

Think and Act in the Name of Prevention

By Debi Mahler, LCSW



As a trained Clinical Social Worker, I reflect on my professional career over the last 25 years and feel quite proud at the direction my career has taken. I started in the clinical arena, working in self-contained programs for children with severe emotional and behavioral disorders. For the last 17 years, I have worked at the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC), where we focus on promoting the social and emotional health and resilience of all children. This universal, primary prevention focus has captured my heart. Even after all of these years, my passion continues to grow, recognizing that prevention in early childhood is how I can help change the world. While the “change the world” comment might sound grandiose, working at the Devereux Center for Resilient Children has confirmed my belief that prevention and promotion of social and emotional skills are what children need for life-long success and happiness. In addition, primary prevention can also serve to reduce and prevent challenging behaviors from becoming barriers to children in navigating this crazy little journey we call “life.”

As the Director of Professional Development for the Devereux Center for Resilient Children, I receive calls each day from individuals looking for professional development opportunities that can help to support the social and emotional needs of young children. The majority of calls are focused on finding training that will help early care and education professionals better manage young children who are displaying challenging behavior. Let’s face it, challenging behavior makes it difficult for teachers to teach and support all of the other children in the classroom. While we certainly offer a variety of different opportunities to build knowledge and skills in working with young children with challenging behavior, I often feel compelled to speak to the importance of prevention as the very strategy to address challenging behavior.

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I recently read an article titled, "Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness," by Damon Jones, PhD, Mark Greenberg, PhD, and Max Crowley, PhD. The authors examined the link between early competencies and future success. Specifically, they explored the non-cognitive trait of social competence. They looked at a prosocial communication subscale, made up of eight items associated with how a child interacts socially with others. This scale was completed on 753 kindergarten children in 1991. The researchers then looked at associations between the scores on this scale when these children were in kindergarten and adult outcomes in the areas of education/employment, public assistance, crime, substance abuse and mental health 13 to 19 years later. Jones, Greenberg and Crowley (2015) state, "Overall, results indicated statistically significant and unique associations between teacher-assessed prosocial skills and outcomes in all domains examined." For example, they found that:

Graduating high school on time and obtaining stable employment were associated with higher scores on the social competence scale.

Early prosocial skills made it less likely for the adults to receive public assistance.

Early prosocial skills also made it much less likely of adult involvement with police before adulthood.

At the end of the article, the authors discuss how their results demonstrate the predictive power of teacher-measured prosocial skills independent of variables of socioeconomic status, family risk status, neighborhood quality, and various behavior traits and early academic ability, which they controlled for in their study. They conclude by saying, "Much evidence has shown how effective intervention in preschool and the early elementary years can improve child non-cognitive skills in a lasting way."

We all want to make sure that those on the front lines who are working with young children and families have the knowledge, skills and resources they need to support young children who may be struggling. These skills and supports will likely include more focused training on the popular topic of "challenging behavior." With that said, this article and other research studies continue to underscore the power of prevention. The research findings confirm that using sound screening and assessment tools on ALL children to get a better idea of their social and emotional competencies allows professionals and parents to get a better handle on supports a child needs *now* to reduce, or better yet, *prevent* challenging behavior from happening later on. In addition, making changes to environments where children spend their time to make sure they foster social and emotional development can also be key to increasing opportunities for children to display positive behavior.

In a time where there never seems to be enough time, I challenge us all to think critically about the environments, skills and experiences that *all* children need to be successful in school and in life. When we think and act in the name of prevention, we can have a huge impact on the lives of young children, the people they are to become, and the world we all share!

Referenced Article: Jones, D. E., PhD, Greenberg, M., PhD, & Crowley, M., PhD. (2015). *Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness*. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(11), 2283-2290.