

Introduction to *Connections to Learning*

As an early care and education professional, you know the important role you play in getting young children off to a good start. During their time in child care, young children develop habits, behaviors, skills and attitudes that will follow them into school-age, adolescence and beyond. This toolkit has focused largely on proper nutrition and physical activity in the child care setting—two critical contributors to children’s physical health and well-being. Health, however, is a multi-dimensional concept. In addition to tending to children’s physical needs for healthy food and adequate physical activity, it is also important to consider their social, emotional and behavioral health and how these four dimensions interface to ensure that children thrive at home, in school and in their communities.

With this need in mind, the Delaware Department of Education has developed a framework called *Connections to Learning*. The vision of this coordinated, holistic approach is to promote safe, caring and healthy learning environments that maximize student and child growth and development through education and the participation of the family and community at large. As you read on about this framework, you will likely realize that you already incorporate many *Connections to Learning* principles in your child care setting. We encourage you to continue this trend of focusing on the influences that support the positive development of the whole child. Formally stated, *Connections to Learning* incorporates three domains:

- 1) Health, nutrition and physical activity**
- 2) Social and emotional health**
- 3) School climate**

Embedded within these sub-domains are three additional concepts:

- a) Diversity**
- b) Character development**
- c) Family and community collaboration**



Connections to Learning aims to integrate these areas by addressing the social, emotional, environmental, behavioral and physical needs of the whole child in a collaborative and coordinated way. As a child care provider or staff member, you are an important partner in bringing this framework to life in your child care setting.

Health, nutrition and physical activity

Making proper nutrition and regular physical activity a priority at your child care center or home is important because good health, proper nutrition and physical activity are associated with academic achievement. Physical activity, in particular, has been linked to enhanced concentration skills and classroom behavior. This, in turn, leads to improved grades, standardized test scores and reading comprehension.¹ Poor nutrition, on the other hand, negatively impacts children's ability to perform well in school leading to shortened attention spans, irritability, fatigue and difficulty concentrating. Children who suffer from poor nutrition during the brain's most formative years score much lower on tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic and general knowledge² In order to support the health, physical activity and nutrition components of *Connections to Learning*, you can:

- Follow Delaware CACFP/*Delacare* child nutrition and physical activity rules
- Incorporate nutrition and physical activity into lessons, field trips, activities, classroom decorations and other program elements at your center or home
- Model healthy behavior and encourage your staff (if applicable) to do so as well
- Engage children in conversations about the role that healthy eating and physical activity play in their development and ability to learn
- Provide opportunities for your staff (if applicable) to learn more about healthy eating and physical activity through professional development

Social and emotional health

Social health refers to a child's ability to create and maintain healthy and appropriate relationships with others. Emotional health can be defined as a child's ability to recognize and manage emotions. Both begin to develop during infancy through interactions with parents and caregivers and continue to evolve throughout the lifespan. Getting along with others, following directions, identifying and regulating one's emotions and behaviors, properly resolving conflict, and engaging in social conversation and cooperative play are all ways that children demonstrate social and behavioral health. Children's emotional and social skills are very important to foster, as they serve as a foundation of academic achievement in the first few years of school. Numerous research studies have shown that young children cannot learn to read if they have problems that distract them from education activities, problems following directions, problems getting along with others and controlling negative emotions, and problems that interfere with relationships with peers, teachers and parents³ As a child care provider or staff member, the environments you create and the interactions you have with children help them develop positive social and emotional skills. To ensure opportunities for children to develop these skills you can⁴:

1. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010). Study Finds Link Between Physical Activity and Academic Performance. Accessed July 21, 2010. <http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/digest.jsp?id=10129>
2. Action for Healthy Kids (2004). The Role of Sound Nutrition and Physical Activity in Academic Achievement. Accessed July 21, 2010. http://www.californiahealthykids.org/articles/NPA_3.pdf
3. Zins, J., Bloodworth, M., Weissberg, R., & Walberg, H. (2004). The Scientific Base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In J. Zins, R. Weissberg, M. Wang, & H.J. Walberg (Eds.), *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* (pp. 1-22). New York: Teachers Press, Columbia University.
4. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (2005). *Using Environmental Strategies to Promote Positive Social Interactions.*

- Make sure children with good social skills are grouped with those with emerging social skills.
- Adhere to a consistent schedule and proper classroom management techniques.
- Ensure that children with emerging social skills remain engaged and do not withdraw from the group frequently.
- Keep toys and materials novel and interesting (e.g., by rotating toys).
- Provide toys that encourage interaction among children (e.g., rocking boat, giant floor puzzle, mural painting); remove those toys made for individual use.
- Give positive attention and reinforcement to children who are playing together.
- Teach conflict resolution and encourage children to resolve disputes among themselves, rather than by seeking a mediator in you or other staff member(s).
- Be clear about behaviors that are unacceptable and consistent in how you treat offenses; help children understand classroom/center expectations.
- Listen to children and encourage them to voice their feelings.
- Express warmth and affection.

Climate

The climate that you create in your child care center or home should be a welcoming, social and inclusive learning environment. It should be positive and foster acceptance and care for every child. Centers/homes should be safe and comfortable, allowing children to focus all their attention on learning new skills and ways of interacting with others. Finally, discipline should serve as a learning opportunity and positive strategies should replace punitive measures. To enhance the emotional climate of your child care center or home:

- Use Positive Behavior Support (PBS) or a similar approach that focuses on replacing challenging behaviors with positive social skills.
- Make your center/home warm and inviting using children’s artwork, activity corners, soft materials, bright colors and sunlight, etc.
- Include all staff (if applicable) in professional development on bullying and diversity.
- Participate in trainings and inspections related to facility and environmental safety.
- Encourage children to share their feelings about attending your center/home.
- Recognize and respect diversity in all its forms (e.g., racial, cultural, religious, learning styles, etc.).

- Create a mealtime environment that allows children to nourish their bodies without distractions and develop healthy habits^{5,6}:
 - Provide adequate space for children to pass, serve, pour and eat; provide adequate space for children and adults to move around the table and eating area without interfering with others.
 - Minimize distracting sights and sounds (e.g., television, teachers preparing activities in same area where food is being served).
 - Focus exclusively on the meal or snack at hand; remove toys and other items from eating surfaces.
 - Ensure that eating areas are tidy and sanitary.
 - Encourage children to eat slowly and explore the meal with all of their senses; supporting positive child-led conversations about the foods served.
 - Develop a predictable, consistent mealtime or snack routine (e.g., children eat at same time each day, wash their hands and sit at their assigned seat at the table).
 - Children should **always** be seated at a table when eating a meal or snack! Furniture should be child-size or modified (e.g., with booster seats) to allow children to reach food and drinks comfortably and **safely**; proper eating utensils should be provided and children encouraged to learn how to use them.

Diversity, character development, and family & community collaboration

As stated previously, there are three additional components embedded in the *Connections to Learning* model. They are diversity, character development, and family and community collaboration. Diversity enhances children's lives and learning environments, while character development establishes a system of values and beliefs that will guide children's future decisions and conduct. Family and community collaboration; however, may be the most powerful factor shaping children's development and potential for success. Families and communities are essential participants in all aspects of a child's life, and children need opportunities and supports outside of early care and education to apply newly-acquired skills and knowledge. As a child care provider/staff, you can:

- Welcome and solicit feedback and suggestions from families.
- Get to know families; communicate frequently and via channels that are individualized and convenient (e.g., letters home, face-to-face interactions, phone calls, e-mail, etc.).
- Encourage family participation – family members can help plan activities and events, share a meal at the center with their child, sit on a Family Advisory Board or come in to share a special skill.
- Foster interaction between families (e.g., a book or toy lending party).
- Make referrals for emotional/behavioral and parenting support if you see families struggling.
- Create opportunities for families to learn new skills (e.g., classes on cooking, dealing with temper tantrums, stress management, etc.).

5. University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (2005). Building Mealtime Environments and Relationships: An Inventory of Feeding Young Children in Group Settings. Accessed August 2, 2010. <http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/feeding/pdfs/BMER.pdf>

6. National Food Service Management Institute, University of Mississippi (2004). Mealtime Memo for Child Care: Happy Mealtimes for Happy Kids. Accessed August 2, 2010. <http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/CAFCHappyMealtimes.pdf>

- Distribute weekly, monthly or quarterly newsletters to update families on special events, positive changes at your center or home and the subject matter that children are learning.
- Partner with local parks, recreation centers and museums to negotiate reduced admission and special offerings for child care organizations.
- Work with families and community organizations to revive local parks, athletic fields and courts to create safe places for children and families to play.
- Attend community events as part of center/home activities and actively participate (e.g., occupying a stand at a local fair or activities night, making a float for a parade, participating in a neighborhood clean-up, etc.).
- **For more information on collaborating with families and communities, please see the “Partnering with Staff, Families & Your Community” section of this toolkit.**

By fostering healthy bodies, minds, social interactions and learning environments, you are acting as a *Connections to Learning* ambassador. In everything you do at your center/home, it is important to consider the needs of the whole child and how you can contribute to his/her healthy development. By being mindful of the three core concepts of *Connections to Learning* and the embedded concepts of diversity, character development, and family and community collaboration, you can ensure that children enter school ready to learn and interact positively with others. To help you accomplish this mission, a number of informative and supportive handouts and websites are included.

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundation for Early Learning: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/>
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention: www.challengingbehavior.org
- Positive Behavioral Support: <http://www.pbis.org/>
- Preventing bullying: <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/>
- Character education: <http://www.character.org/> and <http://www.goodcharacter.com/>
- Parent Information Center of Delaware: <http://www.picofdel.org/>
- Resources for child care providers: <http://www.extension.org/child%20care>
- National Food Service Management Institute (including information and resources on CACFP, videos, posters and more): <http://www.nfsmi.org/>
- Information on healthy eating and physical activity: <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org> and <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/>

Expressing Warmth & Affection to Children

Expressing warmth and affection to children is important for a number of reasons:

- It shows children that teachers and other caregivers like them, enjoy being with them, are having fun with them, and are pleased with their efforts and accomplishments.
- It reassures and comforts children and contributes to secure relationships between children and adults.
- It provides models of positive, gentle behavior and is linked with children's ability to interact with peers.
- It leads to teachers' enjoyment of the warmth and affection of children.

Remember

- Expressions of warmth and affection are most effective in the context of an ongoing positive relationship between a child and caregiver.
- Warmth and affection can be expressed in so many different ways including smiles, laughter, voice tone, words of endearment ("I missed you," "little one"), encouragement, and many types of physical contact (a quick pat on the head, a special handshake, gentle stroking, hugging).
- It is critical to express warmth and affection to children in ways that are sensitive to their individual preferences, family and cultural background, temperament, disabilities and possible history of abuse. Some children may prefer very brief rather than lengthy touch, for example.
- Classrooms that are well organized and predictable set the stage for individualized, warm interactions with children.
- Children who are the most challenging are often those who need warmth and affection the most.

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Using Environmental Strategies to Promote Positive Social Interactions

Preplan for environmental changes and adaptations that can be made

- Planning can involve looking at several aspects of the classroom including:
 - Activities that are open and available for children
 - Classroom materials that are available
 - Composition of small groups at centers and other activities in the classroom

Examine your group composition

- Make sure children with good social skills are grouped with children with poor social skills.
- Keep children with low social skills from isolating themselves by using novel and interesting materials and encouraging children with good social skills to interact with them.

Limit the number of centers available

- If you have 10 centers available during center time and 14 children in your class, there is a good chance that only 1 or 2 children will be in a center at a time, reducing the opportunities for social interactions. Increase the likelihood of positive social interactions by limiting the number of open centers to increase the number of children at each center.
- Make sure there are enough choices for children during play time. If children are bored and not engaged, they are more likely to exhibit problem behaviors.

Keep toys and materials novel and interesting

- Rotating toys is an excellent and cost-effective means of maintaining the “newness” and novelty of materials. Simply shelving materials so they are not available for a few weeks and reintroducing them to the classroom can make them appear brand new and greatly increase the children’s interest in them.

Use toys and materials with high social value

- Replace toys and materials made for individual use (e.g., Sit and Spin, small puzzles, painting easels) with toys and materials made for cooperative use (e.g., rocking boat, giant floor puzzles, mural painting) to help increase the opportunities for positive social interactions.

Give positive attention and reinforcement to children who are playing together

- Give specific positive feedback to children who are playing nicely together and engaging in positive social interactions (e.g., “You two are doing a great job building that zoo together!”).

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Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children: Labeling Emotions

Points to Remember

- Children who have a strong foundation in emotional literacy are healthier, have more friends, are less impulsive, remain more focused and demonstrate greater academic achievement.
- The development of feeling words is considered to be of critical importance in a child's emotional development because it makes it possible for children to better understand their emotional experiences.
- The ability to name feelings allows children to discuss and reflect with others about their personal experiences of the world.
- The larger a child's emotional vocabulary, the finer discriminations he or she can make between feelings and the better he or she can communicate with others about his or her emotions and possible problems.
- While several underlying processes contribute to a child's ability to understand and regulate his emotions, parents and caregivers can make a meaningful difference by emphasizing emotions throughout daily routines.

Things to Do

- Label your own feelings throughout the day in front of children.
- Observe children and label their feelings as they experience them.
- Talk about feelings displayed by characters in children's books, on television or in videos.
- Allow children to feel a range of emotions, but teach them healthy ways to express them.
- Play games and sing songs involving feelings, such as "If you're happy and you know it."
- Reinforce children's efforts to express their feelings in healthy ways.

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Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships

Positive teacher-child relationships are important because:

- They influence a child’s emotional, cognitive and social development.
- They help children develop secure relationships with other adults.
- They help children develop good peer relationships.
- They help reduce the frequency of behavior problems (e.g., tantrums).
- They help children develop positive self-esteem.
- They can result in higher rates of child engagement.

When interacting with young children, remember to:

- Engage in one-to-one, face-to-face interactions.
- Get on the child’s level for face-to-face interactions.
- Use a pleasant, calm voice and simple language while making eye contact.
- Provide warm, responsive physical contact.
- Follow the child’s lead and interest during play.
- Help children understand classroom expectations.
- Redirect children when they engage in challenging behavior.
- Listen to children and encourage them to listen to others.
- Acknowledge children for their accomplishments and effort.

Positive teacher-child relationships include:

- Consideration of the individual needs and interaction styles of young children.
- Consideration of the children’s and families’ cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.

For more information on *Connections to Learning*, please contact the Delaware Department of Education or visit <http://www.doe.k12.de.us/dess/ctl/default.shtml>.

