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# Using Literacy-Based Approaches to Promote Social Competence and Foster Resilience

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## Abstract

Learning to successfully manage stress and navigate life's challenges is essential for healthy living and development. Children who develop effective coping mechanisms for responding to stress and positively adapt in the face of adversity are said to be resilient. Helping children develop resilience-boosting skills is critical—especially in challenging global financial climates when increasing numbers of families deal with serious economic, social, and health issues. Research indicates that social support is one of the strongest predictors of resilience and leads to positive social, academic, and health outcomes. In order to benefit from social support, however, children and adults need to practice and develop social competence, the skills that enable them to create and maintain positive networks of support. In this paper, we provide an overview of research on the development of social competence, and current interventions targeting these skills. We conclude by presenting a theory of change highlighting the child and adult-level mechanisms through which children's capacities to demonstrate positive adaptation would be enhanced by the development of strong social competence abilities using literacy-based practices and materials—at home, at school, and in the community. Equipping all children with strong social competence skills is a critical step toward helping all children positively and resiliently adapt to the demands of a dynamic, fast-paced, 21st century.

# Introduction

Exposure to challenging experiences is part of every childhood. Whether challenges come in the form of normative changes that most children experience, such as making the transition to school, or in the form of serious adversity, such as experiencing family crises or losses, these challenges can lead to significant stress in children's lives. How children handle this stress determines whether exposure to changes and challenges results in positive adaptation and growth or in lasting negative impacts to a child's physical, social, and academic well-being (Evans & Kim, 2007; Gunnar, McCartney, & Phillips, 2006; "National Scientific Council on the Developing Child," 2005). Learning to successfully manage stress is essential to healthy living and development and serves as the foundation for building a resilient individual (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). This issue becomes even more pressing in the current financial climate when an increasing number of families are dealing with serious economic, social, and health issues ("U.S. Census Bureau," 2011). The ability to successfully manage stress and navigate life challenges is critical to positively and resiliently adapting to the demands of a dynamic, fast-paced, 21st century ("OECD Education Ministerial Meeting," 2010).

# Stress in the Lives of Children

The ability to successfully manage stress and navigate life challenges is critical to positively and resiliently adapting to the demands of a dynamic, fast-paced, 21st century.

The types of challenges a child may face in life are highly varied, as are the types of stress encountered in response to these challenges. Stress can be episodic, such as the stress experienced immediately following a divorce or the addition of a new child to a family, or stress can be chronic, such as the long-term stress experienced by families living in poverty (Dearing, Berry, & Zaslow, 2006; Gunnar et al., 2006). Early exposure to stress lays the foundation for an individual's neural responses and neural adaptation to subsequent stress exposure (Gunnar et al., 2006; Torres, Southwick, & Mayes, 2011). Moreover, the presence (or absence) of supportive adults and peers in a child's life has a significant impact on the duration of stress and whether stress is managed in a way that is *positive, tolerable,* or *toxic* ("National Scientific Council on the Developing Child," 2005).

A child's response to stress can be positive. Positive stress is typically brief and occurs in a context, such as visiting a new school with the help of a parent who is present and supportive that leads to positive adaptation or to the mastery of a new task ("National Scientific Council on the Developing Child," 2005). Experiences with positive stress help children learn to adapt to change, face challenges, and develop a stress response system that functions effectively (Gunnar et al., 2006). A child's response to stress can be *tolerable*. When stress occurs in the context of serious adversity (e.g., divorce, abuse, illness or death), but is handled appropriately with help from supportive adults in a child's life, the stress becomes short-lived, enabling the child to cope and recover so that there are no long-term negative impacts on the child's stress response system ("National Scientific Council on the Developing Child," 2005). Like positive stress, experiencing and managing tolerable stress can lead to positive growth and the development of an efficient stress response system (Gunnar et al., 2006). In contrast to positive and tolerable stress, a child's stress response can also be *toxic*. When children experience stress in the context of adversity without supportive adults in their lives to help them cope and recover, stress can become prolonged, chronic, and thus toxic. Children who experience toxic stress have extended exposure to elevated levels of stress hormones, which can lead to the development of a stress response system that is poorly

controlled (e.g., a stress response system that is highly reactive or one that recovers slowly) ("National Scientific Council on the Developing Child," 2005). Toxic stress can have long-term negative impacts on physical and mental health, placing children at risk for the development of stress-related disorders including depression, anxiety, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Gunnar et al., 2006; "National Scientific Council on the Developing Child," 2005; Seccombe, 2000).

## Positive Adaptation and Resilience

Children who develop effective coping mechanisms for responding to stress and positively adapt to changes, challenges, and adversity are said to be resilient (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). Resilience is defined as positive and adaptive functioning in the context of risk or adversity (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). Some researchers propose that two conditions must be present for a stress response to be considered resilient (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). First, an individual must be exposed to serious risk or adversity. Second, an individual must exhibit positive adaptation despite these serious challenges. Studies on resilience have conceptualized positive adaptation in different ways. In educational literature, positive adaptation to stress is often measured in terms of a child's level of academic motivation, engagement, and achievement (Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, 2008; Sektnan, McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2010; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). In developmental literature, positive adaptation to stress has been measured using a wide range of outcomes, including security of parent-child attachment in infancy (Torres et al., 2011) and the ability of school-aged children to successfully navigate transitions (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). Additionally, an individual may face more than one form of adversity (simultaneously or independently) and an individual may demonstrate positive adaptation in one area of functioning (e.g., high academic achievement) while simultaneously demonstrating poor adaptation in another area (e.g., difficulties managing anger) (Luthar et al., 2000). These examples highlight the diverse and contextual nature of resilience. Despite the many forms that adversity and adaptation assume, the growing body of research on resilience is shedding light on factors related to an individual's capacity to demonstrate positive adaptation and thus be resilient across many contexts.

## The Importance of Social Support

Research indicates that social support is one of the strongest predictors of positive adaptation and resilience (Evans, 2004; H. S. Kim, Serman, & Taylor, 2008; Seccombe, 2000; Torres et al., 2011). Social support is defined as the perception that one is loved, cared for, and valued by others (Cobb, 1976). Having strong social support indicates that one is part of a social network in which members feel mutual obligation to one another (Cobb, 1976). The term social network refers to the social contacts—the people—in a supportive group and the frequency of contact between group members (Stansfeld, 2006). The quality of support received from a social network can be emotional or practical. Emotional support refers to social support that boosts self-esteem and leads to positive self-appraisals. Receiving emotional support from a social network can provide an individual with information that helps them reflect upon and reframe their experiences in order to solve problems (Stansfeld, 2006; Torres et al., 2011). Practical support refers to practical help, such as financial support (Stansfeld, 2006).

Social support is related to short- and long-term social, academic, and health outcomes. For example, children and adults with strong social support report higher self-esteem, more positive self-appraisals, reduced rates of depression, better immune function and physical health, and fewer high-risk behaviors than those without strong networks of support (Cohen, 1988; Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Rockhill, Stoep, McCauley, & Katon, 2009; Rubin et al., 2006; Uchino, 2006). Children with strong social support (children who report having at least one reciprocated friendship) have higher grades in elementary school and middle school (Vaquera & Kao, 2008; Wentzel et al., 2004); higher school-related motivation and engagement (Wentzel, 2005) and an easier time adjusting across the transitions to middle school, high school, and college than children who report having no friends (Kingery et al., 2011; Masten et al., 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2010). Importantly, social support has also been shown to reduce stress and is related to the development of positive and active coping mechanisms, including the ability to reach out to others in times of need, the ability to reframe experiences in ways that promote flexible thinking and problem-solving, and the ability to feel realistically confident in one's ability to meet and master life challenges (Im & Kim, 2012; D. H. Kim & Yoo, 2010; Kingery et al., 2011; Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996; Pittman & Richmond, 2010; Seccombe, 2000; Stansfeld, 2006; Torres et al., 2011). In comparison to children with strong social support, children who experience peer rejection and social isolation are more likely to exhibit maladaptive coping responses, including internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007), depression, and low self-esteem (Hall-Lande et al., 2007).

## Defining Social Competence Skills: The Skills Critical for Building Social Support

In order to benefit from social support, children and adults need to practice and develop social competence, the skills that enable them to create and maintain positive social networks. Social competence refers to an individual's effectiveness in social interactions with others and includes regulating one's emotions, communicating feelings, interacting positively and effectively with others, and creating and maintaining positive and reciprocal social relationships (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006). The primary predictors of social competence are an individual's temperament, sociocognitive skills, and communication skills (Fabes et al., 2006). Temperament refers to a set of innate qualities that are present from birth, including sociability, shyness, adaptability, and reactivity (Rothbart, Posner, & Kieras, 2006). Socio-cognitive skills refer to emotional understanding (e.g., being able to recognize the expression of emotion in one's self and others, recognizing events likely to elicit emotional responses (Bierman & Erath, 2006)), the ability to correctly interpret social cues and actions, and the understanding that others have beliefs and intentions (Fabes et al., 2006). Communication skills pertinent to social competence include both expressive (e.g., appropriately expressing feelings and emotions) and receptive language skills (e.g., listening and responding appropriately to peers). The process of developing adaptive socio-cognitive and communication skills is complex and one that evolves over many years (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

# Sociocultural Theory and the Development of Social Competence Through Literacy

Natural connections between literacy and the development of social competence are highlighted by Sociocultural Theory, which considers learning in all areas to be a social process facilitated by exposure to literacy-rich materials and practices (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, literacy is broadly defined to include not only reading, writing and constructing meaning through text, but also spoken language, the social practice of language, and the context in which language is used (Bakhtin, 1986; Gee, 1991; Perez, 2004). It is through interactions with others, in combination with exposure to literacy, that children learn to interpret who they are in relation to others, gain an understanding of their social world, and develop social competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Research supports the idea that opportunities to practice and develop social competence skills are inherent in literacy-based practices. Exposure to literacy-rich practices and materials promotes the development of language, vocabulary, comprehension , and communication skills (Beauchat, Blamey, & Walpole, 2009; Landry et al., 2011), all of which are critical components of social competence (Fabes et al., 2006; Hoff, McCartney, & Phillips, 2006). Additionally, studies have shown that meaningful verbal interactions and activities such as shared book reading and story telling enhance the development of a secure attachment between children and parents/caregivers, laying the foundation for the development of social competence and social support (Landry et al., 2011).

For most children, the foundations of social competence emerge within the context of the parent/caregiver and child attachment relationship (Calkins, 2004; Fabes et al., 2006). Parents who show consistent warmth and responsiveness to their children promote the development of a secure attachment: a strong and supportive bond between the child and parent/caregiver (Bowlby, 1988). Each child's individual temperament also plays an important role in the development of the attachment relationship (Martin, Fox, McCartney, & Phillips, 2006). For example, children who are highly reactive and have difficulties adapting to new environments or situations will require a higher level of sensitive parenting than children who soothe and adapt easily. Parents who are sensitive and responsive to their child's temperament and individual needs are those most likely to foster a secure attachment (Martin et al., 2006). Having a secure attachment has been identified as an important predictor of positive adaptation and has been shown to buffer children against negative responses in stressful situations (Gunnar et al., 2006; Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). The attachment relationship is the first working model that children have of social interactions and has been shown to predict the quality of a child's future relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Torres et al., 2011).

Parenting style also plays a significant role in the development of social competence. For example, the use of an authoritative parenting style (an approach characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and non-punitive discipline) is related to the development of empathy, communication skills, and strong social competence in children (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). In contrast, the use of an authoritarian parenting style (one characterized by low responsiveness and the use of punitive discipline) has been linked to deficits in emotional understanding and poor social competence (Fabes et al., 2006; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

Ensuring that children have strong social competence skills is a critical step toward helping children develop the skills they need to demonstrate positive adaptation and thus to be resilient.

Parents using an authoritative parenting style typically spend more time using language and literacy-based approaches with children than parents employing other styles of parenting (Heath, 2009). These approaches include using a rich vocabulary, sharing narratives and stories, encouraging storytelling, using language to communicate about the consequences of behavior, and inquiring about children's thoughts, ideas, and feelings (Heath, 2009). Through these language and literacy-based practices, parents facilitate the development of communication and socio-cognitive skills including perspective-forming and empathy. In addition to laying the foundation for children's social competence and the ability to create and maintain positive networks of social support, these are skills that predict children's coping abilities and capacities for positive adaptation (Fabes et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 2006; Wentzel, Baker, & Russell, 2009).

## Social Competence in School

Creating and maintaining positive relationships outside the home typically requires stronger social competence skills than those required in family interactions (Rubin et al., 2006). Compared to family members, peers can be less forgiving in response to social interactions that are awkward or of poor quality (Rubin et al., 2006; Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). Having opportunities to participate in social interactions is a critical part of improving social competence skills, learning to create and maintain friendships, and building networks of social support outside the home (Rubin et al., 2006; Wentzel et al., 2009). Children's early relationships with peers are based on shared interests and convenience (Rubin et al., 2006). These relationships are easily created and often short-lived. As children enter middle childhood and adolescence they make important gains in perspective-forming skills and the ability to empathize. This developmental shift leads to a significant change in how children select friends. Friendships become less transient and become based on loyalty, reciprocity, shared experiences, and a willingness to engage in self-disclosure (Rubin et al., 2006).

It is through interactions with others, in combination with exposure to literacy, that children learn to interpret who they are in relation to others, gain an understanding of their social world, and develop social competence.

Teachers play an important role in the development of children's social competence and relationships in school. First, teachers serve as attachment figures and models of appropriate social behavior (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). Second, teachers can facilitate positive interactions between children. As in the home, each child's temperament affects social interactions at school. For example, children who are highly sociable may seek out social interactions more frequently than children who are shy, providing these children with ample opportunities for practicing and developing social competence skills (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). In contrast, children with low sociability (children who are shy or prefer spending time alone) may avoid social interactions and thus have fewer opportunities to practice and improve these skills. Teachers who are sensitive to the temperaments of children can help facilitate social interactions between children who have difficulties initiating or joining into social situations. Finally, teachers can use literacy-based materials and practices to provide direct instruction and modeling of social competence skills (see *Integrating Social Competence into Literacy-based Curricula* below for examples). Of concern is the fact that teachers report that high numbers of children struggle with social competence skills at school entry (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Because most children spend a significant number of hours each week in school and have numerous social interactions with teachers and peers, schools constitute an important context for the practice and development of skills needed to become socially competent.

## Improving Social Competence Through Intervention

In recent years, efforts to improve children's social competence through interventions in schools (and to a lesser extent in homes) have been developed, spanning preschool through high school (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007; Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Fitzgerald & Edstrom, 2006; Pears, Fisher, & Bronz, 2007; Tominey & McClelland, 2011; Webster-Stratton, Reid, McCartney, & Phillips, 2006). These interventions use a range of approaches to promote children's social competence at school, including direct instruction through the use of puppets, stories, dramatic play, worksheets, and structured group and individual activities. Some of the programs also include extension activities and worksheets that children can take home to complete with parents (Fitzgerald & Edstrom, 2006).

One example of a school-based curriculum for preschoolers is the Tools of the Mind program, which focuses on social, emotional, and behavioral regulation skills integrated with a curriculum emphasis on literacy and math. Children participating in Tools classrooms have shown significant improvement on a teacher-reported problem behavior scale (Barnett et al., 2008). Another example is the PATHS program (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), which targets emotional awareness and communication, cooperation, self-regulation, self-esteem, and problem-solving in preschool and elementary school students. Though a primarily school-based program, the PATHS curriculum also includes activities for use with parents. In a randomized trial of PATHS, children participating in the treatment group were rated more socially competent by parents and teachers than children in the control group (Domitrovich et al., 2007). Together, findings from these studies, and others (e.g., Second Step (Committee for Children, 2002); the Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton, 2000)), provide evidence that components of social competence can be practiced and improved through intervention. Currently, it is not known if these observed short-term intervention effects are lasting or if they extend beyond the classroom to children's interactions in other key social contexts, such as at home and in the community. According to the Bioecological Model of Human Development, children grow and develop in the context of interactions with their immediate environment (family) and more distant environments (e.g., community, school) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; White & Klein, 2002). Attempts to promote lasting change in behavior must be supported in each of children's key social contexts, including the family, the school, and the community. Intervention research suggests that in order to promote lasting change, efforts to improve social competence should extend to each of children's key social contexts, including the family, school, and the community (Powell, 2006).

## Social-Competence and the Academic Curriculum

Another shortcoming of existing interventions is that although some of them include academic components (e.g., Tools of the Mind), the extent of the traditional academic skills included is relatively minor. Most of the current intervention programs were designed to be implemented in addition to pre-existing curricula (e.g., Second Step, PATHS), with the exception of Tools of the Mind, which was designed to be used in place of pre-existing preschool curricula. These approaches may work well for intervening at the preschool level, but for teachers in elementary and middle schools, making additional time in the

school day is not always feasible. The current emphasis on accountability in the U.S. public education system has resulted in teachers at all grade levels adopting a strict academic focus to ensure that children are meeting required benchmarks on mandated standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The subjects assessed by these tests are those traditionally considered to be academic skills (e.g., reading, math) and thus, these are the skills primarily stressed in the classroom (Smith & Kovacs, 2011). Finding ways to integrate social competence learning into the teaching of traditional academic skills is an important next step in the development of interventions promoting these skills.

## Integrating Social Competence into Literacy-based Curricula

A literacy-based curriculum would be the first social competence intervention to integrate social competence skills into the teaching of traditional academic skills (i.e., reading). The inherent links between literacy practices and the development of social competence are highlighted by Sociocultural Theory (see *Sociocultural Theory and the Development of Social Competence Through Literacy* above). Additionally, the content included in literacy-rich materials at home, school, and in the community can be used to provide instruction related to social competence skills. Research suggests that the following are essential components of curricula designed to promote social competence: 1) direct instruction and modeling of the targeted skills, 2) multiple opportunities to practice the skills being emphasized, 3) performance feedback, and 4) opportunities to generalize targeted skills to other environments (Bierman & Erath, 2006). A literacy-based curriculum would be uniquely positioned to promote social competence using these four components in new and innovative ways. For example, the use of literacy-rich materials, such as books, periodicals, board games, and even digital media, would allow for: 1) direct instruction and modeling of social competence using a variety of characters and across multiple settings, allowing children to concretely see positive social skills in action, 2a) present questions and scenarios for teachers/parents and children to discuss together in order to practice problem-solving skills related to social situations in stories as well as in children's lives and communities, 2b) allow children to think about and make choices about how to use social skills (e.g., books or games with alternate endings based on the action a child chooses), 3) provide feedback by showing the consequences of positive and negative decisions made in social settings, and 4) provide support materials and activities that can extend social competence learning beyond the classroom to include parents, families, and community members. Moreover, key adults in children's lives can use stories and narratives to help children understand their own lives, relate their lives to the lives of others, and reflect upon and reframe their experiences. These are skills critical not only to the development of social competence, but also for critical thinking, problem-solving, and positive adaptation (Torres et al., 2011).

## Theory of Change

In an effort to synthesize the research presented above, we propose the following theory of change, which describes the child and adult-level mechanisms through which children's capacities to demonstrate positive adaptation in response to challenges and stress would be enhanced through the development of strong social competence abilities.

**1) Child-level change:** Helping children develop strong social competence skills will enable them to build connections with others (both peers and adults) (Fabes et al., 2006). Being able to create and maintain positive relationships and strong networks of social support is one of the strongest predictors of an individual's ability to face challenges, cope with, adapt to, and rise above, adversity (Torres et al., 2011). Having good reciprocal relationships in their lives provides children (and adults) with opportunities to talk about life stress and challenges. Through a process of communicating life experiences to and receiving feedback from supportive individuals (e.g., friends, teachers, caregivers), children and adults are able to share their experiences as well as reflect upon and reframe these experiences. The process of reflection and reframing an experience is a critical part of problem-solving, decision-making, and positive adaptation (Torres et al., 2011). Children must have strong social competence to reach a point where they can establish the social support necessary to enhance their capacities for positive adaptation. As discussed above (see *Defining Social Competence Skills: The Skills Critical for Building Social Support*), the key predictors of children's social competence are temperament, socio-cognitive skills, and communication skills (Fabes et al., 2006). An understanding of temperament and a focus on the development and practice of socio-cognitive skills and communication skills must be at the core of a literacy-rich social competence curriculum.

Exposure to literacy-rich practices and materials promotes the development of language, vocabulary, comprehension , and communication skills, all of which are critical components of social competence.

**2) Adult-level change:** For change in children's lives to be lasting, interventions must include children's greater context, including the key adults in their lives (parents/caregivers and teachers) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A child's attachment with parents/caregivers forms the foundation for the development of social competence and the child's relationships inside and outside the family (Bowlby, 1988; Rubin et al., 2006). Finding ways to promote a secure attachment between parents/caregivers and children is a critical part of promoting social competence and resilience. Adults outside the home, including teachers and community members, can also serve as attachment figures for children and serve as models of positive social behaviors. Helping adults understand temperament (their own and their child's), and boosting their socio-cognitive and communication skills will help create home, school, and community environments that foster the development of strong networks of social support in children's lives, thus enhancing each child's capacity for positive adaptation.

## Conclusion

Ensuring that children have strong social competence skills is a critical step toward helping children develop the skills they need to demonstrate positive adaptation and thus to be resilient. A curriculum using literacy-based practices and materials could be used to support the development of social competence across children's key social contexts: home, school, and the community, and thus promote change that is likely to be effective and lasting. Exposure to stress is inevitable in life. Equipping all children with strong social competence skills is a critical step toward helping children create and maintain the networks of social support that will help them to cope with, adapt to, and even thrive, in the face of life's many challenges.

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