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SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, HEALTH AND SAFETY,
AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

Modeling Positive Behaviors for Young Children through Visual Learning Strategies and Within Recognizable Contexts

*Stories with visual displays as effective tools for teaching
critical life skills in early childhood classrooms*

By *Stuart J. Murphy*

Overview

Our young children need strong social/emotional skills in order to interact in positive ways with others, develop productive dispositions toward learning, and persevere in the work associated with school and in life. Skills in areas such as cooperation, self-regulation, and confidence building at early ages are among the key predictors of later success in school.

Children also need health and safety and cognitive skills in order to succeed. Knowing how to play safely and understanding what to do if you think you are lost are important to the well-being and comfort of every child. Being able to distinguish left from right, to write your own name, and to understand sequence are also important early skills.

Yet, with children attending school at younger ages than ever before, many have only limited development in these critical skills. In his best-selling book, *How Children Succeed*, education writer Paul Tough notes that “when Kindergarten teachers are surveyed about their students, they say that the biggest problem they face is not children who don’t know their letters and numbers; it is kids who don’t know how to manage their tempers or calm themselves down after a provocation.” (Tough, 2012) Teachers must find ways to develop these skills in their children, particularly in the early school years.

Skills such as persistence, developing a “can do” attitude, and empathy are especially important. In an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, award-winning journalist, editor and strategist, Alison Hockenberry wrote: “Ultimately, it’s in schools that the major shift must happen -- and is starting to. Teachers are discovering that placing an emphasis on empathy creates a positive impact in their classrooms.” (Hockenberry, 2012) This positive impact is being seen in the development of all such skills.

Children benefit when teachers make the attainment of these skills part of their daily classroom practice.



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Researchers have found that social/emotional skill development is critical to early literacy learning. In *Teaching and Learning in Preschool*, an innovative preschool guidebook that integrates literacy activities with content-area lessons, authors Elisabeth Claire Venn and Monica Dacy Jahn write: “Self-regulation is significant in the development of early literacy learning competencies. Before children can learn early literacy behaviors and strategies, they must be able to self-regulate their behaviors. We cannot over emphasize the importance of this critical, foundational skill. Teachers must be aware that self-regulation is the number one precursor to literacy acquisition.” (Venn and Jahn, 2003)

The research of school readiness expert C. Cybele Raver indicates that, “while young children’s emotional and behavioral problems are costly to their chances of school success, these problems are identifiable early, are amenable to change, and can be reduced over time.” (Raver, 2002) This critical agenda can and must be addressed in schools. Through integrating social/emotional learning throughout the curriculum, through partnering with parents and other caregivers, and through employing visual learning strategies and stories to model behaviors for children, we can get this done.

Developing Life Skills in Children

Visual learning strategies and storytelling provide helpful ways to model the behaviors that we want our young children to exhibit. Children need to be able to see what these behaviors look like so they can emulate them and internalize how they feel.

Unfortunately, children are continually exposed to many bad behaviors in their daily lives, such as violence on television and in video games, people interrupting one another, drivers exhibiting road rage, cheating in the classroom, and worse. These can become the models that they will follow. We need to counter this reality by purposely exposing children to examples of positive behaviors in contexts that are relevant to their lives.

Defining Visual Learning

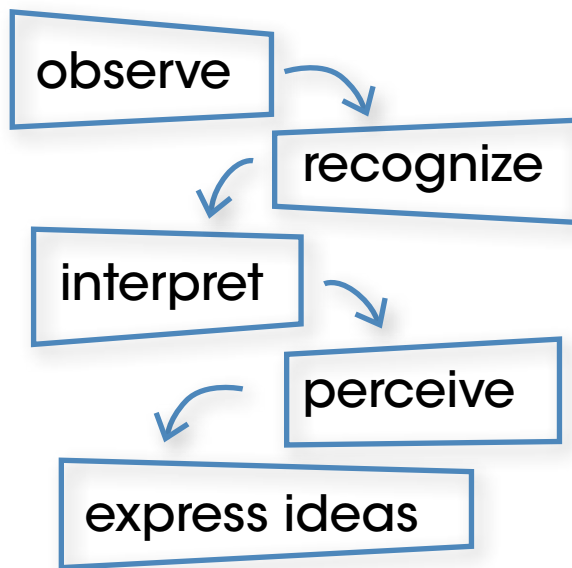
Young children are already accomplished visual learners long before they begin to understand language and learn to read. Visual models transcend language capabilities. Regardless of their language backgrounds, learning styles, and cultural experiences, children readily relate to visual models.

Visual learning is about how we gather and process information from illustrations, graphs, symbols, photographs, icons and other visual stimuli. It is how we make sense of complex information through models.

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There are five specific skills involved in the visual learning process.

Observation has to do with seeing—not just looking at something, but really examining it. “You look sad. Do you feel okay?” “That looks like fun!” “What is she doing?”

Recognition helps us to recall something based on our observations. “I’ve seen that happen before.” “I know what it is.” “I remember that expression.”

Interpretation relies on comprehension and enhances our understanding of something based on what we see. “What does that mean?” “He must be lonely.” “That was a nice thing to do.”

Perception uses visual analysis to help us make predictions and expand our thinking beyond what we see. “She might get hurt if she does that.” “What might happen next?” “He is going to be happy!”

Self-Expression is about drawing and image-making that allows us to communicate our feelings, share our knowledge, and demonstrate our creativity. “This shows how I feel.” “That is a picture of my favorite place.” “This is a map of my room.”

It would be difficult to communicate many of these ideas without seeing them in visual representations. Images express things in ways that words alone are not able to achieve. Seeing leads to understanding.

Children readily apply their visual learning skills to the world around them. Visual models can provide information on a range of topics. And, through their own sketches and drawings, children can express their ideas and feelings. They learn how to share their thoughts and communicate with others.

This ability is often referred to as visual literacy. Students need to be visually literate, and visually fluent. They must learn how to read, interpret, and produce visual information.

Framing the Visual in Contextual Learning

Contextual learning involves making concepts and ideas relevant to young children by inserting them into familiar scenarios. Stories are important vehicles for achieving this goal. Stories, especially those with visual support, engage young children and create a “comfort zone” for them—an environment that allows them to openly explore their thinking within familiar settings.

Children’s books play a key role in this area. “Read-alouds and shared reading provide wonderful opportunities for children to hear and discuss the emotions and social interactions of the characters in books.” (Venn and Jahn, 2003) Stories help children to make connections to their own experiences. They are able to see how the topics they are reading about interrelate within a subject area, to other subject areas, and to their lives.

Modeling Behaviors

“Telling children about the virtue is never as powerful as showing what the quality looks like. It is important to give young children the option of seeing pro-social models so that they can witness and imitate the behaviors that are represented,” notes

Michele Borba, internationally recognized educational consultant and author. (Borba, 2001) Modeling is an important tool when dealing with self-regulation and addressing the development of skills such as persistence, attentiveness and cooperation. Children need to have the opportunity to see what a particular skill looks like, reflect on what it accomplishes, and discuss their understandings.

Reading books that demonstrate positive behaviors is an effective strategy to use in the classroom. “Research verifies that kids learn self-control not only from directly watching parents, teachers, and their peers, but by observing characters in books and other media.” (Venn and Jahn, 2003) The characters serve as role models for children.

Other methods include dramatic play, show-and-tell, and puppet shows. Dramatic play—role playing—gives children a chance to demonstrate a behavior to others and promote a discussion about it: “Describe how I feel.” “How can I change that?” Students may be asked to show something that makes them feel happy or sad, angry or silly, and then tell about it. They are communicating about their

feelings. Puppet shows provide an opportunity for students to assume different roles through the puppet figures. “Lion is being naughty. Here’s what he did.” “Zebra is being nice. Look what she did.” “Let’s talk about it.”

In his book, *Touchpoints Three to Six*, Dr. Terry Brazelton, acclaimed author and life-long advocate for children, warns, “Do not talk or teach about manners at the table. Manners and standards are learned by modeling at ages four and five.” (Brazelton, 2001) This concept applies to learning all social/emotional skills. Effective modeling techniques can help young children become fully engaged in their learning experiences and confident in their own learning capabilities.

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Learning Domains

Many of the important studies, guidelines, and standards for early childhood learning are organized into a number of domains, or critical areas of learning. For example, the influential Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework has grown from eight domains to eleven. These “represent the overarching areas of child development and early learning essential for school and long-term success.” (Head Start, 2011) Others range from as few as four to as many as twelve.

In my work, I have found it useful to simplify these areas of learning into four broad domains: social, emotional, health and safety, and cognitive skills.

Social Skills:

Social development refers to the skills necessary to interact with others, to make friends and be a friend, to work in groups and cooperate, and to acquire a sense of one’s own personal identity. “It is imperative that individuals are able to form positive relationships with others, for it is those relationships that give meaning to their experiences in the home, in school, and in the larger community,” notes Karen Nemeth, author and presenter on early childhood education and language development. (Nemeth, 2012)

Emotional Skills:

Positive emotional development provides a critical foundation for lifelong development and learning. Young children need to build their self-confidence, regulate their own emotions, understand their feelings, and demonstrate appropriate behaviors. “Children who are emotionally well-adjusted have a greater chance of early school success.” (Reggio Emilia, 2012)

Health and Safety Skills:

Acquiring health and safety skills, as well as attending to matters of hygiene, nutrition, diet and exercise are of major consequence for young children. Children must learn to understand and use health and safety rules and routines. “Early health habits lay the foundation for lifelong healthy living. Equally important, physical well-being, health, and motor development are foundational to young children’s learning.” (Head Start, 2011)

Cognitive Skills:

“Cognitive development occurs across all domains and supports children’s learning about the world in which they live,” writes Jessica Hoffmann Davis, cognitive development psychologist and advocate for the role of the arts in education. (Davis, 2016) Children need to learn basic literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and creative arts skills. They need to develop approaches to learning that will contribute to their success in school. These approaches provide children with the opportunity to acquire new knowledge, establish goals, and achieve those goals for themselves.

The skills presented under each domain are connected and interrelated. For example, a story about playground safety, a health and safety skill, is also about learning to play cooperatively with others, a social skill. “Students naturally make, need, and want connections across their learning and school too frequently and wrong-headedly

teaches boundaries, cuts up learning, and suggests to students that they select and settle for one piece of the pie.” (Davis, 2005) These skills come together to form the whole child.

Standards and Frameworks

Visual learning strategies and contextual learning opportunities are important tools for the implementation of national and state early childhood standards and frameworks.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is perhaps the most well-known of the guidelines that have been produced to provide common courses of study and expectations across schools, cities, states, and the country. “Teachers, parents and community leaders have all weighed in to help create the Common Core State Standards. The standards clearly communicate what is expected of students at each grade level. This will allow our teachers to be better equipped to know exactly what they need to help students learn and establish individualized benchmarks for them. The Common Core State Standards focus on core conceptual understandings and procedures starting in the early grades, thus enabling teachers to take the time needed to teach core concepts and procedures well—and to give students the opportunity to master them.” (CCSS, 2011)

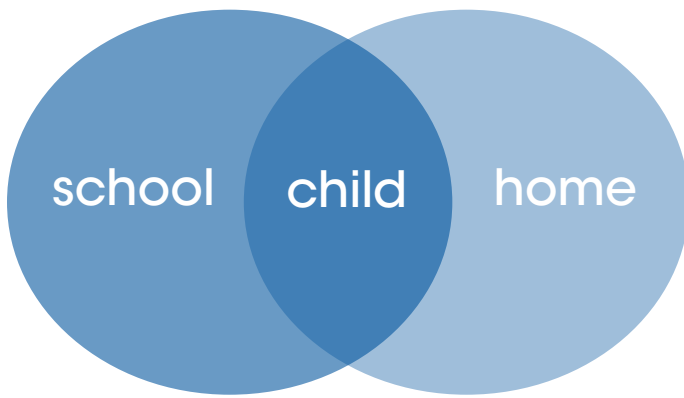
The Ohio Early Learning and Development Standards is a good example of a state initiative. These standards include such goals as “seek new and varied experiences and challenges (take risks), demonstrate self-direction while participating in a range of activities and routines, ask questions to seek explanations about phenomena of interest, use creative and flexible thinking to solve problems, and engage in inventive social play.” In the social/emotional area, desired skills include “recognize and identify own emotions and the emotions of others,” and “communicate a range of emotions in socially accepted ways.” (OELDS, 2012)

There is a great deal of natural overlap between frameworks and, notably, all place value on the acquisition of social/emotional skills. They provide helpful guidance and essential background information as we consider our curriculum and our classroom practice.

The Home Connection

It is critical for teachers to engage parents, grandparents, and other caregivers in the important work of developing the skills of their children. “The social and emotional curriculum should incorporate self-care competencies, appropriate interactions for self and others, and appropriate family and community relations. Multiple modes of learning should be embraced and enhanced by preschool staff, including motivation and curiosity, reasoning and problem-solving, attention to task and continuance, and representational and symbolic thinking.” (Venn and Jahn, 2003)

Current thinking regarding the development of moral intelligence indicates that infants as young as six months start to recognize distress in others and begin to show empathy for others. Building a “moral intelligence,” notes Michele Borba, “encompasses such essential life characteristics as the ability to recognize someone’s pain and to stop oneself from acting on cruel intentions; to control one’s impulses and delay gratification; to listen openly to all sides before judging; to accept and appreciate differences; to decipher unethical choices; to empathize; to stand up against injustice; and to treat others with compassion and respect.” (Borba, 2001)



Empathy is “a teachable, fundamental skill, without which innovation, collaboration, and creativity cannot happen. Empathy is more than just awareness and concern. It’s about cultural sensitivity and conflict resolution.” (Hockenberry, 2012)

Research shows that the home environment has a great influence on the development of empathy and other life skills. It is important that teachers partner with parents and share what is being taught in the classroom, meeting regularly to review key areas of the curriculum, including social/emotional skill development.

Teachers can recommend books to read at home that are also being used in the classroom and provide home activities that relate to these stories. Firsthand knowledge of what is happening in school “empowers parents as they engage in before- and after-school activities with their preschoolers and plan their academic futures.” (Venn and Jahn, 2003)

“With students, parents and teachers all on the same page and working together for shared goals, we can ensure that students make progress each year and graduate from school prepared to succeed in college and in a modern workforce.” (CCSS, 2011)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is an approach to teaching designed to promote the best learning and development opportunities for young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), under whose auspices this approach was developed, provides specific information about the Three Core Considerations, the Twelve Principles of Child Development and Learning, and the Five Guidelines for Effective Teaching associated with DAP. (NAEYC)

In an article about the intersection of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Karen Nemeth noted, “This research-based guide reminds us that children under the age of six years learn best through the rich, creative, exploratory, hands-on discoveries and interactions that happen during play. When early learning happens in this kind of play, it grows, lasts and creates the strong foundation children need to succeed later in school. It is the foundation on which successful accomplishment of the CCSS will be possible.”(Nemeth, 2012)

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Reggio Emilia and Interdisciplinary Learning

There is great value to interdisciplinary learning. Life is interdisciplinary. For example, we rarely experience a mathematical problem, a scientific concept, or a social studies situation in isolation. Rather, these occur within a larger context. When we make a purchase, we count money. When we walk in the woods, we observe nature. When we plan a trip, we learn about geography.

Interdisciplinary learning is central to the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education developed at the Loris Malaguzzi Centre in Italy. In addition to a staff of teachers, every Reggio Emilia school has a “pedagogista” and an “atelierista.” The “pedagogista” is a curriculum specialist who works with the teachers and administrators of the school, and is responsible for its pedagogical direction. “Atelierista” comes from the word “atelier,” a workshop or artist’s studio. That person works with the rest of the staff and the students to design major projects that encourage “the wonder of learning.” (Reggio Emilia, 2012)

In one school, for example, 5-year-olds select “movement” as their project. A dancer is invited into the school to perform and to demonstrate her steps and leaps. The children talk about distance and height (math) and about the various parts of the body involved in each move (science). They discuss strength and balance (health), and make books to record their experiences (language arts).

Meanwhile, 6-year-olds are working on a project around the concept of “windows.” Are windows openings or barriers (philosophy)? They draw pictures (imagination and art, proportion and scale). They write about them, too (language arts, self-expression).

Contextual learning is interdisciplinary learning at its best. Learning new concepts through a story or activity engages children and helps them to relate these concepts to their own experiences.

Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an important national movement to help teachers help struggling students. It involves the systematic monitoring of academic and behavioral progress to make data-based instructional decisions. According to the National Center on Response to Intervention, “Rigorous implementation of RTI includes a combination of high quality, culturally and linguistically responsive instruction; assessment; and evidence-based intervention. Comprehensive RTI implementation will contribute to more meaningful identification of learning and behavioral problems, improve instructional quality, provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school, and assist with the identification of learning disabilities and other disabilities.” (RTI, 2011)

Stories and visual learning strategies are useful tools to engage students who are having trouble attending to early literacy goals, and can help students understand new concepts.

Differentiated Instruction

“The diversity of students in our classrooms is increasing; the need to shape curriculum and instruction to maximize learning for all students more urgent than ever. Educators are searching for methods that will allow us to accommodate the learning needs of all our students so that all are challenged, but not overwhelmed, by the learning process.” (Differentiated Instruction, 2009)

Differentiating classroom instruction is a way to be sure that we reach and engage all students. Students who already grasp concepts can be encouraged to read storybooks independently, while students who need help can receive more individualized attention. Adding related stories to a lesson plan can provide additional context and deepen the understanding of the subject being studied. Students who require more engagement may benefit from a story about the topic being discussed, while advanced students create projects and then present those to the class. Differentiating our classroom instruction is a way to be sure that we reach and engage all students.

Summary

Helping young children master social, emotional, health and safety, and cognitive skills can increase their chances for success in school, and beyond. These skills are, in fact, critical life skills. A child who cannot regulate his or her emotions is more likely to struggle in the classroom. A child who does not know how to cooperate will have a harder time than others making friends. These problems snowball and children may fall further behind in school and become socially isolated.

According to The National Centre for Clinical Infant Program, “kids’ emotional and social abilities are better predictors of school success than the amount of facts a kid knows or whether he or she learns to read early. More important are knowing what kind of behavior is expected, how to control impulsive urges, wait and take turns, ask teachers for help, follow directions, and express needs while getting along with other kids.” (Borba, 2003)

Or, to frame it in behavioral intervention terms, “Extensive evaluations have found that social and emotional learning enhances academic achievement, helps students develop self-management and self-control, improves relationships at all levels of the school-community, reduces conflict among students, improves teachers’ classroom management, and helps young people to be healthier and more successful in school and life.” (RTI, 2010)

The mission is clear: We need to make sure that our children have the social, emotional, health and safety, and cognitive skills they need to succeed. To do this, we must work together—administrators, supervisors, teachers, curriculum specialists, teachers, librarians, parents, grandparents, and all caregivers. Visual learning strategies and contextual learning experiences are powerful tools that can get the results that we seek—happier, healthier, more confident children.

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