



Building Resilience: Nurturing Social and Emotional Health in Young Children

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BACKGROUND

North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education (NCDCDEE) received multiple federal Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) to develop and coordinate comprehensive, mixed-delivery early care and learning systems for all children and families to achieve equitable access to high-quality early care and education.

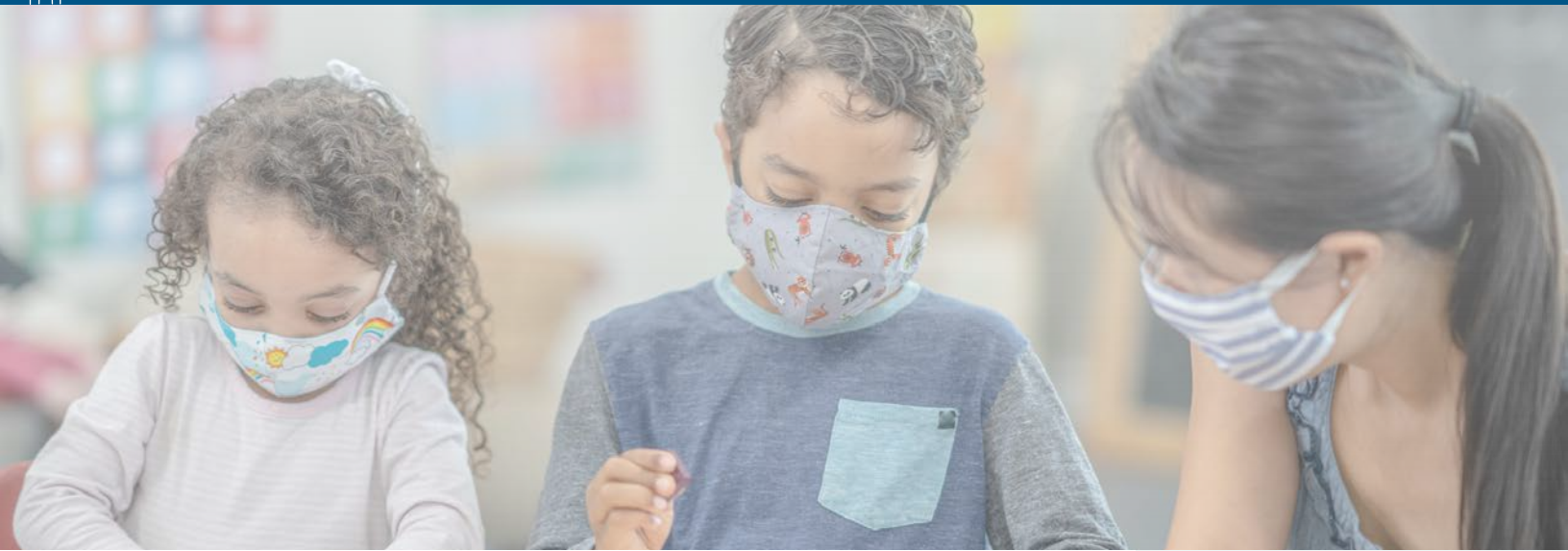
As part of this work, a comprehensive needs assessment was conducted in 2022 that included a review of multiple data sources, including administrative data and literature, as well as focus groups and interviews with early care and education (ECE) providers, stakeholders, and parents in North Carolina. Findings from focus groups were a key part in creating recommendations to inform strategic planning, as families and providers are most impacted and often best positioned to offer diverse perspectives.

This brief synthesizes the system strengths, needs, and ideas for improvement with respect to young children's social and emotional development that were mentioned by the more than 250 parents and providers who participated in the focus groups.

Science has consistently demonstrated that the earliest years of life create the foundation on which a child's future learning, behavior, and health depend. Young children need safe, stable, nurturing environments and relationships to thrive and reach their full potential. Children are learning and developing from the moment they are born, and when children do not have safe, secure, enriching environments and relationships, they lag their peers developmentally. The environments in which children spend their earliest years dramatically influence their long-term success in school and in life.

Young children's social and emotional development significantly impacts their ability to learn, establish healthy connections with others, manage their emotions, and grow into capable adults. Social and emotional development is also a fundamental aspect of school readiness.¹ Importantly, the development of these skills is heavily dependent on the adults with whom they interact, including providers in early care and learning settings.^{2,3} Without positive, enriching day-to-day interactions between infants and the adults caring for them, children are less likely to reach all the developmental milestones needed for success in school and beyond.





THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic raised both awareness and concerns related to the importance of social emotional development as the normal routines and activities of children, families, and ECE providers were significantly impacted. Parents participating in focus groups in North Carolina frequently cited social emotional skills as important to their child’s overall development. Parents articulated a strong desire for their children to be happy socially and to develop the social and emotional skills needed for school readiness and successful transition to kindergarten.

“*I just want them to have a love of learning. I don’t care about a lesson plan really. I want them to teach respect and empathy and just how to be good people because I think that starts when you are under five.*”
– Urban/Suburban Center-based Parent

“*The main reason why I am sending her there is that I want her to have social skills. She has been one-on-one with my aunt so she is really dependent on her so I want her to go be in that environment with other children so she can be social, learn social skills and be able to play with other kids.*”
– Urban/Suburban Family Child Care Home Parent

“*I think social skills are really big. I think especially with the pandemic, a lot of children have lost these skills because of having to stay out of school. For my child, I would want her to have those social skills.*”
– Urban/Suburban N.C. Pre-K/Head Start Parent

Feedback from ECE providers highlights that young children were not alone in experiencing stressors made worse by the pandemic. Increased stress levels were reported by providers who described poor compensation and lack of benefits, high turnover rates, and staff vacancies as key factors. These stressors contribute to worsened mental health for providers, particularly when there are few supports available to address them. These challenges were particularly salient in rural areas of the state.

NATIONAL DATA

A survey of parents in Massachusetts identified widespread concerns about the pandemic’s impact on their children’s long-term academic and social and emotional development, with 61 percent reporting their children’s social and emotional development had been negatively impacted. In addition, 77 percent of early childhood educators reported that children showed increased anxiety, aggression, and frustration.

Beginning in April 2020 and continuing throughout the pandemic, families with children ages birth to five responded to an ongoing national survey conducted by the RAPID-EC project at the University of Oregon. This survey showed that parental feelings of stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression have increased since the onset of the pandemic and remained above pre-pandemic levels through August 2022.

During the pandemic, safety precautions that required masking and fewer close interactions among children and caregivers, frequent closures and staff turnover, and heightened stress impacted young children’s social and emotional development. Providers across focus groups agreed unanimously that the pandemic led to an increase in challenging behaviors and voiced concerns about children’s social emotional skills.

“We have seen so many challenging behaviors. In our classrooms, maybe before you might see one problem here, one over there, but now we have three and four children in the same classroom that have challenging behavior. And so, the staff aren’t prepared.... We’re dealing with some severe mental challenges within our classrooms, and I’m not sure that we are ready for them. If you have a classroom of 20 and four are dealing with behavior problems, we have a real challenge.”

– Rural Head Start Provider

“Between COVID and the major increases in behaviors in children. I am not talking standard behaviors, but like full on aggressive behaviors. I know they are seeing this in the school system but now we are seeing it in child care centers too...”

– Urban/Suburban Center-based Provider

“The staff that we are hiring are not qualified, but we don’t really have a choice at this point. Some of them have no experience working in an early childhood classroom. So that’s another challenge because the training that we normally provide is just not enough to really place them in those classrooms and get the quality services that we want to provide. On the other hand, because we’re short, management staff really don’t have time to give them the one-on-one mentoring or peer coaching that they need.”

– Rural Head Start Provider

“We have staffing shortages in all areas of our program. We’re missing like nine teachers. Right now, we are short of a family engagement manager. We are constantly hiring people, and I think that’s the stress level for me, because sometimes, even after we hired them, they never even show up for the first day of orientation, and they changed their mind within that timeframe.”

– Rural Head Start Provider



Recognizing the multi-layered stressors and complex mental health needs of providers, children, and families, NCDCEE provided support, including the Hope for Healers Helpline and social and emotional resilience courses. Hope for Healers Helpline is a 24-hour resource connecting providers with therapists, in partnership with the North Carolina Psychological Association. Acknowledging that these needs existed before the pandemic and continue to exist, addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach and an ongoing investment of resources.



NEED FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Ongoing professional development and coaching are needed to effectively respond to reports of increased challenging behaviors among children. Many focus group participants indicated that training and professional development on supporting children with mild, moderate, and severe behavioral challenges was needed before the pandemic, but the pandemic made these needs far more critical. Providers noted that they are often not informed about matters at home that may be impacting children’s behaviors at school. Data show that frequently children exhibiting challenging behaviors are suspended or expelled from ECE settings in North Carolina. Consequently, some participants noted that training on how to handle these “big emotions”—whether or not they are aware of the underlying cause—would be beneficial to supporting these children and ensuring that they thrive within ECE settings.

“I will say our school has really worked to become a trauma-informed school...having that training prior to the pandemic has really made a difference for me, as a teacher in the classroom, because I know the children that aren't getting fed, I know the children that come from drug homes.... So, I feel like that has been something that's been very helpful for me.”
 – Rural N.C. PreK Provider

“A lot of children are being kicked out of centers because of the behaviors that we're seeing. We'd love to be able to include those children in the preschool setting, yet at the same time, it becomes a safety factor. So how do we manage that? How do we focus on that and how do we support our staff in that? Because it wears them out, but they're just as invested as we are as directors or administrators in helping these children and these families so that they can get to kindergarten.”
 – Urban/Suburban Center-based Provider

“I believe that if we would have more training on the behavior of children, that would help us tremendously. We do have some training, but it would be great if they would go deeper.”
 –Urban/Suburban N.C. PreK Provider

“For my group, they have mentioned needing support. There are more children during this time that are hard to reach. We have 2-3 students that we gave our all, but even my top teachers who have a Master of Psychology couldn't reach them. And we walked away thinking what more we could have done or what other programs with different resources we could have provided. They like to learn, but I didn't know where to lead them. They'd ask for help, but I couldn't find workshops for the things they needed, like different behaviors and social challenges in the classroom with tantrums and having to protect the other children for their safety.”
 – Rural Center-based Provider

It is important to note that North Carolina has several initiatives designed to teach early childhood educators how to address social and emotional development and behaviors, including the **Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative**, **N.C. Preschool Pyramid Model**, trauma-informed care programs, and the **Early Childhood Mental Health Competency Endorsement Program**. However, these initiatives have not reached many ECE programs in North Carolina. This may be because some providers are not aware of these resources, availability may be limited, or they may not be easily accessible in some areas of the state. Expansion of these offerings and/or additional outreach may be needed to encourage providers in various types of care settings to utilize these resources.

The **North Carolina Pyramid Coaching Model Adaptation Project Pilot** is testing scalable, evidence-based interventions designed to improve children’s social emotional development in both pre-K and kindergarten with anticipated positive downstream effects on attendance, suspensions, and academic achievement.

The **Healthy Social Behaviors Project** was established in 2005 to address behavioral issues in young children by offering services designed to identify, prevent, and modify challenging behaviors to reduce the expulsion rate and promote social and emotional development of children in North Carolina licensed child care centers.

The **Early Childhood Mental Health Competency Endorsement Program** is an internationally-recognized credential that supports and recognizes the development and proficiency of professionals who work with or on behalf of pregnant women, young children birth to six years old, and their families. The Competency Guidelines are centered around culturally sensitive, relationship-focused practices promoting infant and early childhood mental health.

NEED FOR ADDITIONAL SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS

All licensed programs in North Carolina are required to implement the Foundations for Early Learning and Development to guide and inform the planning and facilitation of developmentally appropriate classroom experiences.⁶ However, there is no requirement for curricula, screenings and assessments, or professional development to facilitate social emotional development. Very few providers participating in focus groups indicated that they use additional or separate curricula or assessments focused on children’s social and emotional skills and resilience. Thus, additional resources may be needed to adequately promote and assess this aspect of child development, particularly in center-based facilities and family child care homes. Importantly, many participating providers acknowledged the value of such curricula and assessments, suggesting that the ECE system may be receptive to professional development, curricula, and training in the use of social and emotional assessment tools. It is important to note that assessing children is just one part of the process; ensuring that community-based resources and treatment services are available to children and their families is also critical to addressing any identified needs.

“We use the formal assessment DECA, which is on initiative, attachment, self-regulation, etc. And then we work with the parents and compare what we do or what we think about things to make sure the same strategies are being used. That helps a lot. Besides that, we use conscious discipline, which complements the social emotional stuff for the children and the teachers. Basically, it’s to learn to control ourselves to give more to the children.”

– Urban/Suburban N.C. PreK Provider

“We use observations, anecdotal notes, checkpoints, and then we also see how they engage in circle time and socialize.”

– Urban/Suburban N.C. PreK Provider

“As a staff, we’ve been talking about how to get more direct lessons in our circle time in the morning, and we’re looking at some different programs that we could use so teachers aren’t having to create their own resources.”

– Urban Center-based Provider



SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Families and ECE providers recognize the importance of social and emotional development for children aged birth to five. Importantly, they also recognize that ECE settings play a significant role in building these skills and provide the foundation for school readiness. However, providers felt strongly that they need access to more professional development and training in this area so they can meet the needs of all children. While more in-depth curricula and screening/assessment tools focused on social emotional skills are used in some programs, they occur primarily in publicly funded programs (i.e., N.C. Pre-K and Head Start). North Carolina’s Foundations for Early Learning and Development provides a good starting point, but a more in-depth curriculum and training could provide needed support to ECE professionals. Additionally, the need for a statewide measure to assess key indicators of social and emotional health and resilience is needed to provide key insights into the strengths and needs of young North Carolinians and to inform policymaking.

NCDCDEE and its partners are working to provide professional development, coaching opportunities, and curricula for early childhood educators through the Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative, the Preschool Pyramid Model Project, and the Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Competency Endorsement program but, given the uptick in challenging behaviors as a result of the pandemic, these resources may need to be expanded or more widely publicized to reach all interested providers.



Key recommendations for future planning and additional preschool development grant resources include:

- 1 Collect and share comprehensive data on the social and emotional health and resilience of young children in North Carolina.
- 2 Increase access to and develop additional comprehensive social and emotional health and resilience supports, along with expanding strategies for addressing challenging behaviors for early childhood educators and families.
- 3 Make instructional resources and curricula on social and emotional development and learning more accessible to early childhood educators across program types.
- 4 Continue policy alignment and program coordination efforts across the Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative, the Pyramid Model, the Training and Technical Assistance system, and the endorsement program.
- 5 Increase access to services for providers, families, and children needing mental health support.



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This research brief is part of a four part series to enhance qualitative analysis of parent and provider feedback collected for the 2022 update of NC DHHS DCDEE Needs Assessment and Action Plan.

All four are available online at <https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/research-item/nc-preschool-development-grant/>



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