

# **SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE IN YOUNG CHILDREN**



## ➔ **WHAT WE KNOW** ←

- During the first 2 years of life, children start to develop skills crucial for good relationships with their peers, parents and others. These include:
  - Controlling their emotions
  - Inhibiting their impulsive behaviours
  - Viewing themselves as good or bad
  - Experiencing guilt when they disobey or hurt others
  - Language development
- These skills allow young children to refrain from using aggression (hitting, pushing, etc.) and oppositional behaviour (losing temper, arguing with and defying adults, etc.) to obtain what they want.
- Typically, aggressive and oppositional behaviours are more frequent around 2 ½ years of age, and decrease in each subsequent year until children enter school.
- However, for some young children, levels of aggressive and oppositional behaviour remain high.
- A high level of such behaviour problems in preschool children is one of the most important behavioural predictor of antisocial behaviour in adolescence and also places children at risk for learning difficulties in school.
- The risk of ongoing aggression and opposition seems to increase exponentially with the accumulation of risk factors, including factors in the family (e.g., low income, the parents' own antisocial behaviour, low education, depression, risky prenatal health behaviours, poor parenting) and in the child (e.g., difficult temperament, impulsive and hyperactive behaviour).
- Children with behavioural problems often receive less support and more punishment from parents.
- They also experience more peer rejection and social isolation.
- Such responses from adults and peers reduce their opportunities to learn how to behave appropriately and increase their risk of developing escalating behaviour problems at a young age and later on in childhood.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE

It is possible to act early and have a significant impact on preventing later behavioural problems.

- To prevent behavioural problems before they start, parents should be informed about how to help their child develop social skills, and about when it is important to seek help.
- To reduce young children's behavioural problems and enhance parenting practices, the most effective programs are parenting interventions based on scientific evidence about child development and family interactions.

Programs that are evidence-based and scientifically shown to achieve positive results for young children and their families include:

- **The Nurse Family Partnership (Olds, U.S.):** A selective prevention program that provides intensive prenatal and postnatal support and health-related coaching to young, first-time, low-income mothers.
- **The Incredible Years Program (Webster-Stratton, U.S.):** A prevention program for parents of at-risk children, or children

with early behaviour problems, that teaches parents to use effective parenting practices.

- **The Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (Eyberg, U.S.):** A treatment program for parents of young children with clinical levels of behaviour problems. It assists parents in improving their relationship with their child.
- **The Triple P - Positive Parenting Program (Sanders, Australia):** A multi-level program to strengthen parenting practices and prevent child behaviour problems. It includes universal prevention via the media, and increasing levels of selected and indicated interventions for families with different needs.

Except for these programs, most intervention research has focussed on school-aged children. In general, most research has focussed on targeted interventions, and was conducted outside of Canada. Therefore, more research is needed on programs for children 0-5 and their families, on universal preventive interventions, and on interventions in Canadian settings, including interventions with aboriginal families.

### Social and behavioural competence in young children.

Briefing notes for policy makers are prepared by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre of the Canadian Council on Learning (ECLKC/CCA), with the collaboration of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Early Childhood Development (ECD) Knowledge, Information and Effective Practices.

Ref: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Aggression* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/child-aggression/how-important-is-it.html>; Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Peer relations* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/peer-relations-childhood/how-important-is-it.html>.; Prinz R. Effective parenting interventions, to prevent social emotional and behavioral problems in children and enhance child well-being. Paper presented at: The 40th Banff International Conference on Behavioral Science; March 16-19, 2008; Banff, Alberta.; Reynold A. Cost-effective early childhood development programs from preschool to third grade. Paper presented at: The 40th Banff International Conference on Behavioral Science; March 16-19, 2008; Banff, Alberta.

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