

Early Social-Emotional Development: The key to future school readiness

Nurturing the growth and development of children builds intellectual and emotional foundations that every child needs to be successful in school and life.¹ Promoting healthy emotional development is as necessary as encouraging a child's ability to think, develop language skills, and know her colors and letters. How young children feel and behave is just as important as what they know and think.²

When a child arrives for the first day of kindergarten, she will be expected to cooperate and follow directions, work independently, know when and how to ask for help, and get along with her classmates and teacher. A child who is able to manage feelings and behavior will be able to focus attention on learning and exploration. In contrast, a child who is overwhelmed with anxieties and has difficulty regulating emotions will struggle with the demands of kindergarten. Research suggests that between one-quarter and one-third of young children are perceived by kindergarten teachers as not being ready for school.³ For a significant number of these children, concerns center on emotional and behavioral difficulties.

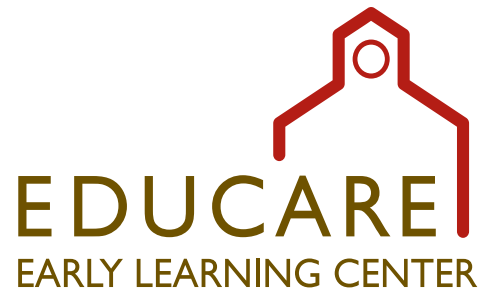
The Educare approach is grounded in the belief that children, families and staff grow and learn best in the context of trusting, supportive relationships. Building healthy parent-child relationships and secure attachments to classroom teachers is central to our work at Educare.

“Continuity of Care” is one of the practices implemented at Educare to support young children's social and emotional development. This practice includes keeping infants and toddlers with the same classroom team for an extended period of time—usually from entry into the center until they are about three years old. Interestingly, very few programs across the country have adopted a continuity of care approach.⁴ Educare in Seattle is currently implementing a mixed-age model, in which infants and toddlers are grouped together with the same classroom team from birth to about age three. This model effectively eliminates transitions for infants and toddlers in center-based care, enabling young children to develop the secure, stable, predictable relationships with their caregivers that will support their early learning and language development. Additionally, this model allows parents to develop long-term relationships with the classroom teachers and with the parents of other children in the room.

A challenge of a mixed-age model is ensuring that curriculum supporting social-emotional development is both age appropriate and individualized. Low child-to-caregiver ratios, highly qualified and trained staff, as well as an on-site mentor teacher, provide the needed structure for this level of care. Ratios in our infant/toddler classrooms are three teachers to eight children; in our preschool program, the ratio is three teachers to 17 children. As an additional support to the teaching teams a mentor teacher works with each classroom to provide coaching, consultation and on-going evaluation.

Supporting the Parent-Child Relationship: We partner with parents, providing opportunities for them to express their feelings, increase their understanding of their children's emotional needs, and strengthen their own coping skills. Our team works together to create emotionally supportive environments in which young children and their families can explore, learn and thrive. A child is more likely to achieve academic success when parents are involved in her education.

Educare offers professional, on-site family support to parents. Family Advocates and teaching staff build caring, trusting bonds with parents who are often isolated or experiencing strained or unpredictable relationships with other adults and institutions in their lives. Through family engagement, parents learn about their child's development, how to recognize—and pursue—quality education, and how to extend classroom lessons into the home.



Educare Early Learning Center emerged from a bold vision to start early to change the academic and life trajectories for children and their families by delivering children into kindergarten ready to succeed. By intervening in the earliest weeks and months of a child's life, Educare aims to prevent the academic achievement gap before it develops.



The Educare Early Learning Center in Seattle's White Center neighborhood is one of 12 centers across the United States in the Bounce Learning Network. This network seeks to provide the highest-quality learning environments for children at risk of school failure. Each center is designed and built around a research-based program model that reflects the developmental needs of children from prenatal to five, their families, and the communities in which they live. Educare centers showcase the results of high-quality robust services delivered to the most at-risk families.

FROM THE CLASSROOM

One practice used at Educare to support young children's social-emotional development in the classroom and at home involves observation and documentation by the classroom teacher.

A letter to Leatta: This letter was written by Leatta's teacher Jackie, a lead teacher in Educare's Infant/Toddler program, and is displayed in the hallway to the classroom. The letter describes a seemingly very simple exchange between Leatta and Anais (two children in the classroom). This letter, however, captures Leatta's growing social-emotional strengths and, when documented this way, is also a tool to help parents learn to recognize positive social-emotional behaviors in their own children. Leatta and Anais are learning the skills they will need to build and maintain friendships, to express empathy, to demonstrate initiative and cooperation, and to problem-solve – all social-emotional skills that will support their success in school and in life. Letters like these are displayed in the hallway and then included in the child's portfolio that follows her throughout her Educare experience. Through photographs, narrative and work samples, individual child portfolios capture a child's development in five learning domains: social-emotional, cognitive, language/literacy, physical, and creative. Teachers use portfolios, observations and formal assessment to guide lesson planning and individual goal setting for children.

Dear Leatta,

You and I were playing Ring-Around-the-Rosie together, one of our classroom favorites. Anais came over to join our small circle. You welcomed her and we played one more round, all three together. Then you politely told me "No Jackie" and dropped my hands in order to grasp both of Anais'. I was surprised and delighted when you decided to play alone with Anais. It's so exciting to see you building relationships with your younger peers.

After a moment of play, you began to pull Anais very quickly around in the circle. She stumbled in her efforts to keep up and her smile turned into a frown. Upon seeing this, you slowed down your steps and loosened your grip on her hands. She responded to this by smiling and continuing the game. I admired how you were able to respond to Anais' emotional cues—you noticed that Anais was uncomfortable and you made adjustments.

As you turned and sang, you and Anais occasionally looked each other in the eyes and smiled with delight. I love seeing that you get pleasure out of each other's company!

Every day I notice your desire to be a leader and a helper to other children and teachers. You were able to take on just the right amount of leadership with Anais. You guided her in the game and helped her with the words of the song. You are an expert play partner for your younger friends!

Love,

Jackie



- 1 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. Shonkoff, J.P. & Phillips, D.A. (Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- 2 Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2003). Head Start faces 2000: A whole-child perspective on program performance. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/faces/reports/faces00_4thprogress/faces00_4thprogress.pdf.
- 3 Knitzer, J. (2003, January 29). Social and emotional development in young low-income children: what research tells us and why it matters for early school success. Testimony given at Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, New York. Retrieved from https://www.nhsa.org/files/static_page_files/F6133D7D-1D09-3519-AD560CDBE3FB142D/Knitzer.pdf.
- 4 Cryer, D., Hurwitz, S., & Wolery, M. (2000). Continuity of care for infants and toddlers in center-based child care: Report on a survey of center practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(4), 497-514.

Resources for more information:

- Zero to Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers, & Families: www.zerotothree.org
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>
- Educare: A Catalyst for Change: www.educareschools.org

Educare Early Learning Center is located in the White Center neighborhood just south of the city of Seattle. More information can be found on the White Center Early Learning Initiative website: www.wceli.org. Tours are arranged by appointment. Please call (206) 716.8800 for more information.



WCELI is a Thrive by Five Washington Demonstration Community.