What makes a successful, healthy adult? This question may be as easy to answer as, “What's the secret of a long, healthy life?” Is it a Mediterranean diet? Regular exercise? Good genes? What about the environment?

Each societal culture dictates its’ own expectations of what’s actually successful, healthy or even permissible. Regardless of the culture in which a child may be born, research has established that future success and health are dependent upon early nurturing and responsive adult-child interactions. More strongly put, social and emotional development as experienced through on-going, consistent, loving exchanges between babies and their care givers results in an attachment crucial to a baby’s survival.

By definition healthy social and emotional development (or infant mental health) is “concerned with a child's ability to experience, express, and regulate emotion to establish loving, supportive relationships with others.” (Day & Parlakian, 2004).
In addition to these characteristics ZERO to THREE emphasizes the young child’s “developing capacities” to form close and secure interpersonal relationships and to explore and learn from their environment (2001). These are the basic foundational capacities that set the stage for a young child’s developmental trajectory. What a tall order for any child to accomplish during primarily, their first three years! Achievement of this significant developmental task is made possible through the nurturing, contingent relationships in the baby’s care giving circle beginning with pregnancy and continuing through the child’s early years.

Another foundational layer to this process is neurobiological in nature (Siegel, 2001). A “pattern” of interactive experiences with attuned, loving and responsive adults influences the “shaping” and “pruning” of neural connections in the developing brain of the baby (Siegel, 2001). In other words, the attachment relationship is all about the magnification of positive emotions (joy, pleasure) and the decrease of negative emotions (fear, anxiety). What all this means is that without the development of this sturdy social and emotional base, those more traditional, educational tasks (literacy, numeracy) will struggle to take hold. The young child who is secure in relating to others, is trusting of his/her environment and has self-calming strategies will benefit from a variety of early childhood learning experiences.

The collective experiences of nurturing connections with others contribute to a toddler’s ability to feel the emotions of others (empathy) to form friendships, explore with confidence a new environment, and deal with the fun, challenges and conflict inherent in the social situations of everyday life. This is a child whose growing brain and inquisitive mind has a strong social and emotional base from which to form healthy relationships and achieve whatever success he/she seeks.

Talking Points for Supervisors
Parents of young children are typically more familiar with a child’s mastering their ABC’s, learning numbers, shapes and colors. What are some ideas that could assist home visitors in talking with families about the importance of social and emotional development?

- When listening to a home visitor describe a family encounter, how can you highlight and explore the meaning behind the child’s social and emotional behaviors?
- What resources might be helpful to suggest to your home visitors to expand their knowledge and skills in the area of social learning and emotional regulation?
References/Additional Resources


