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Teaching Social and Emotional Competence in Early Childhood

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This study evaluated the impact of a social skills curriculum on the social behaviors of students in two pre-kindergarten classrooms. Participating were 30 students in a program based at a university child study center. The average age of the participants was four years ten months. The income levels of the families varied from low social economic status to high middle economic status. Two examiners independently completed the Social Skills and Attitude Scale (SSAS) for each child. The examiners observed the children and recorded children's pre and post intervention behaviors on a checklist. The study yielded positive evidence that the social skills instruction and activities in the Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence *did make a meaningful difference. Paired sample t-tests were run on all Pre:/Post: test pairs in order to measure significant change in social skills behaviors over the course of the intervention. With the exception of Shares ideas, t-test results indicate significant change in social skills on all but one of the pretest/posttest pairs.*

Teaching effective academic content is essential; however, teaching social skills is equally important because children's performance in school is related to their ability to get along with peers and adults and to follow the rules of their environment. Students who display poor social skills are more likely to get rejected by others and are frequently punished because of their inability to abide by school policies and procedures (Lovitt, 2007). Healthy social development of children depends upon their learning and internalizing standards of social conduct as well as transferring and applying these standards in directing their behavior in various environments and situations. Social competence is linked to peer acceptance, teacher acceptance, and post school success. Besides the family, schools exert a dominant influence in the lives of children as they develop socially and emotionally (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001).

Research has supported significant correlations between affective instruction and a decline in discipline problems as well as improvements in academic performance (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has fostered research to show a connection between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and academic success. It was found that where SEL competencies were implemented, students demonstrated appropriate behaviors and were more motivated to learn (CASEL, 2003). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 strongly emphasizes scientifically based practices in evaluating instruction. The U.S. Department of Education requires that all instruction, cognitive as well as physical and affective, should be guided by theory and carefully assessed so that they actually do what they intend to do. Measurement of effectiveness is critical to the validity of a social skills program. Such programs should be replicable and validated and supported by researchers in the field (Report of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2002). This study was implemented to measure the efficacy of a social skills program, *The Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence.*

Program Description
The *Connecting with Others; Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence* series was included in CASEL's *Safe and Sound* list of SEL recommended programs. This guide provides a road map for schools and districts that are launching or adding social, emotional, and academic learning programs. The program was partially developed by teachers within the region of Lafayette, Louisiana

and consists of four volumes to foster heightened social competence in students in grades K-two, three-five (Richardson, 1996) grades six-eight (Richardson & Evans, 1997) and grades nine-twelve (Coombs-Richardson & Meisgeier, 2001). Although the program was initially developed to help educators assist students with special needs to develop pro-social skills in a general education classroom setting, the activities are appropriate for all students. The skills in each of these dimensions are not exclusive and may overlap. The curriculum is meant to be flexible and teachers are encouraged to be creative and include activities relevant to their own situations and to their students' experiences. Six dimensions, Concept of Self and Others, Conflict Resolution, Communication, Socialization, Sharing, and Empathy/Caring are included along with songs, poems and play activities.

The Connecting with Others program focuses on students' active involvement and generalization of the social skills outside the classroom. The teacher directly teaches and demonstrates the concepts while looking for opportunities to model behavior and reinforce pro-social skills as they occur. The dimensions are not sequential, but teachers are advised to introduce the lessons in the *Concept of Self and Others* dimension first in order to foster awareness and motivation for the subsequent skills. Suggested activities are included in the program, however it is permissible to use different activities as long as they are aligned with the goals and objectives of the lesson. The program is intended to be progressive and teachers can expand and keep it current by supplementing each lesson with up to date films, music or videos/DVD's. Newsletters are developed to encourage family participation and transfer of skills taught in the classroom to the home. The teacher sends home a newsletter describing the target social skills and suggests an activity the parents can implement at home. Effective social skills instruction is comprised of two essential elements: a teaching process that uses a behavioral/social learning approach and motivating strategies and activities to involve and empower the participants.

The program includes 30 lessons, five in each of the six dimensions. Each lesson focuses on one major goal and four objectives. The lesson is presented within the context of a specific lesson cycle. However, the prepared scripts were created as guides and not intended to be read verbatim. The lessons include components derived from effective teaching practices, and follow a continuous cycle in which each learning concept builds on the previous one (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2006). In addition to directly teaching the skill, teachers are encouraged to use guided questioning to involve the students as active program participants.

Theoretical Framework
The lessons in the *Connecting with Others* program are based on three theoretical frameworks, Transactional Analysis (TA) (Freed, 1991) Positive Assertion Training (PAT), (Alberti & Emmons, 2001) and Cognitive Behavior Modification (CBM)(Meichenbaum, 1977) A *Getting Started* section describes each theoretical concept in a concrete, practical and comprehensible manner to give students a context for subsequent skills lessons. The program features a cartoon character, KT, Cockatiel, who appears periodically to explain the concepts and provide examples.

The basic principles of Transactional Analysis (TA) are taught prior to introducing the first dimension. Lessons frequently refer to the different ego states. Berne (1964) examined man's multiple egos and observed that behavioral changes occur in people as they interact with others. Positive interactions occur when one is aware of self and others. Gardner (1999) refers to this concept as interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. Interpersonal Intelligence is concerned with the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people. It allows people to work effectively with others. Intrapersonal Intelligence entails the capacity to understand oneself, to appreciate one's feelings, fears and motivations. It involves having an effective working model of us, and to be able to use such information to regulate our lives

As early as the second year, children's *me-self* begins to emerge. Toddlers begin to develop a sense of self as an object of knowledge and evaluation. This stage consists of all qualities that distinguish the self from others. It includes physical characteristics, possessions, and personality traits. As children grow older, they develop attitudes, beliefs, self awareness and awareness of others (Berk, 2006) The Connecting with Others program addresses this concept through examination of the different *Me's*. The program's character is depicted in various ego states. The ADULT mode is referred to as the *Thinking Me*. The PARENT mode is given two natures: *Caring Me* and *Bossy Me*. The CHILD is also given two natures: *Impulsive Me* and *Enthusiastic Me*. The *Thinking Me* intervenes in a problem-solving situation, and uses cognitive strategies to solve the problem.

Vygotsky believed that cognitive development is dependent on social interactions and is a life long process from birth to death. Social learning actually leads to cognitive development. Vygotskian theory of cognitive development proposes that assisted discovery as well as constructive discovery and peer interactions guide children's learning in their zone of proximal development (Wink & Putney, 2001). There is emerging research suggesting that cognitive behavioral intervention can be used to teach pro-social behaviors as well as to decrease disruptive behaviors. Cognitive Behavior Modification (CBM) provides children with tools to manage their own behaviors. It involves teaching the use of inner speech to acquire self-awareness and self-monitoring (Smith, 2002). Strategies in T*he Connecting with Others* program incorporate a *how to think* rather than a *what to think* approach, thus empowering individuals to become self-sufficient. The children are taught to use the *Thinking Steps*, Stop, Think, Plan and Check to reach solutions and to evaluate their decisions.

Assertiveness training focuses on cognitive, affective and behavioral procedures to increase self-advocacy and interpersonal communication. Alberti and Emmons (2001) define assertive behavior as effective, whereas aggressive and non-assertive behaviors are ineffective. An assertive belief system values personal rights as well as the rights of others. Assertiveness training involves learning the basic social skills that deal with clearly expressing oneself to others, persisting with goals in spite of opposition, and appropriately standing up for rights when faced with conflict. Assertive individuals are able to deal with criticism without damage to their self-esteem. They are able to refrain from becoming intimidated, defensive or angry. They can express their rights and opinions with respect for the rights of others. Assertiveness training is effective with shy and withdrawn children, as well as with aggressive and obnoxious youngsters. Children learn that they can reach their goal without submissiveness or aggression. Various activities in the program, such as role-playing, help the children to stand their ground in hypothetical situations, while sharpening their communication skills and good judgment.

Character education involves teaching children basic human values. The *Connecting with Others* program addresses character development as well as social skills. Students are taught pro-social skills necessary to accept themselves and others, and to be accepted by others by developing an interest in social awareness. Schools have typically relied on traditional reactive behavior management techniques to attempt to decrease students' inappropriate and disruptive behaviors and increase desirable behaviors. Rather than waiting for the manifestation of problem behaviors, proactive techniques such as teaching appropriate behaviors can successfully decrease the likelihood of problem behaviors.

Purpose of the Study
The present investigation evaluated the effectiveness of a social skills program, utilizing the curriculum from the *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence for grades K-two* in building social skills and decreasing anti-social behaviors. This research was implemented in two early childhood classrooms setting in a child study center at a University. The adult participants reviewed the curriculum and agreed that many of the activities were appropriate for the pre-K children in the study. The research question addressed the students' acquisition of social skills as a result of the training. Did the targeted students show growth in the targeted skills categories as a result of social skills instruction? The identified skills categories were: Concept of Self and Others, Socialization, Conflict Resolution, Sharing, and Empathy/Caring. It was predicted that growth in these skills would lead to gains in social competencies.

Method
Setting and Participants
The study's population consisted of 30 children participating in an early childhood program at a regional university. The average age of the participants was 4 four years, ten months. The income levels of the families varied from low social economic status to high middle economic status. Approximately two-thirds of the homes were in the middle-class bracket, and one-third in the upper-middle class bracket. Two students were considered coming from low-income homes. Eighteen children were Caucasian, five children's ethnicity was described as Asian, two children were from Hispanic origin and five children were African American. Four of the students were identified as having special needs. The teacher-reported behaviors included defiance, off-task, and difficulty in making friends, resistant to classroom rules, low attention span, and non-compliant behaviors. Two classrooms participated in the studyOne classroom and two student teachers that were completing their undergraduate degree in early childhood, managed each classroom. Put the other pages together???

Instrumentation
The *Social Skills and Attitude Scale (SSAS)* was used prior to, and at the end of the intervention period. The items were based on the *Connecting with Others* curriculum. Five items were developed in the six

basic areas: Concept of Self and Others, Socialization, Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution, Communication, Sharing, and Empathy/Caring. The instrument uses a five point Likert scale to measure the level to which the children demonstrate the skill or trait identified in the statement. Responses to the 30 items described the degree to which class participants used appropriate social skills in the classroom, prior to the implementation of the social skills curriculum and eight weeks after initial implementation. The analysis was made by total category and reported by mean differences between pretest and post-test. The data analysis compared gains by the students as perceived by the two observers to determine if the *Connecting with Others* program had an impact on the children's social skills.

Data Collection
Two examiners independently completed the SSAS instrument for each child. The examiners observed the children and recorded children's behaviors on a checklist. They completed the instrument based on their pre-observations at the end of a three-day observation period. Every effort was made by the observers to remain unobtrusive while conducting the observations in the classroom. The social skills instruction was implemented for six weeks using activities and strategies from the *Connecting with Others* program. At the end of the six-week intervention period, examiners completed the SSAS instrument again for each child based on a three-day observation.

Results
Inter-observer agreement checks were conducted and no significant differences were found between the observations of the two independent observers. In order to assess inter-rater reliability a multivariate

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	S.D.		Mean	S.D.
Pre: Confident tasks	3.40	.894	Pre: Waits for need to be met	3.30	1.179
Post: Confident tasks	4.43	.898	Post: Waits for need to be met	4.40	.968
Pre: Get along with different	3.63	1.189	Pre: Initiates conversation	3.77	1.006
Post: Get along with different	4.47	.819	Post: Initiates conversation	4.77	.430
Pre: Does not project blame	3.57	1.135	Pre: Communicates needs/wants	3.27	.583
Post: Does not project blame	4.50	.820	Post: Communicates needs/wants	4.63	.615
Pre: Cope with criticism	3.50	1.196	Pre: Does not interrupt	3.30	1.119
Post: Cope with criticism	4.40	.894	Post: does not interrupt	4.47	.730
Pre: Self esteem is high	4.03	.850	Pre: Listens attentively	3.57	1.073
Post: Self esteem is high	4.77	.430	Post: Listens attentively	4.43	.728
Pre: Behaves app. places	3.43	1.040	Pre: Shares ideas	4.00	.983
Post: Behaves app. places	4.80	.551	Post: Shares ideas	4.43	.728
Pre: Social amenities	3.80	.887	Pre: Shares materials	3.47	.900
Post: Social amenities	4.40	.724	Post: Shares materials	4.33	1.028
Pre: Work/Play cooper.	3.40	1.003	Pre: Appreciates peer sharing	3.93	.785
Post: Work/Play cooper.	4.47	.900	Post: Appreciates peer sharing	4.77	.568
Pre: Interest social activities	3.87	.629	Pre: Shares knowledge	3.50	1.075
Post: Interest social activities	4.73	.583	Post: Shares knowledge	4.47	.629
Pre: Gives compliments	3.53	.819	Pre: Uses compromise	3.03	.890
Post: Gives compliments	4.60	.621	Post: Uses compromise	4.53	.860
Pre: Responds tease, hits	3.20	.997	Pre: Helpful to others	3.57	.858
Post: Responds tease hits	4.20	.847	Post: Helpful to others	4.70	.651
Pre: Ignores distractions	3.10	1.062	Pre: Understands feelings	3.43	1.040
Post: Ignores distractions	4.47	.819	Post: Understands feelings	4.40	1.037
Pre: Aware of consequences	3.83	.648	Pre: Shows sympathy	3.93	.785
Post: Aware of consequences	4.67	.606	Post: Shows sympathy	4.67	.547
Pre: Settle problems adult inter	3.00	1.287	Pre: Demonstrates kindness	3.73	.785
Post: Settle problems adult inter.	4.40	1.102	Post: Demonstrates kindness	4.70	.651
Pre: Feelings related to problem	3.23	1.104	Pre: Shows caring	3.67	.802
Post: feelings related to problems	4.50	.630	Post: Shows Caring	4.63	.718

analysis of variance was computed to determine if there were any significant differences between the two groups on the 30 pre or 30 post dependent variables. None significant p values across all items indicate that the instrument is reliable as an observation tool.

Statistical analyses were conducted to measure possible differences between the variables prior to the social skills curriculum and six weeks after the implementation. Descriptive analysis of Pre/Post test scores indicates a large (nearly one full standard deviation) increase in social skills behaviors across all variables as measured by the trained observers (see Table 1 above). Observed differences between Pre and Post scores suggest potential statistically significant differences. In addition, standard deviations for post test scores were generally smaller, and in all pairs minimum ratings increased from pre to post measures, indicated a narrower and more positive range of observed behaviors after the intervention. Similarly, frequency distributions across all pairs indicate generally more normal distributions of ratings on pretest scores and negatively (large percentages of ratings at the top of the scale) on posttest scores.

Paired sample *t*-tests were run on all Pre:/Post: test pairs in order to measure significant change in social skills behaviors over the course of the intervention (see Table 2). With the exception of *Shares ideas, t*-test results indicate significant change in social skills on all but one of the pretest/posttest pairs ($p<0.05$).

Table 2
Paired Samples Test

	T statistic
Pre: Confident tasks - Post: Confident tasks	6.998*
Pre: Get along with different - Post: Get along with different	6.113*
Pre: Does not project blame - Post: Does not project blame	6.513*
Pre: Cope with criticism - Post: Cope with criticism	6.496*
Pre: Self esteem is high - Post: Self esteem is high	5.117*
Pre: Behaves app. places - Post: Behaves app. Places	10.420*
Pre: Social amenities - Post: Social amenities	5.835*
Pre: Work/Play cooper. - Post: Work/Play cooper.	7.443*
Pre: Interest social activities - Post: Interest social activities	7.549*
Pre: Gives compliments - Post: Gives compliments	7.443*
Pre: Responds tease, hits - Post: Responds tease hits	6.595*
Pre: Ignores distractions - Post: Ignores distractions	9.786*
Pre: Aware of consequences - Post: Aware of consequences	9.898*
Pre: Settle problems adult inter - Post: Settle problems adult inter.	8.573*
Pre: Feelings related to problem - Post: feelings related to problems	10.033*
Pre: Waits for need to be met - Post: Waits for need to be met	4.853*
Pre: Initiates conversation - Post: Initiates conversation	5.214*
Pre: Communicates needs/wants - Post: Communicates needs/wants	8.411*
Pre: Does not interrupt - Post: does not interrupt	7.309*
Pre: Listens attentively - Post: Listens attentively	6.966*
Pre: Shares ideas - Post: Shares ideas	1.857
Pre: Shares materials - Post: Shares materials	5.277*
Pre: Appreciates peer sharing - Post: Appreciates peer sharing	6.530*
Pre: Shares knowledge - Post: Shares knowledge	6.547*
Pre: Uses compromise - Post: Uses compromise	12.042*
Pre: Helpful to others - Post: Helpful to others	7.999*
Pre: Understands feelings - Post: Understands feelings	4.822*
Pre: Shows sympathy - Post: Shows sympathy	4.853*
Pre: Demonstrates kindness - Post: Demonstrates kindness	6.227*
Pre: Shows caring - Post: Shows Caring	5.950*

*Variable is significant ($p<.05$)

Discussion

Importance of the Study

The study yielded positive evidence that the social skills instruction and activities in the *Connecting with Others* program can make a meaningful difference in early childhood programs. Coping with criticism and sharing ideas were the two items that did not show any significant improvement. Although the children's positive self-concepts were exhibited in their eagerness to tackle new tasks, they were not inclined to share their ideas with their peers. Preschoolers are beginning to acquire knowledge and to clarify ideas. They are still in the *parallel* stage of social development, however, where a child may appear to play with others, but does not attempt to influence peer behaviors through their ideas. As children are exposed to other children, they become increasingly more aware and introspective and are able to express their ideas and understand the thoughts and feelings of others. Their self-consciousness frequently leads to feelings of embarrassment and inability to cope with criticism. Preschoolers' understanding of social categories is evolving and as this knowledge expands they are able to organize their behavior and develop their character (Berk, 2006). Improvement was notably noticed in socialization skills and problem resolution. Although no sustainability data were collected, informal conversations with parents did indicate that the children transferred many of the social skills to the home.

Research from Michigan State University (2007) indicates that young children's social skills frequently predict their future academic and social performances. Important social skills in early childhood include their emerging abilities to regulate their feelings and behaviors recognize social cues from others and engage in positive interactions with peers and adults. The present study indicated the importance of a social skills program to aid in implementing affective instruction.

Limitations of the Study

It was necessary to measure student growth in terms of pre and post observations. A problem in the assessment of social skills training is that the rating scale frequently contributes to the effects of the intervention. The items on the rating scale may have led the teacher to *teach the test* (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). Additionally, these measures may only detect short-term effects on social competence. No control group was available. Without a control group it is difficult to ascertain how the training impacted the classroom. The background of the sample was limited in socio-economic status and ethnic and racial distribution. Findings were restricted mostly to children from white families in the high middle socio-economic bracket who were willing to pay tuition for their children's instruction at the university child study center. Whether the results were caused by the implementation of the *Connecting with Others* activities or were due to other extraneous variables is not clear. Issues in treatment integrity create doubts to drawing inferences in social skills research. Treatment integrity is concerned with the accuracy and consistency with which interventions are implemented (Graham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). Nevertheless, the results did show growth in social skills in this group of children.

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Appendix

The Social Skills and Attitude Scale (SSAS)

Directions: Please read the following statements carefully. Circle the number that most closely matches your agreement to each statement. Use the following scale to score your responses; 1=Strongly Disagree (SD), 2=Disagree (D), 3= Undecided (U) 4=Agree (A), 5=Strongly Agree (SA)

.	The student:	SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Is confident at attempting new tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Can get along with others who are different.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Does not project blame on others.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Can cope with criticism or direction from adults.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Acts as if self-esteem is high.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Behaves appropriately in different places and situations.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Can use social amenities (Please, Thank You, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Can work/play cooperatively in a group.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Shows an interest in social activities.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Can give compliments appropriately.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Responds appropriately when peers tease, push or hit.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Ignores distractions from peers when doing class work.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Is aware of the consequences of inappropriate behaviors.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Can settle problems with peers without adult intervention.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Can identify his/her feelings related to problems.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	Can wait for needs to be met.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Can initiate conversation with peers and adults.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	Can communicate needs and wants appropriately.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	Does not interrupt conversations.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	Listens attentively.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	Shares ideas with peers on class activities without direction.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	Shares materials with peers.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	Appreciates when a peer shares with him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	Shares knowledge with peers.	1	2	3	4	5
25.	Uses compromise to share toys.	1	2	3	4	5
26.	Is helpful to others.	1	2	3	4	5
27.	Is good at understanding others' feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
28.	Shows sympathy to peers when they are hurting. or sad.	1	2	3	4	5
29.	Demonstrates kindness to peers and adults.	1	2	3	4	5
30.	Shows caring through words and actions.	1	2	3	4	5