# "You Got It!" Teaching Social and Emotional Skills

By Lise Fox and Rochelle Harper Lentini

Early educators report that one of their biggest challenges is supporting young children who have problem behavior beyond what might be expected (Buscemi et al. 1995; Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham 2005). Some children engage in problem behavior that is typical of a particular stage of development as they build relationships with peers and adults and learn to navigate the classroom environment. For example, a toddler might grab a cracker from another child's plate because she is still learning to use words to ask for what she wants or needs. What troubles teachers is how to meet the needs of children who have persistent problem behavior that does not respond to positive guidance or prevention practices. The extent of this problem is highlighted by recent reports on the rates of expulsion of children from preschool programs (Gilliam 2005).

## The teaching pyramid

The teaching pyramid model (Fox et al. 2003) describes a primary level of universal practices – classroom preventive practices that promote the social and emotional development of all children – built on a foundation of positive relationships; secondary interventions that address specific social and emotional learning needs of children at risk for challenging behavior; and development of individualized interventions (tertiary level) for children with persistent problem behavior (see the diagram "The Teaching Pyramid"). The model is explained more fully in "The Teaching Pyramid: A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Reinventing

Challenging Behavior in Young Children," in the July 2003 issue of *Young Children.*

The foundation for universal practices begins with nurturing and responsive caregiving that supports children in developing a positive sense of self and in engaging in relationships with others. At this level, teachers focus on their relationships with children and families. Universal classroom practices include developmentally appropriate, child-centered classroom environments that promote children's developing independence, successful interactions, and engagement in learning. While universal practices may be enough to promote the development of social competence in the majority of children in the classroom, teachers may find that there are children whose lack of social and emotional skills or whose challenging behavior requires more focused attention.

In this article we look at the secondary level of the teaching pyramid, which emphasizes planned instruction on specific social and emotional skills for children at risk for developing more challenging behavior, such as severe aggression, property destruction, noncompliance, or withdrawal. Children who may be considered at risk for challenging behavior are persistently noncompliant, have difficulty regulating their emotions, do not easily form relationships with adults and other children, have difficulty engaging in learning activities, and are perceived by teachers as being likely to develop more intractable behavior problems.

Research shows that when educators teach children the key skills they need to understand their emotions and the emotions of others,

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handle conflicts, problem solve, and develop relationships with peers, their problem behavior decreases and their social skills improve (Joseph & Strain 2003). Emphasis on teaching social skills is just one component of multiple strategies to support a child at risk for challenging behavior. Additional critical strategies include collaborating with the family; addressing the child's physical and mental health needs; and offering the support of specialists and other resources to address the child or family's individual needs.

### Reframing problem behavior

The teaching pyramid model guides teachers to view a child's problem behavior as serving a purpose for that child. Some children may use problem behavior instead of socially conventional and appropriate behavior to avoid or join interactions and activities, obtain or avoid attention, and obtain objects. For example, a child who wants another child's toy may hit the other child instead of asking to have a turn with the toy. Other children may use problem behavior to express their disappointment or anger to the teacher, rather than asking for help or sharing their feelings with words. For example, a child may throw toys or destroy materials when frustrated rather than asking a teacher for help.

### Reasons for challenging behavior

Children may use problem behavior to get their needs met for a variety of reasons. For example, a child may have language development problems, social-emotional delays, difficulties with peer interactions, or developmental disabilities; she may have experienced neglect or trauma; or she may simply have not had opportunities to learn appropriate social or communication skills before entering preschool.

When teachers view challenging behavior as actions children use to get their needs met,

they can reframe problem behavior as a skill-learning or skill-fluency issue. *Skill fluency* refers to a child's ability to use a skill consistently and independently. Children with problem behavior may not have appropriate social or communication skills or may not use those skills well in a variety of situations. Reframing problem behavior as a skill-instruction issue opens the door to the development of effective strategies teachers can implement in the classroom: if young children with problem behavior are missing key social and communication skills, then a next step is to teach them those skills!

### A skill-learning issue

Many skills are important in children's development of relationships with adults and peers. Skills help children learn self-regulation (ability to respond appropriately to anxiety, distress, or uncomfortable sensations) and how to problem solve (see "Social and Emotional Skills to Teach," p. 37). Young children at risk for challenging behavior (children at the secondary intervention level) may not be fluent in or have the ability to use these skills. The teaching pyramid model encourages early educators to teach children these skills systematically, using planned procedures within developmentally appropriate activities and with sufficient intensity to ensure that children learn the skills quickly and can use them when needed (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Fontczak 2005).

# Stages of learning

### Stage 1 – Skill acquisition: Show-and-tell

The teacher introduces a new skill to a child by giving concrete examples of what the skill is and how to use it. For example, the teacher may say, "It's hard to wait until it is your turn to ride a trike. I'm going to help you learn how to wait."

### Stage 2 – Skill fluency: Practice makes perfect

The teacher provides many opportunities to practice the skill so the child can eventually use it with ease. Practice opportunities may include prompting the child ("How can you ask to play with Brendan?"), helping the child remember to use the skill ("I know you are disappointed and you want a turn right now. What can you do instead?"), and identifying situations that call for the use of the skill ("We have three children who want to sit at the art table and only one chair. What can we do?").

### Stage 3 – Skill maintenance and generalization: "You got it!"

The teacher continues to promote the child's use of the skill in familiar and new situations. For example, when the child uses his newly learned skill of giving compliments with his mother, the teacher says, "You gave your mom a compliment! Look, she's smiling because you said you like her haircut."

Adapted from D.B. Bailey & M. Wolery, *Teaching Infants and Preschoolers with Disabilities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

## Teaching social skills

In thinking about how to teach social skills systematically, teachers need to be aware of the three stages of learning (Bailey & Wolery 1992) (see "Stages of Learning" above). The first stage is skill acquisition – the skill is introduced to the child; the second stage is fluency – the child has learned the skill and can use it easily; and the final stage of learning is skill maintenance and generalization – the child can use the skill over time and in new situations. In this article, we present strategies for addressing each stage of learning in the instruction of social skills.

## Introducing a new skill: Show-and-tell

**Explain the new skill.** When you first teach a child a social or emotional skill, it is important to ensure that you have explained the skill in concrete terms so the child understands what the skill is and when to use it. Children who have social development challenges may find the nuances of social behavior difficult to interpret. Thus, it is important to identify the skill ("ask to take a turn"), demonstrate or identify when it is used ("Watch Emily ask to play with the water wheel"), and link the idea or concept to other skills the child has ("When you see your friends playing with a toy you want, you can watch them play, you can wait for a turn, or you can ask them for a turn").

**Demonstrate it.** For many children, it is helpful to provide both a positive example of someone using a skill and an example in which the skill is not used. For example, you may ask children to demonstrate the wrong way to ask for a turn and the correct way to ask for a turn. In this manner, children can practice under a teacher's guidance and receive additional information about how the skill is appropriately used.

**Give positive feedback.** When children first learn a new skill, they need feedback and specific encouragement on their efforts to use the skill. The importance of feedback cannot be overstated! Think, for example, about a time when you learned something new – such as a language, a sport, or a craft. The instructor most likely gave you feedback: "That's right, you did it" or "That looks good, I think you are getting it." Feedback may

provide the support a child needs to persist in practicing a newly learned skill. Have you ever tried to learn a new skill and quit when you were in the early learning stages? Perhaps you did not receive encouragement or maybe those initial attempts were so uncomfortable or awkward that you decided to stop practicing.

**Provide opportunities for practice.** There are a variety of instructional methods for teaching new social and emotional skills (Webster-Stratton 1999; Hyson 2004; Kaiser & Raminsky 2007). An important teaching practice at the acquisition stage of learning is providing multiple opportunities for a child to learn a skill in meaningful contexts – that is, in activities that are part of the child's natural play or routines. The more opportunities for practicing, the quicker the child will learn the skill. The box "Classroom Teaching Strategies" (see p. 40) lists a variety of ways to teach social and emotional skills within typical classroom activities.

## Building fluency: Practice makes perfect

When learning to play a new song on the piano, the player must practice before the song becomes easy to play. Similarly, when a child learns a new skill, he needs to practice to build fluency in the skill. When teaching social skills, teachers need to ensure that a skill is not only learned but also practiced often enough that the child become fluent in the skill and can easily use it. Consider the follow example:

Madison struggles when playing with peers. Recognizing that Madison needs extra help in learning how to ask others to play with toys, her teacher, Mr. Jackson, decides to read the children a story about taking turns and asking to join play during group time. On that same day, several times during center activities and outdoor play, Mr. Jackson reminds Madison to "ask to play." After that day of focused instruction on using the skill, whenever Madison tries to enter a game without asking to play, Mr. Jackson provides corrective feedback or redirection, stating, "Madison, you need

to ask to play" or "Madison, you may not grab toys; ask to play."

A month later, Madison still has difficulty entering play and asking to play with toys.

Why did Madison have difficulty learning the skill? Perhaps Mr. Jackson did not provide enough opportunities to practice, so Madison quickly forgot to use the new skill. Or possibly Madison had not learned when and how to use the skill: she may not have become fluent in the skill.

To ensure that children learn a skill to the fluency level, teachers can use several strategies. They may offer the child multiple opportunities to practice, help the child link the new concept or skill to other social skills, or remind the child in advance so he or she can use the skill or concept in new situations.

Scaffolding the use of the skills within interactions may be effective. For example, the teacher can monitor child interactions and offer a verbal bridge for problem solving when children have conflicts or face difficulties (Katz & McClellan 1997). The teacher can pose questions like "What else can you do?" to help children problem solve or "How do you think Emily felt when you said that?" to help them take the perspective of the other child. When scaffolding, the teacher need only offer as much support or guidance as the child requires to navigate the situation, and she should be cautious about becoming overly directive or controlling the situation.

Additional teaching techniques to promote fluency include reminding the child, as she goes into a situation, to use the new skill; creating opportunities to practice by staging situations that call for the skill (creating a problem-solving task or planning an activity that requires sharing or taking turns); and providing the child with peer buddies who can remind her to use the new skill.

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In the fluency stage of learning, the teacher should continue to offer encouragement when the child is practicing the skill.

### Promoting maintenance and generalization: "You got it!"

For a child acquiring a new social skill, the final stage of learning is maintaining and generalizing the skill – learning it to the point that it becomes part of the child's social skill repertoire and he uses it in familiar and in new situations. When teaching children social skills, it is important to ensure that children reach this stage.

For many children, moving from skill acquisition to skill generalization occurs quickly and seamlessly with little teacher effort. However, for children who are at risk for social development delays or challenging behavior, a more systematic approach may be needed.

To ensure maintenance and generalization of a new skill, after introducing the skill and providing practice opportunities, teachers can offer repeated opportunities to practice the skill in familiar and new situations. At this stage of learning, children continue to need occasional encouragement to remember to use the skills, and they need feedback on the successful use of the skill in new situations. The example that follows describes how Ben's teacher supported and encouraged Ben to use his newly learned problem-solving ability in new situations.

Four-year-old Ben tends to get very frustrated when playing with his peers, especially on the playground. He screams, pushes children, and grabs toys. Ms. Mitchell, his teacher, has introduced a four-step problem-solving process to the class, using a puppet (who has a problem to solve) and picture cards depicting the problem-solving process:
(1) Ask yourself, What's my problem? (2) Think, think, think of some solutions; (3) What would happen? and (4) Give it a try.

Although Ben uses the process during play times, Ms. Mitchell realizes that he needs additional prompting to problem solve in new situations. Today the class is visiting the children's museum. Before entering, Ms. Mitchell takes Ben aside and reviews the problem-solving steps.

Inside the museum, there are several magnet activity stations, all occupied. Knowing that Ben will want to play with the magnets, Ms. Mitchell moves near him to give him support. She reminds Ben about the problem-solving steps: "Remember, think, think, think." Ben then says to a child playing with the magnets, "Can I play too?" The child hands him a magnet and they build together. Ms. Mitchell looks at Ben, winks, and smiles.

The goal at this stage of instruction is for children to use the social skills they have learned in a variety of situations, helping them build satisfying relationships with children and adults. They are then motivated by their successes and the joy they experience playing and developing relationships. As children develop new social skills and grow in their social competence, they gain access to a wider variety of play and learning opportunities; increase the duration and complexity of play interactions and engagement in social interactions; build friendships with peers; and feel good about themselves.

### Conclusions

It is critically important that early educators identify children who need focused instruction – children who may be considered at risk for challenging behavior. Teachers can guide them to learn new social and emotional skills, teaching them within child-centered, developmentally appropriate activities. It is equally important to design a systematic teaching approach that allows such children to acquire and use their new skills easily, over time, and in a variety of situations.

When young children do not know how to identify emotions, handle disappointment and

anger, or develop relationships with peers, a teacher's best response is to teach!

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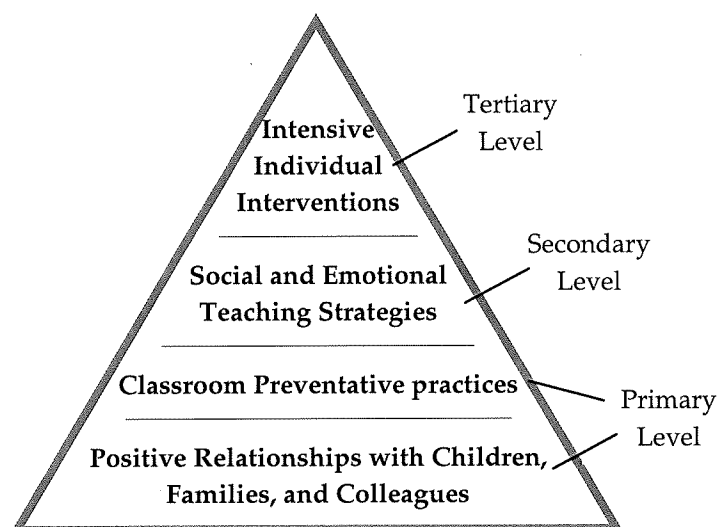
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       ╱Intensive╲    Level
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   ╱ Social and Emotional ╲  Level
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 Positive Relationships with Children,
      Families, and Colleagues
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**The Teaching Pyramid**

### Social and Emotional Skills to Teach

- Following rules, routines, and directions
- Identifying feelings in oneself and others
- Controlling anger and impulses
- Problem solving
- Suggesting play themes and activities to peers
- Sharing toys and other materials
- Taking turns
- Helping adults and peers
- Giving compliments
- Understanding how and when to apologize
- Expressing empathy with others' feelings
- Recognizing that anger can interfere with problem solving
- Learning how to recognize anger in oneself and others
- Learning how to calm down
- Understanding appropriate ways to express anger

# Classroom Teaching Strategies

Instruction is more effective when it is embedded in the meaningful activities and contexts that occur throughout a child's day (Katz & McClellan 1997). Here are suggestions and examples for teaching social skills within classroom activities.

**Modeling.** Demonstrate the skill while explaining what you are doing. As you pass a block to a child, say, "Look, I am sharing my blocks with my friend."

**Modeling with puppets.** Use puppets to model the skills while interacting with a child, an adult, or another puppet. A puppet can explain to the teacher and the class how she became angry and hit her brother to get a toy. You can ask the puppet to consider other solutions and then discuss what a child might do when he or she wants a toy that another child is using.

**Preparing peer partners.** Ask one child to show another child the skill or to help the child use the target skill. You can prompt the peer by saying, "Carmen, Justin is still learning how to wait and take turns. Since you know what to do, can you help him? Show him the line-up picture while you wait for a drink at the water fountain."

**Singing.** Introduce a new skill through a song. To teach children to trade toys, pass out small toys during a large group activity, then sing the following song to the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and practice trading:

I can be a problem solver, problem solver, problem solver,
I can be a problem solver, let me show you how.
Maybe I can trade with you, trade with you, trade with you,
Maybe I can trade with you; let me show you how.

Children then practice trading toys with each other.

**Doing fingerplays.** Introduce the skill with a fingerplay, then follow up with a discussion or story. While showing fingers, have children recite this rhyme:

One little friend cried, "Boo-hoo"; a friend gives a hug and then there are two.
Two little friends share with me; we play together and that makes three.
Three little friends ask for more; they all say "Please," and then comes four.
Four little friends take turns down the slide; another comes to play, and that makes five.
Five little friends have fun at school, because they follow every rule.

**Using a flannel board.** Introduce a new skill using flannel board activities and stories. For example, to teach turn taking you could have flannel pieces for Humpty Dumpty and change the rhyme so that "All the king's horses and all the king's friends / Work as a team to put Humpty together again." As you say the rhyme, have the children take turns putting the pieces (castle, bricks, Humpty Dumpty pieces, horses, and friends) on the flannel board. When you finish the rhyme, extend the activity by talking about how Humpty felt when he sat on the wall; when he fell; and when his friends helped put him back together.

**Using prompts.** Give a child verbal, visual, or physical prompts to use a skill during interactions and activities. When a child who has difficulty with initiating play interactions moves toward a group playing together, you might say privately, "Remember to use your words and ask to play."

**Giving encouragement.** Provide specific feedback when the child uses the skill. For example, describe what the child did: "You asked Joy for a turn. I saw that you two had a good time playing together." Encouragement can be verbal or a signal (a thumbs-up or high five).

**Using incidental teaching.** Guide the child to use the skill during interactions and activities. Quietly say to the child, "Quan, I see that you are very angry that all the trucks are being used. What can you do when you are angry? Let's go over the steps."

**Playing games.** Use games to teach problem-solving, words that express feelings, identification of others' feelings, friendship skills, and so on. Place photographs of each child in a bag. Have the children take turns pulling a photo out of the bag and offering a compliment to the child in the photo.

**Discussing children's literature.** Read books to help teach friendship skills, feeling words, problem solving, and so on. While reading a story, pause and ask the children how a character in the story might feel or ask them to suggest ideas for solving the character's problem.

Additional ideas for many of these activities may be found on the Web site of the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning at www.csefel.uiuc.edu; under Resources click on **Practical Strategies**

# Children's Literature: A Window to Understanding Self and Others

By Stephanie Feeney and Eva Moravcik

The teacher reads the book and shows the picture of an Inuit mother and child in the moonlit landscape of a northern night. The little girl in the book asks her mother what she would do if she were to turn into a mean polar bear and chase her mother into their tent. The mother answers: "Then I would be surprised and very scared but still, inside the bear, you would be you, and I would love you. I will love you, forever and for always, because you are my Dear One." (Barbara Joosse, *Mama, Do You Love Me?*)

The book is closed and the group of three- and four- year-olds is silent for a moment. Then Desiree, with her eyes shining, whispers, "Read it again!"

It is from experiences like these that early childhood educators recognize the power of children's literature to touch hearts. Why is literature so powerful? What can it teach? Early childhood educators know that children's literature can fulfill many important functions. Good books can help children to develop literacy and they can be used to share information, entertain a group of children, or provide a restful island of quiet in the midst of a transition.

But literature in programs for young children can serve another important function, one that is often overlooked. Like Desiree, who loved a story about an Inuit child, children can develop understanding of themselves and others through books.

A good story makes a connection with the reader. The characters become almost as real to children as people they know. Stories have tremendous power. They reach children's hearts and minds and help them understand themselves and the world in which they live.

## Developmental theory and understanding of the social world

Developmental theory, particularly the constructivist views of Jean Piaget, contributes to our understanding of how children learn. It tells us that development takes place through interaction between the child and the environment and that children actively construct their understanding of the world. Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory helps us to realize children's construction of understanding is social. Understanding is developed through relationships in which the child engages in discussions and dialogue with others (Edwards 1986; Feeney, Christensen, & Moravcik 2006).

Constructivist research has focused to a great extent on how children acquire understanding of the physical world and on the subject areas of math and science. Much less has been written about the development of children's understanding of the social world of people and relationships (DeVries & Zan 1994). Yet if we accept the constructivist view, we must assume that the processes used in learning about the physical world apply as well to developing knowledge of the social world. We would also assume that this

knowledge develops in very much the same way – slowly, over time, based on a wide range of experiences.

We have all observed young children in the process of trying to understand differences among people: Why is his skin a different color than mine? Why does my grandma have wrinkles? Why does that person walk funny? How can those people eat the strange food? Young children are also growing in the ability to understand how other people think and feel. Educators work hard in programs to help children learn to understand the feelings and viewpoints of others, to move from being egocentric – seeing the world only from their own perspective – to having the ability to take on the perspective of others.

Teachers are aware of the kinds of manipulative materials that help children explore and experiment with the physical world. What kinds of materials and experiences help children gain understanding of the social world? Children do have direct experiences with the people in their homes, classrooms, and communities. There is much they learn from these relationships, but it is not possible for them to have direct experience with all kinds of people, with people in other places or times, nor can they always know what the people close to them feel and think. Books, which provide experiences that are real to children, though not hands-on, help to provide different perspectives.

Important learning takes place through the characters that children get to know in books. Experiencing diversity in the characters they meet in books can help children to understand human behavior and relationships just as sensory and manipulative materials help them construct knowledge of the physical world. As adults talk with children about books that present diverse people and views, new awareness is gained.

## How literature contributes to understanding of self and others

The idea that teachers can use books to help children appreciate human differences and develop prosocial behavior has been suggested in a number of articles (Morris 1985; Hale 1991; Brady 1992; Lamme & McKinley 1992; McGuire 1993; Walker-Dalhouse 1993; Elster 1994). When we reviewed the literature (1994 to the present) we found that over the years researchers have studied the influence of literature on children of varying age groups (preschool to junior high school age). Generally these studies support the notion that children's literature has an impact on attitudes and behaviors toward others. Fry, McKinney, and Philips (1994) suggest that younger children are more accepting of diversity than are children in later years and that early, planned experiences and teacher discussion can help children develop positive attitudes toward diverse peoples. More research needs to be done on the impact of literature on very young children, the long-term effect of literature, the impact of literature on children from diverse backgrounds, and the impact of books compared to other social influences.

Here are six important ways that literature can contribute to children's growing understanding of self and others. For each one, we cite supporting research.

### Increases positive self-concept

Picture books for young children play a major role in shaping their emerging images of themselves, others, and the larger society. When the story lines and images are positive in the books that they read, children are likely to develop healthy self-concepts and favorable views of others. When the images are distorted and negative, children's self-images may suffer, and they may develop inaccurate or negative views of others.

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Understanding and appreciation of oneself and pride in one's own heritage is the basis for being able to accept others. Literature that portrays the characteristics, lives, and experiences of children in positive and realistic ways enhances their self-concept and helps them to develop pride in themselves. Liaw (1995), in her study of the impact on Chinese American children of books that featured Chinese characters, points out that literature is more complicated than just reading a text; we must take into account the cultural images that are portrayed and the reader's social and cultural milieu.

The diversity of children's books available today makes it possible to find good books that portray characters who share a child's appearance, culture, family structure, and type of community. Whether teaching in an African American community in a city (*Whistle for Willie* by Ezra Jack Keats), a multi-ethnic Asian community on a tropical island (*Dumpling Soup* by Jama Kim Rattigan), or a village of indigenous people in the far north (*On Mother's Lap* by Ann Herbert Scott), educators can find books that reflect the lives and experiences of children in their programs.

### Increases respect for and appreciation of human diversity

Each person has the right to be respected as an individual and the responsibility to respect the individuality of others. Reading and discussing books can help children develop familiarity with, understanding of, and respect for the range of human characteristics, including differences in age, gender, ability, race, and culture. When children do not have direct experience of a group, they are particularly vulnerable to stereotypes and bias in society and in books. When children experience books that show unfamiliar people dealing with issues or emotions they can identify with, they are able to relate to the characters and begin to gain a sense of common humanity.

Awareness of ethnicity (race) develops as young children observe attributes such as skin color, hair, and facial features. Three- and four-year-olds are aware of racial differences and are beginning to develop attitudes about these differences (Goodman 1952; Katz 1982). They may begin by expressing distrust or fear of people who are different. Child development research demonstrates that by the age of 10 children's attitudes toward race are formed and are very resistant to change (Goodman 1952; Katz 1982).

Research on the impact of children's exposure to literature has shown that these attitudes changed in a positive direction after children were exposed to books that portrayed different ethnic groups in a positive light. These changes were reported after reading books, especially when followed by discussion, and when the reader identified with the characters in the story. The effects were most pronounced for younger readers (Jackson 1944; Smith 1948; Fisher 1965; Lichter & Johnson 1969; Campbell & Wirtenberg 1980; Derbaum 1981; Kuperus 1992; McBride 1997).

A child who has identified with the situation of the characters in a favorite book like *Mama, Do You Love Me?* or *At the Crossroads*, by Rachel Isadora, has had a positive experience with people from another culture that may have a lasting impact on his or her attitudes about that group.

Research has shown that children's attitudes toward the elderly are also affected through exposure to stories (Gutknecht 1991; Lancy & Wimsatt 1999). Books like *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, by Mem Fox, which features a young child's relationships with older people, and *Jamaica Tag-Along*, by Juanita Havill, which shows a preschooler's empathy for a toddler, can help children to

become aware of and more positive toward differences in age.

Several studies (McArthur & Eisen 1976; Petersen 1979; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski 1999) showed that gender stereotypes also change in response to literature, although the impact on girls appears to be more significant than the impact on boys. We can help children to see that gender is not a prescription for nurturing girls versus achieving boys through books like *Very Last First Time,* by Jan Andrews, in which a girl is brave and adventurous, or *Beany,* by Jane Feder, a story about a boy and his loving relationship with his cat.

Many children have had little or no experience with people with disabilities, so sharing books like *Friends in the Park,* by Rochelle Bunnett, and *Someone Special, Just Like You,* by Tricia Brown, that emphasize the similarities between all children, is a good way to introduce them to people whose abilities are different from their own. Elementary children were more favorable in their opinions of people with differing abilities when presented with literature programs that showed children with disabilities in a favorable way (Leung 1979; Salend & Moe 1983; Bauer, Campbell, & Trozel 1985; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski 1996).

### Raises awareness that people live in many different ways

Books are an excellent way to acquaint children with the many ways that people live throughout the world, thus introducing them to the concept of culture. Teaching about culture involves providing accurate depictions of the lives of different groups of people. Exposure to unfamiliar lifestyles can help children see their own lives and communities more clearly. Comparisons can also help children become aware of experiences and feelings that are shared by all people.

We believe that it is best to begin by exploring similarities, because focusing on differences can lead to distrust or fear of those who are different. Children who have a true picture of what others are like and who understand similarities among people are less likely to fear, distrust, or stereotype others (Tauren 1967; Kuperus 1992).

Books that feature characters from diverse cultures help children become accustomed to the idea that there are many languages, points of view, and ways of living. Books that focus on human universals help children to recognize that all people need nurture, food, clothing, and shelter; tell stories, dance, and sing; and make things that are useful and beautiful – and do so in different and interesting ways. Books like *Whoever You Are; Everybody Cooks Rice;* and *Bread, Bread, Bread,* as well as others in the series by Ann Morris, address human experience from a universal perspective.

### Aids the development of empathy

Good literature can help children to develop the capacity for empathy through identifying the feelings of others (Taylor 1976; Lamme & McKinley 1992). They may then realize that they sometimes feel the same ways that people in the books feel.

Preschool and kindergarten children start to recognize what feelings are appropriate in different situations and to recognize that they have feelings and other people do too. Young children slowly grow to understand that others' views and feelings might be different from their own and that two people might react differently to the same situation. Later in childhood they learn that two different emotions can be felt at the same time about the same situation.

Walking in someone else's shoes can help a child to develop a greater capacity to empathize with others. Through books

children may become aware of problems in society and that not all children's lives are as secure as theirs may be. Hearing stories about these experiences helps them to become more sensitive to problems in society and in the lives of others (Lamme & McKinley 1992). For example, a book like *Smoky Night*, by Eve Bunting, makes children aware of conflicts that lead to rioting in a context that can be understood by young children. We urge teachers to select these kinds of books with great care and sensitivity to the feelings of the group of children to whom they will be reading.

### Aids the development of positive values

Literature can support the development of values such as cooperation, generosity, kindness, compassion, and interdependence and provide models of positive ways to relate to others and solve problems (Taylor 1976; Berg-Cross & Berg-Cross 1978; Black, Seeman, & Trobaugh 1999). Often characters in stories find themselves in situations that require them to make moral decisions. Children listening to these stories will think about how they would respond and may expand their views of right and wrong (Lamme & McKinley 1992; Lamme, Krogh & Yachmetz 1992).

### Models for ways to cope with problems and crises

Good literature can help children to cope with everyday life problems and extraordinary crises. Issues in children's lives raise strong and often troubling and confusing feelings. Books can help children learn that they are not the only ones who have ever experienced an event or feeling and can model ways to think about and act on a problem. And this understanding can extend to the problems of others when a child identifies with a sympathetic character.

Everyday issues such as worries about attending a new school (*Timothy Goes to School* by Rosemary Wells), divorced parents (*Charlie Anderson* by Barbara Abercrombie), parental love (*Mama, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara Joosse and the classic *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown), coping with a new sibling (*Julius, the Baby of the World* by Kevin Henkes), adoption (*I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* by Rose A. Lewis), or the death of a parent (*Some of the Pieces* by Melissa Madenski) can be addressed in books. A time of change, crisis, loss, or other stress can be a time for potential growth if dealt with sensitively (Gemma 2001).

### Selecting books that help children understand self and others

Early childhood educators want the books we share with children to have positive effects on their attitudes about themselves and others. We want children to experience good literature and love books. To accomplish these objectives it is important to choose books with care and think about the appeal of the books and their literary quality as well as the messages conveyed.

Books that children enjoy deal with their interests and the issues in their lives. The characters and plot are communicated in ways with which children can identify. A good children's book has well-developed characters who change as a result of life events and a well-structured plot with enough conflict and suspense to hold children's interest. The words are interesting and engaging. The illustrations are appropriate for the story, help children gain meaning from the text, and are aesthetically pleasing.

Books that have a positive impact on children's attitudes portray people with respect for their humanity and explain why they feel and act as they do. Literature that does this reflects the children's backgrounds and experiences and also portrays different

races, cultures, abilities, lifestyles, and economic backgrounds (Gross & Ortiz 1994; James & Kormanski 1999).

It is important to evaluate the messages books convey about different groups of people (Slapin & Seale 1989; Harris 1991; Jackson 1991; Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 2005). Do they depict differences respectfully? Are women and minorities portrayed in strong, positive roles? Are elders portrayed as people in their own right, not as stereotypes? Is the self-esteem of the child whose culture is portrayed enhanced and respect for that child encouraged in children who are not part of his or her group?

Once teachers realize the importance of sensitivity to how race and culture are portrayed in books, how can they assess the portrayal of a group that is not their own? The *Journal of the Council for Interracial Books on Children* may be helpful as may journal articles (Dowd 1992; Pang et al. 1992; Gross & Ortiz 1994) and other resources that assess books about a particular group, such as *Books without Bias: Through Indian Eyes* (Slapin & Seale 1989) and *Lessons from Turtle Island* (Jones & Moomaw 2002).

Many children's books are written to address a particular issue or social problem. Some of these books do a fine job of addressing sensitive issues like divorce, illness, death, financial hardship, and disabilities. We especially like books such as *A Chair for my Mother*, by Vera B. Williams, that present an issue (in this case, financial difficulty in a single-parent family) as a part of an intrinsically interesting story. Some, however, are written with the sole intent of making a point or teaching a thinly disguised moral. We call these *Band-Aid books*, and while they are well intentioned, they are often dull and lacking literary merit. They are sometimes helpful for a child who is dealing with the issue portrayed in the book but usually are not entertaining or meaningful to a group of young children. We feel that it is important to remember that some of the very real problems in children's lives are too big to be fixed by a book. Like a band-aid on a deep wound, they may give the appearance of helping without actually providing comfort or cure.

## Conclusion

Early childhood educators know that it is important to make books a priority in their classrooms. Realizing that books make such a significant contribution to the development of understanding and appreciation for self and other people adds another dimension to the selection and presentation of literature. It reminds you to carefully supply your classroom library with books that speak to each child.

Finally it is important to realize that a caring teacher who celebrates diversity and respects all students is the critical element in presenting these carefully chosen books to young children (McBride 1997). The most beautiful illustrations and most moving words fulfill only a small part of their promise if they are not well delivered. Teachers must select books with care, thoughtfully choose when to read them, read them with understanding and feeling, and discuss them sensitively with children. No article or book gives you the specific information that watching and listening to children provides. How do the children in your class respond to a book? Do they listen deeply? Are they touched in some way? What do they say about the book and the people in it? What do they want to hear again? How do they respond to questions about themselves and others?

Literature gives young children a window on the world outside themselves. Through books we introduce them to the richness, diversity, sorrow, and joy that our human family has to offer. Through books we can

prepare them for an increasingly diverse society. In our early childhood classrooms we are challenged to help children to understand and appreciate themselves and others, to build tolerance and positive relationships, and to recognize the common humanity among all people.

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## Some Questions to Ask When Selecting Books for Young Children

**Children are touched by authors who understand and respect their lives.**
- Does the author seem to like and understand children?
- Does the book help children feel competent?
- Will this book promote self-esteem in the child whose culture is portrayed and encourage respect in other readers?

**Children enjoy satisfying stories that capture their interest.**
- Will the young children in your program understand the story?
- Does it relate to their lives, issues, or interests?
- Does the story have a theme (a main idea or central meaning) that enlarges children's understanding o the world of human nature?
- Does the story help children to think rather than preaching, sentimentalizing, moralizing, or giving easy answers?

**Children like language. They enjoy repetitive phrases and rhyming words.**
- Are the word carefully chosen and pleasing to listen to?
- Are there memorable phrases/sentences?
- Do the characters speak naturally?

**Children love illustrations (regardless of the style) that bring a story to life.**
- Do the illustrations enhance the words and make the story complete?
- Are the illustrations done with care and craftsmanship? Are the drawings easy to interpret? Are the photographs clear and well-composed?
- Are the colors appealing?
- Are text and illustrations free from stereotypes or prejudice about individuals or groups?

**Children enjoy believable and appealing characters.**
- Are characters portrayed as real people with strengths and weaknesses?
- Do characters grow and change in the course of the story?
- Are the characters represented authentically and respectfully? Is the historical and cultural information true/honest?
- Are females and persons of color portrayed in strong, positive roles?
- Does the book respectfully depict age, ethnicity, culture, status, ability, and gender differences?

## Children's Books That Increase Understanding of Self and Others

**At the Crossroads** by Rachel Isadora. 1991.

**Beany** by Jane Feeder. Illus. by Karen Gundersheimer. 1979.

**Bread, Bread, Bread** by Ann Morris. Photographs by Ken Heyman. 1989. (and others in this series)

**A Chair for My Mother** by Vera B. Williams. 1982.

**Charlie Anderson** by Barbara Abercrombie. Illus. by Mark Graham. 1990.

**Dumpling Soup** by Jama Kim Rattigan. Illus. by Lillian Hsu-Flanders. 1993.

**Everybody Cooks Rice** by Norah Dooley. Illus. by Peter J. Thornton. 1991.

**Friends in the Park** by Rochelle Bunnett. Photos by Carl Sahlhoff. 1992. Also *Friends at School* (in Spanish: *Amigos en la Escuela*) and *Friends at Work and Play.*

**I Love You Like Crazy Cakes** by Rose A. Lewis. Illus. by Jane Dyer. 2000.

**Jamaica Tag-Along** by Juanita Havill. Illus. by Anne O'Brien. 1989.

**Julius, the Baby of the World** by Kevin Henkes. 1990.

**Mama, Do You Love Me?** by Barbara M. Joosse. Illus. by Barbara Lavallee. 1991.

**On Mother's Lap** by Ann Herbert Scott. Illus. by Glo Coalson. 1992.

**The Runaway Bunny** by Margaret Wise Brown. Illus. by Clement Hurd. 1942.

**Smoky Night** by Eve Bunting. Illus. by David Diaz. 1994.

**Some of the Pieces** by Melissa Madenski. Illus. by Deborah Kogan Ray. 1991.

**Someone Special, Just Like You** by Tricia Brown. Photos by Fran Ortiz. 1984.

**Timothy Goes to School** by Rosemary Wells. 2000.

**Very Last First Time** by Jan Andrews. Illus. by Ian Wallace.

**Whistle for Willie** by Ezra Jack Keats. 1964.

**Whoever You Are** by Mem Fox. Illus. by Leslie Staub. 1997.

**Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge** by Mem Fox. Illus. by Julie Vivas. 1984.