

Personal, Social and Emotional Development and School Readiness

Dr Janet Rose, Bath Spa University

Our understanding of young children's personal, social and emotional development has undergone enormous strides since new technology has enabled neuroscientific researchers to study the impact of early development on the brain. But what is most particularly striking is the increasing importance being placed on the interpersonal relationships that a child encounters within the caregiving environment, which gradually extends beyond the home into the local community, such as the school they attend. What has also become apparent is how personal, social and emotional development creates a significant foundation for all future learning, particularly the kind of learning necessary for a school environment. The real meaning of 'school readiness' is about how interpersonal interactions shape the developing brain to help build two key neurophysiological systems in our brain and body - the stress regulation system and the social engagement system. These systems of neural connections within the brain and connecting to the nervous system in our body, are fundamental to learning as they help to establish and regulate working memory, attention control, planning and self-regulation skills. Collectively these skills are known as *executive function skills*. They enable children to filter distractions, control impulses, focus and re-direct attention, hold and manipulate information, prioritize tasks, set, achieve and adapt goals. Thus they support cognitive self-regulation and the ability to learn.

In other words, they regulate emotions, thinking and behaviour by helping a child to manage stresses in life, feelings, social engagements and the stress of learning. Imagine what life in the classroom might be if children were unable to stay focused on a task, or could not remember simple instructions? Practitioners rely on children having reasonably effective executive function skills in order to teach. Not surprisingly, children with stronger executive skills have a better capacity to regulate behaviour, better attentional skills and a stronger working memory, and thus do better academically. Like many aspects of children's development, executive function skills appear to be particularly sensitive to the caregiving environment the child experiences and the brain regions associated with executive functioning have extensive interconnections with deeper brain structures that control the developing child's responses to stress.

Given the evidence from neuroscience that supportive relationships help to moderate the stress response and have been shown to have positive significance for the development of brain functioning, teachers' *relationships* with their pupils have important implications for their learning. Evidence shows how thinking and reasoning and emotional processing are fundamentally integrated in the brain at multiple levels. In order to generate successful learning, educators must also engage in the *affective* dimensions of pupils' minds. Indeed, all rational decision-making (executive functioning) is impossible without emotional processing or 'emotional thought'. Therefore, because emotions and relationships influence motivation and give meaning to our knowledge formation, how and what we learn is, in part, controlled and mediated by our emotional capacity to engage with our physical and social world.

Research shows that adults who employ sensitive interactions, take notice of what might be happening in a child's mind, provide appropriate stimulation and scaffolding, and gently encourage children's decisions and goals appear to generate more effective executive function skills in children. Hence, an ability to empathise and build relationships is just as important as professional knowledge and skills. Emotion Coaching is an effective vehicle for this process and promotes positive relationships with young children, particularly during incidences of misbehaviour.

Emotion Coaching is based on the work of John Gottman and colleagues in the USA and is an evidence-based tool. The Public Health team in Somerset have commissioned training in Emotion Coaching throughout Somerset as part of the Somerset Children and Young People Health and Wellbeing in Learning Programme. Emotion Coaching is seen as a particularly helpful strategy as it emphasises the importance of considering the emotions which underlie particular behaviours, "in the moment," before dealing with limit setting and problem solving. Emotion Coaching views all behaviour as a form of communication and makes an important distinction between children's behaviour and the feelings that underlie that behaviour. It is about helping children to understand their different emotions as they experience them, why they occur and how to handle them, leading to happier, more resilient and well-adjusted young children. It is essentially an empathic and dialogic process which enables children to feel appreciated, to explore their feelings and relationships, to reflect with others and to confront their core emotions such as anger, fear and anxiety, rather than projecting them through challenging behaviour. Emotion Coaching soothes the stress regulation system and helps young children to engage the more rational parts of their brain, making them more 'ready' for learning. It can operate as a stabilising factor to enable children to focus their energies on learning and to help them moderate the challenges of school life and beyond.

Dr Janet Rose co leads the Somerset Emotion Coaching Project – details are at www.emotioncoaching.co.uk