Chapter 1

Making a Difference in Children’s Lives

Objectives

On completion of this chapter, you should be able to describe:

• Social competence and how it affects children’s lives.

• How child development and learning influence children’s social competence.

• The contexts within which children develop socially.

• Differences between laypersons and early childhood professionals in promoting children’s social competence.

• Your role in enhancing children’s social competence.
Think about the aspects of everyday living that are most important to you—family life, time with friends, school, work, and play. They all involve human relationships. People are social beings. From the moment we are born, we spend a lifetime actively engaged with others. Through social interactions, we gain companionship, stimulation, and a sense of belonging. We obtain knowledge of who we are and how the world works. We develop personal and interpersonal skills and become familiar with the expectations and values of the society in which we live. This is such a crucial facet of the human experience that much of children’s attention during the early years centers on how to navigate the social environment effectively.

Children in the Social World

The social environment is complicated. There is a lot to know and many things you must be able to do to function successfully in society. Take the simple act of greeting someone you meet. To interact effectively, you need to know a variety of scripts and what physical actions others will interpret as friendly. You have to make judgments about what is polite or impolite based on how well you know a person, his or her role, your role, the time, the place, and the culture in which you are operating. Based on all this, you will probably address someone you know well differently from someone you are meeting for the first time. Likewise, you will adopt a very different manner to greet someone at a football game than you might use at a funeral. Although such variations make common sense to adults, children are new to the world, and many of the social understandings and behaviors we take for granted are things children are just learning.

Children’s Social Knowledge and Skills

Imagine that you are working with children in a childcare setting or elementary classroom. You observe the following behaviors among three 6-year-olds in your group: Dennis, Rosalie, and Sarah Jo.

Dennis is an active child. He has strong reactions to the people and things around him. He is imaginative, with many ideas for how to play. In an effort to translate his ideas into action, Dennis spends a lot of time telling the other children what to do and what to say. When peers suggest alternate play themes or strategies, Dennis tends to resist their ideas and yell to make things go his way. When other children ask if they can play with something he is using, Dennis often answers, “No.” If they persist, it is not unusual for him to push or hit to keep things for himself.

Rosalie is a quiet child who seldom misbehaves. Typically, she wanders from one activity to the next without talking to the other children. Rosalie responds when spoken to, but rarely initiates social interactions with peers or adults. She cannot name anyone in the group who is her friend, and no other children identify her as a favorite playmate. Although children do not actively reject her, they have come to ignore her and seldom include her in their activities. Most days, Rosalie is a solitary figure in the room.

Sarah Jo is keenly interested in the other children and often invites them to interact with her. Frequently she is willing to try games or play in ways proposed by peers, yet she also expresses ideas of her own. Sarah Jo shares easily and can usually figure out how to keep the play going. Although she has her ups and downs, she is generally cheerful. Other children seek her out as a playmate and notice when Sarah Jo is absent from the group.

As you can see, each of these children is exhibiting a variety of social behaviors. Unfortunately, Dennis and Rosalie are displaying interaction patterns that are not serving them well. In fact, if they maintain these patterns over time, their prospects for life success will be weakened (Goleman, 2007). On the other hand, Sarah Jo has skills that predict a positive future.

As an early childhood professional, you could help Dennis and Rosalie develop better ways of getting along with others. You could also support Sarah Jo in expanding her skills. In doing these things, you would be contributing to each child’s social competence. To promote social competence, you must first know what it is and what behaviors characterize socially competent children.

Social Competence

Social competence includes all the social, emotional, and cognitive knowledge and skills children need to achieve their goals and to be effective in their interactions with others (Davidson, Welsh & Bierman, 2006; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). Typical categories of behavior associated with social competence include the following:

- Social values
- Personal identity
- Emotional intelligence
- Interpersonal skills
- Self-regulation
- Planning, organizing, and decision making
- Cultural competence
nor will they always experience success in asserting their rights appropriately. “Any child may occasion-
ally have some social difficulty … for most children these events are short-lived and constitute opportu-
nities to learn and to practice new skills” (Hastings et al., 2006, p. 4). Children who take advantage of these opportunities (rather than becoming hostile or giving up) become increasingly successful in their social interactions and in achieving their personal goals effectively.

Are All Children Socially Competent in the Same Way?

Consider the following personal attributes:

- Kindness
- Honesty
- Shyness
- Generosity
- Friendliness
- Assertiveness

Which of these do you associate with social competence?

If you were to compare your answers with those of other readers, you would find many choices in com-
mon, but probably not all. This is because definitions of social competence are fairly similar worldwide.
and incorporate most of the categories identified in Figure 1-1 (van Hamond & Haccou, 2006). However, some behaviors defined as socially competent in one culture are not defined that same way in others. For instance, Table 1-1 presents the results of a study of qualities people in Canada, China, Sweden, and the United States describe as socially competent (Ladd, 2005). Note that each country has several qualities in common, but not all. To further complicate things, the same social value may be demonstrated through different behaviors in different groups. For example, although many societies value respect, the combination of words and actions considered respectful in one family or culture, may not match what is viewed as respectful in another (e.g., in some households it is respectful to take your shoes off before entering the main living area; in other households, this is not expected).

Variations like these contribute to distinct definitions of social competence across and within cultures. Yet, regardless of which behaviors equate with social competence in a given group, all children eventually

FIGURE 1-1  The Elements of Social Competence.
## Individual Attributes

The child
1. is usually in a positive mood
2. is not excessively dependent on the teacher
3. usually comes to the program willingly
4. usually copes with rebuffs adequately
5. shows the capacity to empathize
6. has positive relationships with one or two peers; shows the capacity to really care about them and misses them if they are absent
7. displays a capacity for humor
8. does not seem to be acutely lonely

## Social Skills

The child usually
1. approaches others positively
2. expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions
3. asserts own rights and needs appropriately
4. is not easily intimidated by bullies
5. expresses frustration and anger effectively and without escalating disagreements or harming others
6. gains access to ongoing groups at play and work
7. enters ongoing discussions; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities
8. takes turns fairly easily
9. shows interest in others; exchanges information with and requests information from others appropriately
10. negotiates and compromises with others appropriately
11. does not draw inappropriate attention to self or disrupt the play or work of others
12. accepts and enjoys peers and adults of ethnic groups other than his or her own
13. interacts nonverbally with other children using smiles, waves, nods, etc.

## Peer Relationships

The child is
1. usually accepted rather than neglected or rejected by other children
2. sometimes invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work
3. named by other children as someone they are friends with or like to play and work with

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**BOX 1-1** Observable Behaviors of Socially Competent Children.

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Social competence is not a luxury. It makes a tremendous difference in how children feel about themselves and in how others perceive them. Research tells us that socially competent children are happier than their less competent peers. They are more successful in their interactions with others, more popular, and more satisfied with life. In addition, children’s social relations have been linked to academic achievement, with positive social skills being associated with greater success in school (Epstein, 2009). See Box 1-2.

As a result of these favorable outcomes, socially competent children tend to see themselves as worthwhile human beings who can make a difference in...
Socially incompetent children are at risk of continuing these problematic behavior patterns as they mature (Ladd, 2008).

Whether children eventually become more or less socially competent is influenced by many factors, including child development, childhood learning, and the contexts in which children function. You will need to know more about all of these things to support children in their journey toward social competence.

Children tend to be seen as more socially competent when they are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>China</th>
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<td>Helpful</td>
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<td>Nonaggressive</td>
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TABLE 1-1  Similarities and Differences in Social Competence across Cultures.
Academic success in the early school years is based on social and emotional skills. Young children can’t learn to read, do their sums, or solve a science problem if they have difficulty getting along with others and controlling their emotions, if they are impulsive, and if they have no idea about how to consider options, carry out a plan, or get help.

Students who demonstrate strong social and emotional skills also tend to exhibit

- Greater academic motivation
- More positive attitudes toward school
- Fewer absences
- More classroom participation
- Higher math achievement
- Higher language arts achievement
- Higher social studies achievement
- Higher grades
- Fewer suspensions
- Less tendency to drop out in high school


**BOX 1-2** “Learning is a social process.”

## Development and Social Competence

Katie and Sandra, two 5-year-olds, are rocking their dolls in the housekeeping area.

**Katie:** We’re friends, right?

**Sandra:** Yeah. You have a baby, and I have a baby boy.

**Katie:** These babies can’t be friends. They don’t talk or nothin’.

**Sandra:** Babies can’t play games or save swings.

**Katie:** Not yet!

**Sandra:** Not like us!

**Katie:** Yeah!

Katie and Sandra are pleased to be friends and are proud of the social abilities they possess at 5 years of age that “their babies” have not yet developed. As children mature, developmental changes gradually occur that increase their social capacities. Such changes are governed by certain developmental principles that help us recognize commonalities among children and characteristics typical within age ranges (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). These five principles remind us that children’s social development is complex, requiring the support of knowledgeable adults who appreciate the unique qualities of the children they serve.

## All Development Is Interrelated

All threads of development (social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical) interweave and exist simultaneously. No aspect of development is more important than another, nor can any single thread exist independent of the rest. The truth of this principle is illustrated as children try to make friends. Their ability to establish relations with peers is dependent on a whole host of developmental skills and understandings.

- **Social:** Negotiating the rules of a game; waiting to take a turn; working out who will go first
- **Emotional:** Having confidence to approach another child; responding with enthusiasm when invited to play by a peer; expressing empathy toward another child
- **Cognitive:** Remembering another child’s name; developing alternate strategies for how to solve conflicts that arise; knowing which scripts fit which social situations
- **Language:** Using words to greet another child or to describe how a game could be played; responding with appropriate comments to questions from a potential friend
- **Physical:** Making room for a new player; having the motor skills necessary to play a video game or a game of chase with a potential friend

Recognizing that all development is interrelated will enable you to better appreciate the many social behaviors children are striving to master. It will also help you identify opportunities to guide children’s social development and learning throughout the day. Such chances come up as children play in the pretend grocery store, as children discuss rules for building with blocks, as they proceed through the steps in a science experiment, or as they work out a math problem in a group. These opportunities may occur indoors, outside, at the lunch table, in the gym, on the bus, during a field trip, or at a home visit. Social development is happening all the time and everywhere children are.
There Is an Orderly Sequence to Social Development

Try putting these developmental milestones related to self-awareness in the order in which they tend to appear during childhood:

- Children define themselves by comparing themselves to others. (I ride bikes better than Susan. I am shorter than Marc.)
- Children define themselves based on their personality traits. (I am honest. I am fun to be with.)
- Children define themselves based on what they look like. (I am a boy. I have brown eyes.)

What did you decide? In their proper order, social benchmarks such as these illustrate the principle of developmental sequence.

Social development proceeds in a stepwise fashion and is relatively predictable. Scientists worldwide have identified typical sequences of behavior or understanding related to various aspects of social development and social competence (Berk, 2009). For instance, children develop their concept of self over several years.

Preschoolers tend to focus primarily on physical traits. As they grow older, children gradually incorporate comparisons into their definition of self. By age 8 or 9, children become more conscious of the internal characteristics that comprise their personality. Although children spend differing amounts of time on each step, and sometimes skip steps altogether, self-awareness seems to progress in roughly the same order for everyone.

There are developmental sequences for many aspects of social competence—self-regulation, empathy, prosocial behavior, moral understanding, ideas about friendship, and so forth. As you learn these sequences, you will gain insights into what comes first, second, and third in social maturation. Such knowledge will help you determine reasonable expectations for individual children and decide what new understandings or behaviors might logically expand children’s current levels of functioning. For example, knowing that 3- and 4-year-olds focus on the physical traits that characterize who they are, you might plan classroom activities such as self-portraits or body tracings to enhance their self-awareness. On the other hand, you might ask early elementary-aged children, whose physical sense of self is more established, to tell or write stories focused on the personal qualities they value in themselves, such as honesty or being a good friend.

Rates of Development Vary Among Children

Darlene is 4 years old; so is Emma. Darlene could use whole phrases to describe her feelings by age 2. She has numerous strategies for getting what she wants, including taking turns and making plans for the order in which children will get to use a favored toy. Emma only began using multiword sentences around age 3. Her approaches to getting something she wants include asking a child who has it if she can have it next or getting the teacher to help her find another one like it. Darlene and Emma are alike in many ways, but they are different from one another as well. Both children are developing in a typical manner.

As illustrated by Darlene and Emma, all children develop according to their own timetable. No two children are exactly alike. Although the principle of orderly sequences still applies, the pace at which individuals go through the various sequences differs.

This explains why Darlene could express her feelings in words by age 2, and Emma accomplished the same skill several months later. Both children are exhibiting typical development, but the timing is different.

Based on the principle of varying rates, you can presume that children the same age will exhibit a wide range of social abilities. Some will be in the early developmental phases of a particular skill, and others will be farther along in the sequence. These variations are not a question of bad or good, worse or better, but simply typical differences in children’s social development. Understanding this will help you to be more patient with children and more realistic in what you expect of them.

There Are Optimal Periods of Social Development

There are certain moments in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

Graham Greene (novelist)

Certain times in people’s lives provide critical foundations for future development (Brophy-Herb, Schifman & Fitzgerald, 2007). During these periods, children are developmentally primed to acquire new understandings and skills. Conversely, if children are denied the kinds of experiences that will enhance development during this time, it may be harder for them to acquire certain skills or abilities later on. This is the principle of optimal periods of development.

Between the ages of birth and 12 years, children are eager, motivated social learners. They want to
connect—to become socially engaged. Concurrently, negative behavior patterns are not so entrenched that they cannot be changed. This makes the childhood years an ideal time for enhancing many essential attitudes and behaviors related to social competence. Some of these include the following:

- Trust
- Self-awareness and self-esteem
- Interpersonal communication skills
- Prosocial attitudes and behaviors
- Friendship dispositions and skills
- Problem-solving strategies
- Coping skills
- Executive function (decision making, organizing, planning ahead)
- Self-regulation

If the preceding developmental tasks are ignored, it is harder for children to become socially adept as adolescents or adults. The principle of optimal periods compels us to focus on children’s social development beginning when they are babies and well into the second decade of life.

Social Development Has Cumulative and Delayed Effects

An experience that has a minimal effect on a child’s development if it occurs once in a while may have a positive or harmful influence if it happens repeatedly over a long period of time (Katz & Chard, 2000). This is the principle of cumulative effects. For instance, being the target of occasional criticism is not likely to cause permanent damage to children’s self-esteem; however, youngsters who are subjected to steady fault finding are likely to develop lasting feelings of inferiority and pessimism (Seligman, 2007). On the other hand, reasoning with a child only once will not have a lasting impact on that child. However, adults who make a habit of reasoning with children will gradually see those children become better able to reason for themselves.

In addition to these accumulated impacts, developmental outcomes may be delayed. Some early experiences influence children’s functioning in ways that only appear much later in life. For instance, children’s development of self-regulation takes years to accomplish. The delayed nature of this process may prompt adults to wonder if their early efforts at reasoning with children will ever yield positive results. However, research shows that when adults consistently explain their point of view while also considering the child’s perspective, children eventually become better able to monitor their behavior without constant supervision (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). These strategies must be used for a long time before children can reason on their own.

Knowing the principle of cumulative and delayed effects will help you to consider the long-range implications of your efforts to guide children’s social development and behavior. As a result, there will be times when you reject a quick solution because it could undermine your long-term goals. For instance, even though it is faster to simply tell children “No,” when they disobey, if you want children to develop self-regulation, you will take the time to talk to them about their actions. In doing so, both the cumulative and delayed effects of reasoning support children’s eventual development of social competence.

As you can see, development plays a significant role in the extent to which children gain social competence. Understanding developmental principles will influence your interpretations of child behavior as well as your professional practices. Childhood learning is another factor to consider.

Learning and Social Competence

Cooperation, generosity, loyalty, and honesty are not inborn. They must be passed on to the child by older people, whether they are parents, other adults, or older youngsters.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (human ecologist)

Some of the social learning we pass on to children includes saying, “Excuse me” when they bump into someone, crossing streets at the corner, and deriving pleasure from sharing with another child. We communicate such lessons through our words and our deeds. How well children learn these lessons is governed by several principles of learning that impact social competence.

Children Are Active Social Learners

Consider the following Chinese proverb:

I hear, and I forget,
I see, and I remember,
I do, and I understand.

This saying captures a central truth about childhood learning; Children are doers. They do not wait passively for others to load them up with information. Children have active bodies and minds, which they use to make sense of social experiences everywhere they go. They
do this by observing, acting on objects, and interacting with other people (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). As a result of their experiences, children form hypotheses about how the social world works. (For instance, Cory might think, “If I say ‘Please’ Mohammed will give me the scissors right now.”) Sometimes children’s ideas are confirmed (Mohammed says, “Okay”). Sometimes children encounter evidence that is contrary to what they believe (Mohammed says “No” because he still needs the scissors). By observing, experimenting, and reflecting on what happens, children gradually make adjustments in their thinking (Cory decides, “I will have to wait for the scissors, but I’ll get them next”). Through hundreds of experiences like these, children construct ideas about codes of behavior to follow and strategies to use (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

Because children are active learners, they need many opportunities to experience the social world firsthand. For instance, children become more skillful at sharing when they practice sharing with others in their daily encounters, rather than simply hearing or talking about sharing. Figuring out how to divide the crackers at snack, how two people can use the computer together, or how to fit an extra person into a game are tangible problems children can solve on their own or with support from you. Such natural opportunities for social learning become teachable moments, in which children are motivated to learn new strategies. A typical teachable moment occurs when Celia wants to jump rope with a group of children already jumping. Her teacher uses this chance to help Celia figure out words she might use to approach the other children. On-the-spot mini-lessons like these are powerful. Children have immediate opportunities to practice relevant new skills as well as get feedback on the strategies they use. As you guide children’s social development and behavior, you will need to look for teachable moments such as these and take advantage of the learning opportunities they offer.

**Children Have Multiple Ways of Learning about the Social World**

Although all children are active learners, there are many ways in which they perceive, act on, and process social information. Consider the following examples:

Gary has a real feel for music and uses that medium as a way to express his feelings. When a problem comes up, he likes to figure it out on his own.

Samantha has a way with words. It’s easy for her to communicate needs and feelings to others verbally. In problem situations, she prefers strategizing with a friend.

Children benefit from having many opportunities to interact with minimal adult intervention.
Gary and Samantha are demonstrating different combinations of knowing and learning. Howard Gardner has coined the phrase **multiple intelligences** to describe these multilearning capabilities. His research suggests that there are at least eight ways of learning (Gardner, 2003):

- **Intrapersonal**: Children learn on their own through self-paced activities.
- **Interpersonal**: Children learn through relating to others and collaborating.
- **Kinesthetic**: Children learn through touch and movement.
- **Linguistic**: Children learn by seeing, saying, and using language.
- **Logical-mathematical**: Children learn by looking for patterns and relationships among objects and events.
- **Musical**: Children learn through rhythm and melody.
- **Naturalist**: Children learn through observations and interactions with plants and animals.
- **Spatial**: Children learn through visualizing something in their mind’s eye and then translating what they see in some tangible way.

All children have all these intelligences, but each type is not developed equally in each child. Thus children learn best when they have access to learning opportunities that match the learning modes they favor. Because you cannot always be sure which manner of learning suits an individual child best, children benefit when you use a variety of modes in your social teaching. For instance, assume you want children to learn about helping. Some children may find it useful to

- Carry out a classroom job on their own or read a book to themselves about helpful people (intrapersonal).
- Interact with another child to carry out a classroom job (interpersonal).
- Rehearse a helpful act before trying it out for real (kinesthetic).
- Talk about helpful actions they observed or carried out (linguistic).
- Consider patterns that characterize helpful behaviors (logical-mathematical).
- Sing or make up a catchy song about helping (musical).
- Help to care for a pet in the classroom (naturalist).
- Reflect on a helpful act they have seen or heard about (spatial).

Most children combine such experiences, extracting important information from the ones that match their preferred ways of learning. As you guide children’s social development, you will have to be sensitive to these different learning styles and make use of strategies that address each of them.

### Social Competence Involves Continuous Challenge and Mastery

Children enjoy the challenge of learning what they nearly understand, but do not quite grasp and of trying things they can almost do, but not quite do on their own. This means they benefit from tackling concepts and skills just slightly beyond their current levels of proficiency and from working at them until they achieve greater competence (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). At the same time, research shows that children need to successfully negotiate learning tasks most of the time if they are to remain motivated to learn. Youngsters who are overwhelmed will fail. If failure becomes routine, most children will simply stop trying (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Thus, positive social learning is most likely to occur when children feel both stimulated and successful. Knowing this, your role is to monitor social situations, challenge children to stretch their understandings, support children as they attempt new social skills, and help children figure out more successful approaches. At times, peers may provide these supports instead. As children become more adept, you will gradually withdraw from the scene, allowing them to pursue mastery on their own.

Two-year-old Callie wants more snack, but does not know how to ask for it—this example can be used to illustrate the process of challenge and mastery. Some on-the-spot coaching by you or a more knowledgeable peer could facilitate Callie’s learning. Coaching might involve suggesting a simple script for Callie to use to get her peers to pass the cracker basket. If your words are too complex or too abstract, Callie will not absorb the lesson. If the script is just slightly more involved than Callie is used to, however, she may stretch her thinking to encompass the new words. Chances are, Callie will not learn the new script in a single episode, but this interaction may prompt her to try the new script in a variety of situations, practicing until she eventually gains mastery without prompting from someone else. In doing this, she will actually move to a higher order of social learning.

### Social Learning Takes Time

*There is more to life than simply increasing its speed.*

**Mahatma Gandhi (political and spiritual leader)**

Social learning is a gradual process. Although children are social beings at birth, they are not born socially
competent. Nor do they attain mature levels of competence quickly (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Thus, when they come to preschool, kindergarten, or even fifth grade, youngsters are not yet socially mature. Throughout the preschool and elementary years, children spend much of their time exploring social ideas, experimenting with various strategies, and seeking clues about what works in the social world and what does not. This social learning cannot be unduly hurried. Youngsters need numerous opportunities to engage in social interactions to perfect their concepts and skills. This is true for typically developing children as well as for children with special needs. While all young children need time and guidance to develop social skills, some children require extra help. Consider this as you think about Patrick, who is described next.

Meet Patrick

Four-year-old Patrick is enrolled in Head Start. He likes to build with blocks, create things at the art table, ride trikes on the playground, and jump on the trampoline at home. He is a high-energy child with a charming smile. Patrick is also very curious. However, his attention moves from one thing to the next quickly, and he is easily distracted. It is hard for Patrick to listen to a story the whole way through, to pay attention when an adult is giving directions, to sit in his chair at snack, or to follow along when someone is explaining what will happen next. Although most young children fidget and squirm sometimes, Patrick is in perpetual motion most of the time. His impulsivity is very high, and his ability to deal with frustration is extremely low. These behaviors contribute to poor social relations with peers. Recently, Patrick’s parents, caregiver, and pediatrician have been exploring the idea that Patrick may have ADHD.

Children with ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactive disorder) are hyperalert, responding to everything they see or hear. This leads to impulsiveness and the inability to attend to any one thing very long. These behaviors are present at levels much higher than expected for the child’s developmental stage and actually interfere with the child’s daily functioning. ADHD affects approximately 3–7% of the U.S. population and is diagnosed three times more often in boys than in girls (CDC, 2006). Because of their distracted, impulsive nature, children with ADHD need ongoing assistance from caring adults to develop greater social competence.

As an early childhood professional, you have the responsibility to see that children, including youngsters like Patrick, get the time and opportunity to develop their social skills. In line with this task, you will need to exercise patience and provide support as children practice new techniques. That practice will take place in a variety of social contexts, including the early childhood setting. However, teachers do not socialize children all on their own. Many others are involved in the process too. This requires you to take into account all of the environments in which children acquire social competence.

The Social Environment

Some of the many settings where children form ideas and behaviors associated with social competence include at home, at Grandma’s house, at the childcare center, at school, on the playground, in a peer group, at synagogue, and in the neighborhood. Things that happen in any one or all of these environments affect children in various ways, ultimately influencing the degree of social competence they achieve. To guide children’s social development and behavior effectively, you must consider how such forces combine to affect children’s lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Arnett, 2008).

Begin by envisioning the contexts in which children live as a series of concentric rings, with the child at the center. Figure 1-2 shows four distinct social systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Moving outward from the child, microsystems are embedded within mesosystems, mesosystems are contained within exosystems, and exosystems function within macrosystems. Let us consider each system separately and then how they function together.

Microsystems

The most basic social system is the microsystem. It includes the people, materials, activities, and interpersonal relationships children experience directly in face-to-face settings such as home or school. At various times in their lives, children participate in some or all of the following microsystems:

- Immediate or extended family setting
- Childcare program or Head Start center
- School
- 4-H group, scouts, Boys & Girls Club
- Church, synagogue, temple, or mosque
- Doctor’s office
- Community sports programs
- Dance class, gymnastics class, or karate class
Each of these is its own social environment in which children gain social experience through interactions with people and things. Three microsystems are especially important to children early in life: family, peer group, and early childhood settings.

**Family Influences**

Families throughout the world bear primary responsibility for meeting children’s physical needs, nurturing children, and socializing them (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Family members have long-term attachments to children, providing links to their past as well as visions for their future (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2009). Parents and sometimes grandparents, aunts and uncles, or brothers and sisters are children’s first teachers. They provide children with their earliest social relationships, models for behaviors and roles, a framework of values and beliefs, and intellectual stimulation. The initial attitudes toward other

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**FIGURE 1-2** Nested Ecology of Human Development.
people, education, work, and society that children encounter are in the family. These functions take place through direct and indirect teaching, in constructive and sometimes destructive ways, more or less successfully. In addition, most environmental influences are channeled through the family. For instance, it is through their families that children gain access to economic resources and learn the customs of their culture groups. Family members arrange for out-of-home care and make the initial entry into a school for their children. Family members also promote or inhibit opportunities for children’s interactions with peers and the greater community by organizing informal contacts with peers and by enrolling their children in formal activities such as 4-H or scouts (Grusec & Davidov, 2008). Through their actions and choices, families play the lead role in transmitting to children the manners, views, beliefs, and ideas held and accepted by the society in which they live. Eventually, however, children’s social worlds expand to include microsystems beyond the home or extended family. In these settings peers, caregivers, teachers, and other adults provide additional opportunities for social learning.

Peer Group Influences

As children interact with peers in childcare settings, at school, and in the neighborhood, a significant amount of social learning occurs. Within peer relationships, children learn concepts of reciprocity and fairness through the give and take that happens among equals. The social negotiation, discussion, and conflict found among peers help children learn to understand others’ thoughts, emotions, motives, and intentions. This understanding enables children to think about the consequences of their behavior both for themselves and for others (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004). Then, as they receive feedback from their peers, children begin to evaluate the appropriateness of their actions and modify their behavior accordingly (Santrock, 2010). Consequently, peer relations provide critical contexts for social cognition (i.e., thinking about social phenomena) and social action. Such thinking and acting may result in either negative or positive social outcomes. This process is illustrated when 7-year-old Marvin has a “meltdown” each time he strikes out in T-ball. At first, his peers say nothing, but after a few instances, they tell him to stop and complain that he is acting like a baby. Marvin eventually stops protesting so loudly if his turn at bat goes poorly. He wants the other children to accept him and comes to realize that they are more tolerant of his striking out than of his tantrums. Chances are you can think of many additional examples of how the peer group provides an important context for social learning.

Caregiver and Teacher Influences

Caregivers and teachers play key roles in promoting children’s social competence (Wentzel & Looney, 2008; Ladd, 2008). They do this when they engage in a variety of social behaviors:

- They form relationships with children.
- They communicate values to children.
- They instruct children.
- They model social behaviors and attitudes.
- They design activities that highlight and give children practice in relevant knowledge and skills.
- They plan the physical environment.
- They formulate routines.
- They communicate rules to children.
- They enact positive or corrective consequences to help children comply with societal expectations.

Social competence is so crucial that it is addressed in the formal learning standards designated for Head Start, state-sponsored early childhood programs, and elementary education programs throughout the United States. These standards describe what children should know and be able to do in the program. Although each state has its own standards, all of the states address social competence in some way. See Table 1-2 for examples.

Now that you have explored the three primary microsystems in which most young children function, it is time to examine their joint impact.

Mesosystems

All the different microsystems in which a child participates combine to form that child’s mesosystem. Rachel may be involved in a mesosystem that includes home, school, peer group, after-school childcare program, synagogue, and Aunt Judy’s apartment. Jason’s mesosystem may include some of the same elements as well as other microsystems specific to his life. As children’s mesosystems expand, influences from each setting also affect the others. Thus, the home environment affects children’s social learning at school and vice versa.

Exosystems

Exosystems represent settings and relationships people do not experience directly, but that ultimately affect them. For instance, children do not serve on town councils, but the policies made by town councils influence children’s home, education, and recreational experiences.
Another common exosystem for children is their parent’s workplace. What happens to Mom or Dad on the job affects children, too. The parent’s mood, level of stress, income, and time available for leisure are exosystem-related factors that influence children. Conversely, a child’s scout troop, elementary classroom, and ballet class function as an exosystem for the parent whose child participates in these settings. In due course, what goes on in such places comes home with the child. And, in the end, all of these elements have an impact on children’s social development and behavior.

**Macrosystems**

The larger context in which all other systems operate is the macrosystem. **Macrosystems** are dominated by cultural influences. They are defined not by physical

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**TABLE 1-2 Early Learning Standards Related to Social Competence.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Benchmarks/Learning Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Georgia      | Preschool ages 4–5 | Children will increase their capacity for self-control. Children will develop confidence and positive self-awareness. | • Child helps to establish classroom rules and routines.  
• Child follows rules and routines within the learning environment.  
• Child uses classroom materials purposefully and respectfully.  
• Child expresses feelings through appropriate gestures, actions, and language.  
• Child demonstrates knowledge of personal information.  
• Child recognizes self as a unique individual and becomes aware of uniqueness of others.  
• Child demonstrates confidence in personal range of abilities and expresses pride in accomplishments.  
• Child develops personal preferences. |
| Arizona      | Preschool ages 3–5 | Children acknowledge the rights and property of self and others.             | • Child asks permission before using items that belong to others.  
• Child defends own rights and the rights of others.  
• Child uses courteous words and actions.  
• Child participates in cleaning up the learning environment. |
| Illinois     | Early elementary  | Children apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations. | • Child identifies a range of decisions that children make in school.  
• Child makes positive choices when interacting with classmates.  
• Child identifies and applies steps of systematic decision making.  
• Child generates alternative solutions and evaluates the consequences for a range of academic and social situations. |
|              | Later elementary  |                                                                                 |                                                                                             |
| New Jersey   | K–4th             | Children demonstrate effective interpersonal communication.                  | • Child uses positive social skills.  
• Child uses language appropriate to the situation.  
• Child practices steps for effective conflict resolution.  
• Child works with others cooperatively to accomplish a task. |

environments, but by the values, beliefs, laws, and traditions shared among people and groups of people. As a result, people may share certain values, traditions, and beliefs because they

- Speak the same language.
- Have certain historic experiences in common.
- Trace their ancestors to the same country or region.
- Share a common religion.
- Live in the same place.
- See themselves as members of a particular generation.
- Consider themselves to be of a particular economic/social class.

Macrosystem beliefs vary from society to society and within societies among various subcultures. Some examples of typical variations among groups are depicted in Box 1-3.

Macrosystem beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation. Children learn them explicitly through direct teaching and implicitly through the behavior of those around them (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). As a result of how different groups approach these issues, children learn different things. For instance, in some societies, children learn that competition is good; in others, children learn to value cooperation more highly. In one group, time may be treated as a finite commodity not to be wasted; in another group, time may be seen as more fluid and less pressing. In these ways, macrosystems broadly define how people believe children should be treated, what they should be taught, and what behaviors and attitudes represent social competence (Berns, 2009).

**Seeing the Big Picture!**

Microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems combine to form a total social context within which children develop and learn. None of these systems exists in isolation. For instance, although macrosystem elements are pictured as the outermost ring in Figure 1-2, their influence does not remain at the outer edges of people’s experiences. Eventually, the impact of societal beliefs, laws, economic conditions, religious concerns, and political positions filters down to the microsystem level. This happens, for example, when society’s tolerance of media violence works its way into the classroom through children’s imitation of the violent actions they see on television such as pretending to shoot one another. On the other hand, microsystem influences also can be felt at the macrosystem level. This happens, for instance, when families demand certain business services or community structures to support their changing needs. Because all of these systems interact and influence one another, it pays to keep the following ideas in mind as you work with children, their families, and your colleagues.

- **Programs for children complement, but do not replace families in enhancing children's social competence.** Early childhood professionals treat families as partners in the socialization process. Such partnerships are enhanced when you establish respectful relationships with families and when you recognize that family members will have valuable insights from which you will learn and benefit.

- **Many factors influence children's social behavior.** For instance, when Gordon hits another child, he may be hungry, ill, or unsure of how to enter a game. He may have witnessed someone using physical force to achieve a goal and is imitating what he has seen. He may simply have run out of strategies to try. How effectively you react

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**BOX 1-3**

**Cultural Variations.**

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SOURCES: Cole & Tan, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Rogoff et al., 2008; Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2008.
to Gordon will be influenced by your ability to consider all these things as well as sort out such factors.

- **Children’s social competence is enhanced when there is communication among the settings that make up their mesosystem (family members talk to teachers, teachers talk to childcare providers, etc.).** Such communication helps parents and early childhood professionals get a more complete understanding of the child and coordinate their efforts so that children experience similar expectations and approaches in each setting. Children benefit when this occurs. In contrast, when communication is lacking, adults may operate without full information or at counterpurposes. Neither circumstance enhances child development. This is why it is important for you to communicate with the central people in children’s lives, providing them with relevant information and inviting them to offer their perspectives about children’s social experiences.

- **System influences are distinctive for each child.** A group as a whole may share some understandings (e.g., everyone in the 4-year-old room is aware that the guinea pig died). Yet, the social context for every youngster is unlike that of any other (e.g., Stanley has never before experienced death; Ramona saw her dog killed on the road in front of her home). Understanding these variations will increase your sensitivity to the individual strengths, needs, and interests that each child brings to the classroom, the playground, or the 4-H group.

- **Early childhood programs can moderate some of the negative circumstances children experience in other social contexts.** For example, in 2004, children in Martin County, Florida, experienced the chaos of Hurricane Frances. Buildings were damaged, trees were toppled, and daily activity was totally interrupted for months. Professionals in the area quickly rose to the challenge, reestablishing programs in which children could receive services while members of the community attempted to restore reasonable living conditions. Programs focused on helping children feel secure by providing them with safe environments and predictable routines, conditions that contrasted greatly with the upheaval children were experiencing in their community at the time.

There are many ways in which adults in childcare settings and schools can lessen the impact of negative conditions children experience elsewhere in the social system. Some examples are listed in Table 1-3.

As you can see, social contexts play a significant part in children’s social development and learning. Now it is time to consider more specifically the role you will play in this network of influence.

### Your Role in Fostering Children’s Social Competence

If a job interviewer asked you, “Why do you want to work with children?,” think of what you would answer. Chances are, no matter what else you might say, your dreams for the future include making a positive difference in children’s lives. There is no place where that difference will be more felt than in the social/emotional domain. Every day, you will be faced with situations in which you will have to make judgments about how to support and guide the children in your...
Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning

your past experiences with children, information you have read, advice provided by colleagues, and your intuition about what is best. Indeed, such sources might provide valuable insights. However, none of them is sufficient to help you formulate a truly professional reaction to such situations. For that, you will need a greater array of knowledge and skills than those based solely on life experience. Although some people have certain personality traits and previous experiences that enhance their ability to guide children’s social development and behavior, that background must be supplemented by additional knowledge and competencies to make the journey from talented novice to bona fide professional.

Working with Children as a Professional

Think of the qualities adults need to relate well to young children. Perhaps you think adults need to be

- Patient
- Caring
- Respectful
- Open-minded
- Humorous and fun

Anyone could possess such qualities, but still not be a professional. Whether your title is teacher, caregiver,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If Children/Families Experience . . .</th>
<th>You Can Provide . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of isolation</td>
<td>Support and connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty due to divorce, death, changing family relationships</td>
<td>Consistent relationships, information for family members about these issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaos in the environment</td>
<td>Predictable settings and routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear, anger, shame</td>
<td>Safety, empathy, acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress and pressure</td>
<td>Calm, patient interactions; time to explore and think; strategies for coping and handling stress more effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Access to human resources and learning opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness</td>
<td>A sense of safety, security, stability, and belonging within the classroom community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence at home, in the community, in the media</td>
<td>Nonviolent classrooms, peaceful strategies for dealing with conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse or neglect</td>
<td>Protection, care, and compassion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bias and discrimination</td>
<td>Equitable treatment, support in developing positive self-identity, awareness of others, and antibias behaviors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1-3  Program Conditions That Offset System Pressures.
counselor, group leader, social worker, or child life specialist, certain other characteristics will differentiate you as a professional, including specialized knowledge, demonstrated competence, formalized standards of practice, lifelong education, and adoption of an ethical code of conduct.

**Specialized knowledge.** Professionals have access to a body of knowledge that goes beyond what is known by the average layperson. This knowledge base is derived from a combination of theories and research that professionals gain through reading, reflection, observation, and experience. It includes terms, facts, principles, and concepts that help us understand why children behave as they do. It also provides guidance regarding which intervention strategies might be useful and which might not. Acquisition of relevant content happens as a result of prolonged education and specialized training (Cooper, 2010; Horowitz, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have all made recommendations for training professionals in a variety of fields involving children. They recommend a knowledge base that includes general studies (humanities, mathematics, technology, social sciences, biological and physical sciences, the arts, physical health, and fitness); child development; teaching, and learning; curriculum development and implementation; family and community relationships; assessment, documentation, and evaluation; and field experiences with young children under appropriate supervision. Other professional groups such as the Child Life Specialist Association (CLSA) advocate similar content with the addition of specific information about health care settings.

**Demonstrated competence.** Another way to distinguish professionals from laypeople is that the former have to demonstrate competencies related to their field to enter the profession. The most formalized evidence of mastery involves licensing and certification, which are usually governed by state or national standards. Less formal monitoring occurs when aspiring professionals take tests, pass courses, and demonstrate effective practices either in a practicum setting or on the job. These experiences take place under the supervision of qualified members of the profession.

Regardless of how competence is assessed, being a professional goes beyond simply memorizing facts for a test; it requires you to translate the knowledge base into effective practices or skills. **Skills** consist of observable actions that, when used in combination, represent mastery of certain strategies. They can be observed, learned, and evaluated (Gazda, Balzer, Childers, & Nealy, 2005). For example, research tells us that an effective strategy for enhancing children’s emotional development is to label children’s emotions in a variety of situations (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2008). Although this sounds simple enough to do, it requires adults to use a broad feeling word vocabulary, to accurately interpret children’s moods, to make non-judgmental statements to children, and to determine when and where to best use the strategy. These actions fit the definition of a skill. First, they are all observable. You can see and hear the extent to which people use different feeling words and whether their statements are objective. Second, if individuals have limited vocabularies, they can learn additional feeling words; if they speak to children in judgmental ways, they can learn to be more objective. Third, a qualified observer could evaluate the person’s use of the skill as well as provide feedback that would contribute to improved performance.

It is only when a person performs the entire combination of strategies correctly that it can be said that he or she has demonstrated the skill. Most aspiring professionals find that it takes time and practice to achieve this.

Some skills are simple to understand and easy to learn; others are more complex and difficult. In all cases, skill mastery will require you to know what to do, why to do it, and how to do it. Even when all this is accomplished, true mastery is attained only when you can carry out strategies in the setting for which they were intended. It is not enough to understand the importance of children’s emotions or even to use feeling words in role-playing situations in class or at a workshop. You must also label children’s emotions accurately in the center, on the playground, or in the classroom. This transfer of training from practice situations to real-life encounters is the ultimate demonstration of professional competence.

**Standards of practice.** Professionals perform their duties in keeping with standards of practice generally accepted for the field (Business Roundtable, 2004). Such standards come about through research and professional discourse. They are enforced through self-monitoring within the profession as well as governmental regulation. In early childhood education, for instance, practices have been identified that support and assist children’s social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development. Some of these include health and safety provisions that ensure children’s well-being; staff-to-child ratios that enable frequent personal interactions between each child and...
staff member; requiring adults to have special training in child development and early education; stable staffing so children have chances to develop trusting relationships with adults; and programming that is appropriate for children’s developmental levels and interests (NAEYC, 2009). Professionals who strive to maintain such standards are more likely to provide high-quality programs for the children in their charge. Deviation from these standards can be detrimental to children. Knowing the professional standards that govern the field provides a gauge by which practitioners assess their own performance as well as the overall quality of the services they offer children and families.

Continuing education. To keep up with the standards in their field, professionals participate in continuing education throughout their careers (NAEYC, 2009). They constantly upgrade their knowledge and skills by attending workshops, consulting with colleagues, participating in professional organizations, reading professional journals, and pursuing additional schooling. Thus, professionals treat learning as a lifelong process that continues throughout the course of their careers.

Adopting a code of ethics. All professions have an ethical code that guides the behavior of their members on the job. These codes include statements of professional values as well as standards of conduct to help people distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, and proper from improper professional behavior (Cooper, 2010). Such codes supplement the personal morals people bring with them to the profession.

Although having strong moral character is an important asset to your professional development, knowing right from wrong in a professional sense requires more than personal judgment (Feeney, 2010). It involves knowing the agreed-upon ethical standards within the field. Thus, professionalism requires you to adopt an ethical code of conduct that has been formally approved by the members of a profession. One such code prepared by NAEYC is presented in Appendix A.

A code of ethics provides a guide for decision making and a standard against which you can judge the appropriateness of your actions in different circumstances. It gives you a tool for talking about ethical dilemmas with others and gives you access to the collective wisdom of our colleagues even when no one else is available in person. Laypersons do not have access to these same ethical supports.

Take a moment to consider how the five elements of professionalism just outlined influence your response to the question, “What should I do about a child who bites others?” Examples of what professionals might think about, know, and do related to each element are presented in Table 1-4. As you can see, professionals have a rich background of knowledge, skills, and standards they call on to enhance children’s social development. Evidence indicates that practitioners who have this kind of professional background are most likely to engage in the most effective practices that foster children’s social competence (Gestwicki, 2011; McCay & Keyes, 2002). Such practices are often described as being developmentally appropriate.

### Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Social Competence

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) are associated both with professionalism among practitioners and high-quality programs for children (Horowitz, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005). To engage in developmentally appropriate practices, you will make decisions based on the following information (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009):

- What you know about how all children develop and learn
- What you know about the strengths, needs, and interests of individual children
- What you know about the social and cultural contexts in which children live

These three criteria help to ensure that your approaches to guiding children’s social development and learning are age appropriate, individually appropriate, and socially and culturally appropriate.

### Age-Appropriate Practices

Jack is 3. Amy is 10. Both want to play a game. Would you select the same game for each of them? Would you expect them to have similar social skills or the same understanding of how games are played?

As someone who is familiar with child development, you undoubtedly answered “No” to these questions because you are aware that age makes a difference in what children know and what they can do. Consequently, to choose games that would be fun and doable for Jack and Amy, you must take into account the age appropriateness of the different games available for them to play. For instance, a simple game of stacking blocks, then pushing them over might please Jack, but quickly bore Amy. Conversely, Amy might enthusiastically engage in an action game with other children outdoors that Jack would find too difficult
Individually Appropriate Practices

The children are visiting a farm. Walter runs to the fence calling out, “Here horsy. Come here!” Margaret hangs back from the group, unsure of how close she wants to get to the big, hairy creatures. Carlos moves to the fence with Ms. Lopez. He is happy to watch as long as she is nearby.

Three different children have three different reactions. Each calls for an individualized response from you.

Every child who comes into this world is a unique being, the result of a combination of tens of thousands of genes inherited from his or her parents. Each child has a distinctive voiceprint, fingerprint, lip print, and footprint—and a natural odor singular enough to play. In both cases, your idea of a suitable game would be influenced by your knowledge of Jack’s and Amy’s motor skills, their cognitive understandings, their language abilities, and their social skills (such as their ability to wait, to follow rules, to take turns, to accommodate other people’s needs, and to share). Although chronological age is not a foolproof indicator of children’s thoughts and abilities, it does serve as a helpful gauge. This, in turn, allows you to make reasonable assumptions of what might be safe, interesting, achievable, and challenging for children at different times in their lives (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Therefore, you can better recognize that children’s social competencies are influenced by age-related variables and that children at different ages will demonstrate different understandings and levels of skill.
for a bloodhound to follow. Even the size, shape, and operation of a child’s brain are slightly different from those of all other children. Children’s temperaments are so distinct at birth that family members often make remarks such as, “Lucida has been that way ever since she was a baby.” These biological differences are complemented by experiential factors that further differentiate one child from another. Each child in any group setting brings a backlog of experiences and understandings that influence social competence. A child who has few group experiences will have different needs and strengths than a child who has been in group care since birth. Likewise, youngsters who have a certain game at home will be more capable of explaining the rules to others than children who have never played the game before. The kinds of experiences children have, the amount of experience they acquire, the quality of that experience, and its outcomes all combine to yield a different result for each child.

Thinking about children as individuals enables you to adapt programs and strategies appropriately and to be responsive to the variations that exist among children in a group (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). You can see the notion of individually appropriate practice at work during the children’s visit to the farm.

One adult walks up to the fence with Walter, sharing his pleasure in the horses and helping him to control the impulse to immediately stick his hand through the fence to pet them. Another adult stands back with Margaret and Carlos, providing emotional support as they watch the animals from a comfortable distance. These individualized responses take into account the children’s differing reactions and needs. Requiring all the children to stand far back would deny Walter the opportunity to examine the horses more closely, and making everyone stand up close would force Carlos and Margaret into a situation they fear. Thus, treating all the children in exactly the same way would be inappropriate under the circumstances. The concept of individually appropriate practice reminds us that treating children fairly requires us to treat them as individuals and sometimes that means treating them differentially according to their needs.

**Socially and Culturally Appropriate Practices**

In addition to considering age and individuality, you will have to look at children within the context of their family, community, and culture to effectively support their development of social competence. Consider the following classroom scenes:

**Scene 1**

Ms. Hayes notices two children arguing over a doll in the pretend play area. She carefully separates the children and begins to talk with them about their disagreement. Juanita looks down at the floor. Ms. Hayes says, “Now Juanita, I want you to listen carefully. Look at me when I’m talking to you.” Juanita keeps her eyes on the floor. Ms. Hayes gently raises Juanita’s chin and insists that Juanita look her in the eye to show that she is listening to what is being said.

**Scene 2**

Ms. Freelander notices two children arguing over a steam shovel in the block area. She carefully separates the children and begins to talk with them about their disagreement. Carlos looks down at the floor. Ms. Freelander continues talking with the children. Eventually they agree to look for another vehicle so both children can have one to use.

In both cases, the adults were trying to help children resolve their differences within the context of a typical classroom disagreement. Both teachers relied on reasoning
to support the children’s efforts to solve the problem. These are accepted standards within the profession. Yet, Ms. Hayes insisted that Juanita look at her to show she was being attentive; Ms. Freelander did not make the same demand of Carlos. Ms. Freelander was engaging in socially and culturally appropriate practices; Ms. Hayes was not. What Ms. Freelander realized, and Ms. Hayes did not, was that in Carlos’s and Juanita’s families, children are taught to cast their eyes downward in the presence of adults, especially if they are being scolded. To do otherwise is to demonstrate lack of respect (Trawick-Smith, 2009).

Without realizing she was doing so, Ms. Hayes had ignored the social context in which Juanita lives. The adult inaccurately presumed that because her own upbringing taught her to look at someone directly as a sign of attentiveness, the children in her group had been taught the same.

When we ignore the cultural facets of children’s lives, we lose access to the rich background children bring with them from home (Arnett, 2008). To avoid this problematic outcome, you will have to make a special effort to learn about the cultural backgrounds of the children in your charge. By interacting with children and families in ways that demonstrate appreciation and interest, you will learn more about what they interpret as meaningful and respectful. You will discover what expectations families have regarding their children’s social development. You will find out more about what is happening in children’s lives at home. These understandings will go a long way toward helping you interpret children’s behaviors, emotions, and needs more accurately and respectfully.

Keeping developmentally appropriate practice in mind, let us now consider a social intervention framework that helps professionals determine which practices to use when and with whom.

### A Framework for Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked you to imagine working with three 6-year-old children in a childcare setting or elementary classroom:

- **Dennis**: (described as active, imaginative, resistant to other children’s ideas, relies on using hurtful behaviors to get what he wants)
- **Rosalie**: (described as quiet, ignored by peers, alone in the classroom)
- **Sarah Jo**: (described as cheerful, socially skilled, sought out by other children)

There are literally hundreds of ways you could help these children increase their social competence.

### Establishing Positive Relationships with Children

*Children flourish in a classroom where they sense that the teacher cares deeply about them—as people, about what they are learning, and about the skills they are developing.*

---

*Claudia Eliason and Loa Jenkins (early childhood educators)*

The first and most important step in promoting children’s social competence is for adults to establish caring relationships with children (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). Positive relations provide the base on which all other interventions build and, therefore, constitute the broadest phase of the Social Support Pyramid.
of social and emotional strategies and help children maintain desirable behaviors or change inappropriate ones to more acceptable alternatives. Reminding children to “Walk, don’t run” or guiding children as they resolve a verbal conflict are examples of teaching and coaching (Epstein, 2007). In situations like these, adults help children achieve desirable standards of behavior, rather than simply restricting or punishing them for inappropriate conduct. Typical teaching and coaching strategies include discussing, modeling, instructing on the spot, redirecting, reminding, reinforcing, implementing consequences, and following through. Such strategies benefit every child at one time or another. However, what strategies to use, how to use them, when to use them, and what variations to employ will differ with the child and the circumstance.

Intensive Individualized Interventions

Most children develop greater social competence in response to the practices described within the first three phases of the Social Support Pyramid. In fact, if the strategies outlined previously are applied consistently and appropriately throughout early childhood, a significant percentage of children will enter kindergarten with the basic skills they need to interact positively (not perfectly) with their peers (and adults) (see Figure 1-4). These early skills provide a strong foundation for further social skill development in elementary school.

However, some children (approximately 3% to 15%) exhibit persistent challenging behaviors that are not responsive to Phases 1, 2, and 3 practices only. These children require additional intensive interventions

Creating Supportive Environments

Phase two of the Social Support Pyramid involves creating supportive physical and verbal environments. The physical environment is a powerful force. It affects how we feel and what we do, determines how we interact with others, and makes a difference in how successful we are in reaching our goals (Weinstein & Mignano, 2007). This is the case for everyone, but especially for children. Children’s social behavior is affected by environmental elements such as color, light, materials, room arrangement, sounds, and routines. Well-planned early learning settings enable children to interact comfortably, help children behave in socially acceptable ways, and give them opportunities to practice skills associated with self-regulation (Kostelnik & Grady, 2009).

How adults talk to children, how well they listen to what children have to say, the degree to which they align their nonverbal and verbal communication, and the extent to which they use language to expand children’s social understandings influences children’s social behavior greatly. In teaching and learning, demeanor and tone are just as important, if not more important, than the exact words you choose (Nabobo-Baba & Tiko, 2009). Similarly, words can harm, heal, support, or detract from children’s sense of well-being and confidence. Nonverbal and verbal strategies connected to this phase of the Social Support Pyramid promote self-awareness as well as language and communication development.

Teaching and Coaching

The third phase of the Social Support Pyramid promotes children’s skill learning and social development. Adult practices expand children’s repertoire

FIGURE 1-4 Percentage of Children Entering Kindergarten Who Exhibit Positive Social Behaviors When Interacting with Their Peers.

This is because children need to feel psychologically safe and secure to learn best and to thrive (Goleman, 2006). Security comes from consistent trusting relationships with adults. Children who know that their mistakes will be tolerated and that their efforts to learn will be supported and encouraged are open to learning new things, such as how to express their emotions in words, how to wait, or how to treat others with kindness. Children who are frightened and suspicious are less likely to absorb such lessons. The same is true for children who feel rejected or inept. Consequently, children who experience warm accepting relationships with adults tend to increase their social abilities and positive behavior adjustment over time (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2008). Children who lack such relationships are more likely to display behavior problems, have a lower tolerance for frustration, and exhibit poorer social skills with peers.
to resolve problem behaviors and develop new skills (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007). Teams of professionals and family members most often develop this level of intervention together and then systematically implement it in multiple social environments. Such interventions appear at the top of the Social Support Pyramid because they are applied only after more preventative measures have been tried and only with a small number of children.

**Working Up the Pyramid**

No one marches lockstep through the phases depicted in Figure 1-3. Nor does anyone focus on just one phase at a time. Instead, early childhood professionals understand when and how to use each component of the Social Support Pyramid and are skilled in effectively implementing practices that correspond with each phase. All of this is what you will be learning in the remaining chapters of this text.

**Chapter Structure**

*Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning* is designed to help you acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function as a professional working with children. Therefore, every chapter that follows is structured around the five elements of professionalism.

**Specialized Knowledge**

A statement of objectives opens each chapter to guide you in your reading and learning. The knowledge base for the chapter begins with a discussion of the latest empirical findings and research regarding a particular topic, such as children’s emotional development or play, and includes definitions of key terms.

**Demonstrated Competence**

Next comes a section that outlines specific skills related to the research addressed in the chapter. These skills are directly applicable to your work with children and represent professional competencies that promote children’s social development and learning. Skills for communicating with family members are also included to enhance home/program connections. All chapters include skills related to the first three phases of the Social Support Pyramid depicted in Figure 1-3. Specific information about intensive intervention skills is offered in the chapters where such content is most appropriate.

Each skill is presented as a series of observable actions for you to read about and then incorporate into your own professional behavior. Students report that the skills often “read like common sense,” but take much practice to actually use effectively in real life. (To help you make the transition from “hypothetical” to “actual,” we have provided the Online Companion, already mentioned in the Preface). The skill sections are set off with color to make them easy to reference.

To enhance your skill development, we describe pitfalls you may experience as you begin to incorporate new behaviors into your interactions with children and families. The pitfalls are designed to help you recognize common errors beginners make and to gauge your progress in using specific skills.

**Standards of Practice**

The skills outlined in each chapter correspond to standards of practice commonly accepted for the field. They have their basis in developmentally appropriate practice and can be used to address all phases of the social intervention continuum depicted in Figure 1-3.

**Continuing Education**

All chapters conclude with a summary that provides a brief overview of the chapter’s topic. Discussion questions follow to help you assess your understanding of the material. Field assignments give you an opportunity to apply what you have learned with real children in early childhood programs. These sections are designed to help you generalize what you are learning beyond the college classroom and to provide a base for future practice. As you become more involved in the field, you will update what you have learned in these pages by reading journals, attending conferences, and pursuing additional means of continuing education.

**Code of Ethics**

Each chapter takes into account ethics associated with the topic it addresses. Because ethics are so integral to professionalism, there are ethics-related discussion questions in each chapter as well. Although there is no single correct answer for any of the questions, talking them over with peers and supervisors will hone your ethical judgments.

Throughout the course of the book, every aspect of the NAEYC Code of Ethics will be covered. Our expectation is that you will be thoroughly familiar with the entire code by the time you complete Chapter 15.
Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning

Summary

Social competence refers to a person’s ability to achieve personal goals in ways deemed appropriate by society. The acquisition of social competence begins in childhood and occurs as a result of both development and learning.

Children acquire social competence within an interdependent network of systems—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Considering how these systems combine to affect children’s lives involves adopting a contextual perspective.

Maintaining this perspective enables you to see children holistically, to appreciate how various systems affect children’s lives, and to communicate more successfully with other people in the microsystems in which children participate. The most basic microsystem is the family. As children mature, other microsystems such as the peer group and childcare or educational settings play ever-increasing roles in their lives. As children engage in such settings, they often come in contact with professionals in the field. Professionals demonstrate five characteristics that differentiate them from laypersons: specialized knowledge, demonstrated competence, standards of performance, continuing education, and a code of ethics.

Professionals who work with children refer to the Social Support Pyramid to guide their professional practice. The pyramid includes four intervention phases that range from establishing positive relationships with children, to creating supportive environments, to teaching and coaching, to developing intensive individualized interventions as necessary. As you learn to effectively carry out practices represented within the Social Support Pyramid, you will be well on your way to making a positive difference in children’s lives.

Key Terms

developmentally appropriate practices
exosystem
macrosystem
mesosystem
microsystem
multiple intelligences
professionals
skills
social competencies
Social Support Pyramid

Discussion Questions

1. Refer to Figure 1-1. Define social competence. Randomly select one of the elements of social competence to discuss. Describe examples of behaviors that would illustrate the knowledge, skills, and values encompassed by that element.

2. A recent study involving Russian parents and early childhood professionals revealed that the following elements of social competence were ones they particularly valued:
   • Kindness
   • Good manners
   • Respect for individual differences
   • Independent thinking and acting
   • Self-confidence
   • Self-direction
   • Spontaneity
   • Happiness
   Discuss how these behaviors/values compare with the elements of social competence described in relation to children in the United States identified in this chapter.

3. There is evidence that approximately 75% of students with learning disabilities manifest social skills deficits during the early years. In addition, children with mental retardation are much more likely to experience problems in socialization and communication than their nondisabled peers (McCay & Keyes, 2002). Discuss what implications this has for families and early childhood professionals working with young children.

4. Some scientists say, “Remember that children are whole people in their own right, not deficient adults.” Based on your knowledge of child development and learning as well as the content of this chapter, what significance does this have for children’s development of social competence?

5. Using Figure 1-2 as a reference, draw a picture of the social systems in your life. Label the elements that are contained in each of the systems that influence you.
6. Imagine that you have been invited to speak to a group of families whose children are newly enrolled in your program. What are the three key things you would want to communicate to them about children’s social competence and ways in which your program supports the development of social competence in children?

7. Consider the five characteristics of a professional—specialized knowledge, demonstrated competence, standards of practice, continuing education, and a code of ethics. List these on a piece of paper and then discuss various ways in which you are involved in acquiring these characteristics.

8. Refer to the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct outlined in Appendix A. Read Section I: Ethical Responsibilities to Children. Identify principles and concepts described in Chapter 1 that support the ideals and principles covered in this section of the code.

9. Not all children develop typically; some children experience challenges or delays in their development and learning. Discuss how you would adapt the notion of developmentally appropriate practice to take this into account.

10. Briefly describe the four phases of the Social Support Pyramid depicted in Figure 1-3. Discuss examples of adult behavior that would correspond to these four phases.

Field Assignments

1. Make a diagram of the classroom or other childhood setting in which you will be practicing your skills this semester. Be sure to include details related to doors, windows, and furniture. Write a daily schedule for the formal group setting in which you will be participating, and identify your role at each time of the day. Name at least three adults with whom you will interact and briefly describe each person’s role in the program. Name at least 10 of the children in your setting. What are two goals related to social competence you believe the supervisor has for the children in the setting, and what evidence did you use to determine this?

2. Select one principle of social development or learning described in this chapter. Name the principle, and give an example of children demonstrating that principle in your field placement or practicum site. Remember to write objectively, focusing on observable behaviors.

3. Refer to Table 1-3. Make a copy of this table and share it with a childhood professional. Ask him or her what elements of the table may represent his or her program. Invite him or her to offer examples of how the program provides children with the conditions that offset system pressures.

4. Observe an early childhood setting. Write out examples of age-appropriate, individually appropriate, and socially/culturally appropriate practices you observe in the setting.

5. Consider the four phases of the Social Support Pyramid depicted in Figure 1-3. Observe in a childhood program, and provide examples of adult behaviors that demonstrate each of the first three phases. Find out if there is a plan for a child that corresponds to phase 4, Intensive Individualized Interventions.