

The Science of Learning

How Your Kids' Emotions Affect Their Academic Success

By Heather Turgeon

April 23, 2014

Babble (Courtesy of Disney)

When my son was in preschool, it was all about social and emotional learning.

Teachers (one for every six to eight kids) would get down on eye level, carefully helping the little ones express themselves and listen to each other's words. Skills for managing big feelings were taught and practiced. There were "talking chairs" in the classroom where even the two- and 3-year-olds would take time to sit and hash out their disputes.

This year my son started kindergarten, and things are unmistakably different.



But here's the problem: Social and emotional skills aren't just the touchy-feeling things that help our kids make friends and be part of a peaceful classroom – they actually *make for higher-achieving kids*.

Research shows that social and emotional skills are fundamental to learning, that the ability to understand and manage feelings and impulses is a major predictor of academic success (more important than IQ), and that supporting kids in these areas boosts their learning in all other realms of life.

"Usually in schools, the social-emotional and academic domains are seen discretely," says Alison Kerr, principal of Citizens of the World charter elementary school in Los Angeles. "It's as if schools want to teach kids to be 'nice' and, separately from that, really push them academically. But emotional skills and academic excellence – you can't have one without the other."

That's a point of view supported by a large and growing body of research. Young kids with better emotional regulation have more academic success in kindergarten and on math and literacy standardized tests (even controlling for IQ).

Emotional regulation is positively related to math and reading scores, teacher-rated academic competence, as well as GPA (even taking into account other cognitive variables).

Over and over again, researchers see that emotional skill is important for managing impulses, screening out distractions, making good choices, and connecting with and learning from peers – all of which make for academic wins.

"Emotional skills and academic excellence
– you can't have one without the other."

- Alison Kerr

Principal, Citizens of the World
Charter School in Los Angeles

Suddenly, there are 25 kids to one teacher and a half-day assistant, and up to 100 kids on the playground at a time. Some of the students have had little or no preschool experience, so they're learning to be in a group for the first time, and there's been pushing, hitting, and even biting. The diligent use of "I" statements my son practiced in preschool now seems like a foreign language.

My friends with kids in public school kindergartens (these are good schools, too) agree that careful attention to feelings and conflict resolution is now a rare and special thing: One mom said after her son and another kid fought over a ball and one child hit the other, the teacher sent one of them to time-out and never brought it up again.

Negative consequences as opposed to conflict resolutions are more common, like having to sit instead of playing at recess. Academics, not social skills, are the focus, and in a way that's logical – this is no longer preparation for school, this *is* school.

The idea that emotions affect learning has made its way into teaching approaches, but not across the board.

“Most teachers are trained in a way that emphasizes students’ academic development,” says Sara Rimm-Kaufman, a researcher at the University of Virginia, “not the relation between students’ social and academic development or the way in which students’ social and emotional development relates to their academic learning.”

American kindergarteners are now expected to learn a lot in the way of reading and numbers, so teachers face more and more demands on their time.

Emotional and social training gets squeezed out. Schools that understand the link between feelings and learning have programs to integrate the two.

Our elementary school follows the Responsive Classroom system (used in many schools throughout the country) to connect social and cognitive realms.

Responsive Classroom outlines practices like community building through “morning meetings,” emphasizes skills like self-control and empathy, and asks teachers to focus on encouraging a child’s process over praising.

Research suggests that children in classrooms where teachers adopt these ideas have less anxiety and gains in social behavior, assertiveness, as well as reading, writing, and math scores.

“It’s a balancing act to support kids’ social skills, while also building their endurance and focus for success in the next grades,” says my son’s kindergarten teacher, who agrees that over time, kindergarten has become more and more academic.

At Citizens of the World, which uses aspects of the UCLA Lab School and MindUP curriculums, social-emotional lessons are taught just like math and reading lessons.

The kids practice how to identify feelings, strategies for focusing the mind, options for when you have a “big emotion,” and lessons, for example, on the difference between “being strong and being mean.”

Kerr, who was a teacher for 16 years, says in her past jobs she would always hear schools talking about “developing character strengths and values” in children.

“But my question was always ‘How? How are you *explicitly* teaching this?’ They wouldn’t really have an answer,” she tells me.

In her school, the kids learn mindfulness and meditation practices, as well as mini neuroscience lessons so they understand how the brain processes emotion and uses higher thinking skills.

“It makes for a more focused classroom,” she says. “And the teachers are ready to respond to whatever comes up.”

If the energy level is spiraling, a teacher might say, “We need to do two minutes of ‘core practice,’ or breathing” as a way to reset and refocus.

Recently, I was working in my son’s class as a volunteer, and something random and unexpected happened: A large bird flew into the room and started circling as the teacher tried to chase it, wrangle it, and set it free again while the kids screamed and ran around in a panic.

When it was over, the teacher turned to the students.

“Let’s talk about what happened,” she said.

The kids had been working in small groups but now they came together and sat in a circle. She gave them a chance to say how they felt and ask questions.

She wondered out loud *how that bird must have felt* when he suddenly found himself in a bright classroom of 25 yelling humans.

As she talked, I thought about what a good exercise it was for the kids to review the experience and to consider the perspective of the bird, and the teacher, and each other – a great lesson in empathy and emotional processing.

It may not seem like it on the surface, but it’s opportunities like this that stimulate the right parts of the social and emotional brain, and help to create expert academic learners.