

# Improving Children's Social and Emotional Health through Delaware Child Care Policy

Policy Paper #3 • 2008

Planting the seeds for better health

## High Quality Child Care: Focusing on Social and Emotional Health

### SUMMARY

Research indicates that social and emotional skills developed in early childhood are fundamental to academic and life success, and in fact may be more important than specific academic skills.<sup>1</sup> Results of a number of program evaluations show that these social and emotional skills can be successfully taught to young children in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup>

Because of decades of under-funding, the majority of early care and education programs in Delaware do not have the resources, expertise or technical assistance available to directly assess and systematically help children in their emotional and social development.<sup>3</sup>

Legislation passed by the Delaware General Assembly on June 17, 2008 and signed by the Governor on July 8, 2008 establishes Delaware Stars for Early Success, a quality rating and improvement system to safeguard the growth, development and learning of children. The legislation was the result of strong, bipartisan public-private partnerships. It states that quality standards developed in Delaware need to support children in being "physically and emotionally healthy."

Delaware policy makers and child care programs can now access research on programs that teach early childhood teachers how to build children's social skills and promote their capacity for resilience. The research on this area should be used to develop criteria that will promote the social and emotional health of young children in Delaware.

### Introduction

Social and emotional health is one of a number of relatively new terms used to describe human capacities that have been highly valued throughout history.<sup>4</sup> These include the ability to manage one's own feelings, show care and concern for others, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations constructively.<sup>5</sup>

Although these qualities have always been seen as valuable personality traits, only in recent years has it become clear that these traits are skills that can be systematically taught to children.<sup>4</sup> Recent research has also indicated that these skills are fundamental to academic and life success.<sup>2</sup>

The landmark National Academy of Sciences review of research, "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development," includes strong social and emotional capacity among the qualities necessary for children to be ready for school.<sup>6</sup> Children's adjustment to kindergarten and their subsequent academic success has been shown to be strongly linked to their healthy social and emotional development.<sup>2</sup> A study conducted by the University of Delaware found that kindergarten teachers' highest priority for children entering school was the development of social and behavioral skills that allowed them to interact with others and to work in group situations.<sup>7</sup>

### The World of Children Has Changed

Along with a child's family, no institution in contemporary American life has as much potential to promote

### About Nemours Health and Prevention Services

Nemours Health and Prevention Services (NHPS) is a division of Nemours, one of the nation's largest pediatric health systems, operating the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and outpatient facilities throughout the Delaware Valley and northern and central Florida.

The goal of NHPS is to drive long-term improvements in policies and practices that promote child health, and to leverage community strengths and resources to help children grow up healthy. One of our initial areas of emphasis is the prevention of childhood obesity through promotion of healthy lifestyles, the centerpiece of which is the *5-2-1-Almost None* prescription for a healthy lifestyle (visit [www.GrowUpHealthy.org](http://www.GrowUpHealthy.org) for details). NHPS is also launching a campaign to promote children's social and emotional health.



(continued on page 2)



# Improving Children's Soc through Delaware

## NAEYC Accreditation Standards

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation process developed 10 standards that outline what all preschools, child care centers, kindergarten classrooms, and other early childhood education programs should provide to nurture young children.

One of the new standards focuses on the relationships that young children develop with adults and other children, which are crucial to early learning and development. NAEYC recommends that parents, educators and others interested in the quality of a program pay attention to how teachers interact with children, and look for evidence that teachers are fostering positive relationships between children and their peers, children and adults, and teachers and families.

Delaware Stars for Early Success is designed so that NAEYC accreditation standards will be met by programs that receive the highest rating. Delaware Stars for Early Success needs to ensure that programs moving toward the highest rating focus on emotional and social issues as they progress up the rating scale. This can be done by developing criteria on these issues for programs in the earlier stages of development. For more information on the NAEYC Early Childhood Standard on relationships, see [www.rightchoiceforkids.org](http://www.rightchoiceforkids.org).

(continued from page 1)

the development of social and emotional health as child care. Most young children now spend many hours of the day in early care settings; in Delaware, the majority of children under age five are cared for during the day by someone other than a parent.<sup>8</sup> Teachers of these young children are uniquely positioned to model and support interactions that encourage healthy social and emotional development.

Scientific discoveries on the rapid development of the human brain have demonstrated that the early years are even more important than was previously understood.<sup>6</sup> Most of the media attention to this research has focused on how children acquire language and other cognitive skills.<sup>9</sup> Significant findings on how children develop socially and emotionally received less attention until the last decade.<sup>9</sup>

Yet these findings have important implications for public policy. We now know, for instance, that interactions with caregivers, including early childhood providers, help to shape the architecture of a child's brain, influencing the ability to trust and to develop healthy relationships.<sup>9</sup> There is an increasing body of research that documents the ways in which early childhood programs can promote healthy social and emotional development.<sup>11</sup> High-quality early childhood programs, equipped with skilled teachers, low teacher turnover, an appropriate teacher to student ratio, and an environment that supports social and emotional learning can make a significant difference in children's emotional and social well-being and prepare them for success in school and later in life.

## The Need for Change in Delaware

The overall quality of early care and education programs in Delaware does not adequately meet the needs of young children.<sup>12</sup> The Delaware Early Care and Education Baseline Quality Study, released in 2005, found that the level of quality in most child care programs in the state on most nationally-recognized rating categories was poor to mediocre.<sup>3</sup> This study was conducted over five years ago and a number of child care programs have made significant improvements in the interim. Nonetheless, programs continue to be seriously underfunded and in need of technical support to improve children's emotional health.

According to the study, over half of child care centers were not focused on encouraging social development by teaching children listening and talking, or focused on encouraging appropriate social interaction within the infant and toddler age group. In addition, about one third of programs were rated mediocre or poor at encouraging appropriate social interaction among older age groups.<sup>3</sup> These skills are important to normal social and emotional development and behavioral self-control.

## Lack of Investment in Children's Emotional Health Will Impact Delaware

The consequences of an environment that does not support healthy social and emotional development can be devastating—for the child and the family. Indeed there is considerable evidence that behavior problems during the preschool years are likely to escalate to more serious behavioral issues that include poor peer relationships, academic difficulties in kindergarten, and likely referral for additional educational

# Social and Emotional Health Child Care Policy



and mental health services as a child gets older.<sup>13</sup> Clinical and research data indicate that the majority of children with these problems in preschool do not simply “grow out” of them.

Expulsion is the most extreme disciplinary action an educational program may impose and may serve as an indicator of the extent of social and emotional problems in child care settings. There is no evidence that expulsion reduces future behavior problems.<sup>13</sup> The expulsion problem in Delaware is severe. According to a study released by the Yale Child Study Center in 2005, Delaware’s rate of expulsion due to behavior from publicly-funded preschool is fifth highest in the nation.<sup>13</sup> A 2006 report from NHPS reveals that 40 percent of center-based child care providers surveyed asked at least one family to withdraw a child from their care in the past year based on the child’s social, emotional, or behavioral issues.<sup>14</sup>

## Effective Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional Health

Child care research indicates that a number of factors, including, for the youngest children, smaller class sizes and training of teachers and staff to better manage behavior, reduce the likelihood that a child will be expelled because of behavioral issues.<sup>13</sup>

Training on social and emotional health and professional consultation for child care teachers is likely to be an effective strategy. One study found that prekindergarten teachers who have ongoing relationships with classroom-based mental health consultants are about half as likely to report expelling a child as teachers with no such support.<sup>12</sup> Delaware early care and education programs have reported an unmet need

## RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- 1** The Delaware Stars Quality Rating and Improvement System should include standards on social and emotional health at every level of the rating system.
- 2** Technical support and training should be available to early care and education programs seeking to improve their quality by developing teacher skills in the area of social and emotional health. This technical support and training should include on-site skill building and coaching for teachers by experts in child development and mental health.
- 3** Delaware Stars for Early Success should be funded at a level sufficient to promote all of the criteria established for quality child care. Early childhood programs should be supported financially to permit full implementation of high quality programming.

for such support in public forums and official reports.<sup>15</sup> Delaware Stars for Early Success has an important role in ensuring that this need is met.

## The Opportunity Presented by Delaware Stars for Early Success

Improving the quality of child care is currently a high priority in Delaware. The passage of Delaware Stars for Early Success is a milestone in this effort and a testament to the commitment of both public and private sectors to the health and education of children in Delaware.

A quality rating system, such as Delaware Stars for Early Success, shifts the focus of child care from basic care to high quality early education. In states with quality rating systems, parents and policy makers can assess a child care program according to established

(continued on page 4)

## Where to Find More Information

American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org/mentalhealth](http://www.aap.org/mentalhealth)

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)  
[www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning  
Children’s Research Center  
[www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel)

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning  
[www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)

National Association for the Education of Young Children  
[www.naeyc.edu](http://www.naeyc.edu)

SAMHSA: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation  
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>

Pathways to Prevention: A Comprehensive Guide to Supporting Infant and Toddler Mental Health  
[www.headstartinfo.org/pdr/pathwaysto.pdf](http://www.headstartinfo.org/pdr/pathwaysto.pdf)

Zero to Three  
[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

By Pat Redmond, Lynn Chaiken, and Norma Everett, Nemours Health and Prevention Services

252 Chapman Road,  
Christiana Building Suite 200  
Newark, Delaware 19702  
302.444.9100 • 888.494.5252  
email: nhps\_info@nemours.org  
www.growuphealthy.org

standards. A standard in this context is a statement that defines a goal of professional practice. It represents a widely agreed upon, state-of-the-art, high quality level of child care. Some 36 states, including Delaware, have developed quality rating systems; standards vary from state to state. For instance, some states, but not Delaware, mandate standards for staff to child ratios in their quality rating systems. Recent changes in Delaware licensing regulations reduced staff to child ratios in Delaware by a small percentage; Delaware Stars has the capacity to raise the bar on this critical indicator of quality.

Now that authorizing legislation for Delaware Stars for Early Success has passed the General Assembly and been signed by the Governor, state government and early childhood stakeholders can seize the opportunity to enhance the quality rating program

by incorporating specific criteria on social and emotional health. Delaware is primed to take steps forward on the quality of early care, including improving social and emotional health.

Criteria incorporated in Delaware Stars for Early Success can draw upon state and national expertise in fields of child development and social and emotional health. Criteria could include:

- staff to child ratios;
- training and consultation for teachers;
- on-site mental health consultation for teachers to help them manage children's behavior;
- enhanced services for children with the most needs; and
- environmental criteria, such as classroom arrangements that support children's curiosity, ability to share with others, and need for space for physical activities.

## Notes

1. Denham S.A. & Weissberg R.P. (2004) *Social-emotional learning in early childhood: What we know and where to go from here*. In E. Chesebrough, P King, T.P. Gulotta & M. Bloom (eds). A blueprint for the promotion of prosocial behavior in early childhood: 15-50. New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.
2. Fleming C.B., Haggerty K.P., Catalano R.F., Harachi T.W., Mazza J.J., & Gruman D.H. (2005). *Do social and behavioral characteristics targeted by preventive interventions predict standardized test scores and grades?* Journal of School Health, 75: 342-349; Blair C., Diamond A.(2008). *Processes in prevention and intervention: The promotion of self-regulation as a means of preventing school failure*. Development and Psychopathology, 20:899-911.
3. Gamel-McCormick M., Buell M.J., Amsden D.J., & Fahey M. (2003). *Delaware early care and education baseline quality study*. Newark, DE: Center for Disability Studies, College of Human Services, Education and Public Policy, University of Delaware.
4. Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. (2007). *Social and emotional learning: A key to children's success in school and life*. Chicago: University of Illinois.
5. Goleman D. (1997). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.
6. Shonkoff J.P. & Phillips D. (eds). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
7. Lovett K., Foley J., & Gamel-McCormick M. (1999). *Transitions from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten: Teachers' perceptions*. Newark, DE: Center for Disabilities Studies/Interagency Resource Management Committee, University of Delaware.
8. Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. *2003 National Survey of Children's Health*, Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health Website. Retrieved 08/01/08 from www.nschdata.org
9. Ramey C.T. & Ramey S.L. (1999). *Right from birth: Building your child's foundation for life*. New York: Goddard Press.
10. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (www.casel.org) provides updates for parents and professionals on the growing body of research in this field.
11. A large scale, randomized quality study of Delaware's early care and education programs was conducted in 2002 and published in 2005. It was prepared for the Delaware Interagency Resource Management Committee and the Department of Education, Department of Health and Social Services, and the Department of Services for Children, Youth, and their Families. It is important to note that the data are now six years old and that improvements in the system have been made in the interim. However, the system is still significantly underfunded and many of the issues identified need attention.
12. Gilliam W. & Shahar G. (2006). Preschool and child care expulsion and suspension: rates and predictors in one state. *Infants and Young Children*, 19: 228-245.
13. Gilliam W. (2005). *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. (Abbreviated as Foundation for Child Development Policy Brief Series No. 3). Retrieved 8/13/08 www.fed-us.org/usr\_doc/ExpulsionComplete Report.pdf
14. Nemours Health and Prevention Services, Center for Evaluation and Research; 2006 Delaware Child Care Provider Survey.
15. Nemours Health and Prevention Services. (2005). *Report to the community: community expert forum on childhood emotional and behavioral health and prevention strategies*.

