidence shows, however, that early and appropriate interventions that focus on social-emotional development can help to mitigate the effects of negative experiences in ways that lead to improved cognitive and social-emotional outcomes.

CSSP'S PROTECTIVE AND PROMOTIVE FACTORS

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to create new ideas and promote public policies that produce equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families, especially those most often left behind. The foundation of all of CSSP's work is a child, family and community well-being framework that includes a focus on protective and promotive factors. Using an ecological perspective:

- **protective factors** are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that **mitigate or eliminate risk**
- **promotive factors** are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that **actively enhance well-being**

Taken together, protective and promotive factors increase the probability of positive, adaptive and healthy outcomes, even in the face of risk and adversity.

The **Strengthening Families™** and **Youth Thrive™** frameworks exemplify CSSP's commitment to identify, communicate and apply research-informed ideas that contribute to the healthy development and well-being of children, youth and families. As numerous studies affirm the importance of early childhood experiences in influencing adolescent and adult behavior, these frameworks provide a view of two interrelated phases of the lifespan developmental continuum: Strengthening Families focuses on families of young children (0-5 years old) and Youth Thrive on youth ages 11-26.

| The Strengthening Families Protective Factors | The Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental Resilience • Social Connections • Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development • Concrete Support in Times of Need • Social-Emotional Competence of Children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Resilience • Social Connections • Knowledge of Adolescent Development • Concrete Support in Times of Need • Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence in Youth |

Parents, system administrators, program developers, service providers and policymakers can each benefit from learning about and using the Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive frameworks in their efforts to ensure that children, youth and families are on a path that leads to healthy development and well-being.