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Early childhood social and emotional development: Advancing the field of measurement

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ABSTRACT

This paper frames the subject of this special issue — how the field currently measures social and emotional development in early childhood. We first describe the relationship of social and emotional development to child functioning and overall well-being, and then present major measurement challenges associated with this domain, including a lack of clarity around conceptualizations of the subdomains of social and emotional development, and issues tied to quality and ease of use for extant measures. In describing the multiple purposes of early childhood assessment more broadly, the reciprocal dynamic between programs, policymakers, researchers, and developers in generating knowledge, guidance for practitioners, and policy is highlighted. We close with an overview of the remaining articles in this issue, and underscore the need for the field to come to agreement on sound conceptual and methodological approaches to measuring young children's social and emotional development.

This special issue is intended to propel the field concerned with measurement of child social and emotional development forward by encouraging ongoing validation and refinement of extant measures, and development of new measures. This goal is rooted in a growing understanding of the inter-relationship between subdomains of social and emotional development, and the key components that should be measured within these subdomains. Better measurement is fundamental to the widely held goal of understanding the association of young children's social and emotional competencies with school readiness, and how these competencies support children's overall development as they move to middle childhood and beyond.

The work presented here moves beyond the scope of an initial project between Child Trends and the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (the Forum) (Federal Interagency Forum on Child & Family Statistics, 2015). This special issue provides a review of key literature and considerations related to understanding and assessing subdomains of social and emotional development in young children. Next, a summary of extant measures of early childhood social and emotional development and a rubric developed for evaluating the characteristics of these measures are presented. Then, academic experts provide commentaries on considerations specific to the various subdomains of social and emotional development. In closing, we identify strengths and gaps in the measurement of social and emotional functioning, and where there is consensus – or a lack thereof – in approaches to defining and measuring aspects of social and emotional development in young children. Our hope is that this issue will be a useful guide for those concerned with what constitutes high-quality measurement, as well as a resource directing readers to measures that fulfill specific criteria.

Overview of early social and emotional development

For the purposes of this issue, we define early social and emotional development as the emerging ability of young children (ages 0–5) to "form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn — all in the context of family, community, and culture" (Yates et al., 2008, p. 2). Among the many foundational social and emotional skills and characteristics, researchers consistently include in their work emotion expression and management, perspective taking, empathy, inhibitory control, self-confidence, and the ability to develop and support relationships with others (Denham, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Yoder, 2014).

Relationship of social and emotional development to child functioning and well-being

Research and practice around understanding and supporting young children's social and emotional development have been in existence for

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decades. That said, social and emotional competencies are increasingly recognized as critical for children's success, in school as well as in other settings, and in later phases of life into adulthood (National Education Goals Panel, 1995; Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). Child development specialists across multiple disciplines (e.g., education, medicine, child welfare) acknowledge the importance of positive social and emotional development to overall child well-being and the subject continues to gain prominence in public discourse (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.; Cooper, Masi, & Vick, 2009; Isakson, Higgins, Davidson, & Cooper, 2009).

Social and emotional experiences with primary caregivers as well as interactions with other children and adults early in life set the stage for future academic and personal outcomes, and undergird other areas of development (Denham, 2006; Denham & Brown, 2010; Konold & Pianta, 2005; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). As children develop social and emotional skills, they gain the confidence and competence needed to build relationships, problem-solve, and cope with emotions (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000; Parlakian, 2003). Social and emotional competencies as they relate to school readiness have gained enormous attention. Research indicates that social skills and accompanying *process skills* (e.g., attention and approaches to learning) evident at school entry (i.e. by about age 5) are the best predictors of later social and emotional *competencies*, such as managing behavior, making social connections, and tolerating frustration with peers (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Halle, Hair, Burchinal, Anderson, & Zaslow, 2012; Herbert-Myers, Guttentag, Swank, Smith, & Landry, 2006; Konold & Pianta, 2005). Social and emotional competencies also often uniquely predict academic achievement, even when other factors such as earlier academic success are taken into account (Denham, 2006; Jacobsen & Hoffman, 1997; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995; Shields et al., 2001; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). In addition, children with greater self-control (an aspect of self-regulation) are more likely to grow into adults with better health (e.g., better physical health, less substance abuse), have higher incomes and fewer financial struggles, and fewer criminal convictions than those with weaker self-regulatory skills (Moffitt et al., 2011).

Conversely, maladjustment in the social and emotional domain may impede children's ability to function in family, school, or other contexts (Campbell, 2006). Failure to develop secure attachments with caregivers may lead to later difficulties communicating or managing emotions, or developing positive relationships with peers (Sroufe, 2005). Emotional or behavioral problems in young children are linked to health and behavioral problems in adolescence, including school dropout and juvenile delinquency (Brauner & Stephens, 2006). Persistent behavior problems extending beyond what is considered appropriate for a child's age and development are risk factors for both externalizing and internalizing disorders (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2009). Finally, certain social and emotional problems such as anxiety and depression also negatively predict later academic achievement (Romano, Babchishin, Pagani, & Kohen, 2010).

The advancement of knowledge around the importance of early childhood social and emotional development has brought with it a variety of informational and child-serving program accountability tools. For example, parenting resources abound for supporting early attachment, language development, and positive discipline approaches wherein parents model emotion management and problem solving skills for their children. Early childhood program standards (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003),[1] almost universally convey expectations for programs supporting the development of social and emotional competencies (Council of Chief State School Officers, n.d.; Smith, 2008). School-age standards are beginning to incorporate similar expectations (Collaborative for Academic Social & Emotional Learning (CASEL), n.d.; National School Climate Center, n.d.).

The growing body of research linking assessments of social and emotional competencies to child outcomes, and involving the use of these assessments to inform practice and intervention (Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, & Shulman, 1992; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007), provides accumulating evidence that when young children are able to develop prosocial relationships, feel confident in themselves, and express and manage their emotions, they are more likely to be prepared to learn and succeed in school (Raver, 2002). However, despite this preponderance of evidence, the development of psychometrically valid measures that are aligned for use within assessment and accountability systems has lagged (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, Newcombe, & de Villiers, 2005; Raver, 2002).

Purposes of assessment

In response to growing accountability requirements in publicly funded programs such as Early Head Start, Head Start, and public prekindergarten, the field of study surrounding early childhood assessment is burgeoning (Grisham-Brown, Hallam, & Brookshire, 2006), with greater emphasis on conducting and using the information from assessments than ever before (National Research Council, 2008). For example, state and program-level articulation of early learning standards, or goals for what children should know and be able to do at different points in their development, has led to expectations to document children's progress in light of these standards and to utilize assessments for program planning and evaluation. At the same time, the field of measurement is traversing its own developmental continuum to identify best practices in child assessment. Issues range from how to select appropriate measures across phases of development, to their proper administration and the communication of results to parents and program leadership.

Assessments currently serve several purposes, including documenting children's developmental progress over time to provide a comprehensive picture of their skills and abilities and informing early childhood program delivery (National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014). In this regard, the National Academy of Sciences (National Research Council, 2008) outlines four broad purposes of assessment in early childhood: 1) Determining an individual child's level of functioning, 2) guiding intervention and instruction, 3) evaluating the performance of a program or society, and 4) advancing knowledge of child development.

Within each of these broad purposes of assessment, more specific goals may be noted. Assessment of individual child functioning may occur to identify problems or risks at the individual or community level, to confirm suspected problems, or to assess the readiness of children entering formal school settings. Assessments also are used to plan activities or to track the progress of children in early care and education settings, either individually or collectively. Aggregated assessment data used to evaluate program performance inform both program effectiveness (to make decisions about how best to strengthen or whether to continue or terminate programs) and program impacts (in comparison to some alternative program or treatment). At the societal level, early childhood assessment can also inform social benchmarking. Finally, assessments are used in basic research designed to advance knowledge of child development. The content of this issue touches upon each of these assessment purposes at least briefly.

Our initial interests were in identifying survey measures suitable for providing a national portrait of young children's social and emotional development, much akin to benchmarking. However, in so doing we became aware of the need to scrutinize the quality of available assessments to determine whether the information they yield is a reliable reflection of social and emotional functioning. In the following section,

[1] For more information, see http://ectacenter.org/topics/earlylearn/earlylearn.asp.