

# CHAPTER 4

## Promoting Healthy and Effective Relationships Among School-Aged Children and Youth

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**R**esearchers, practitioners, policymakers, and the nation at large are united in concern for preparing children and adolescents to be positive, functioning members of society. Although academic and technical skills have received much attention as prerequisites for success in the adult world, the importance of social and emotional competence as related to success across the lifespan and multiple life contexts is receiving increased attention. A range of social and emotional competencies are associated with positive academic, school, and work outcomes and are directly related to the development of healthy and effective relationships. Whereas healthy and effective relationships contribute to adaptive outcomes, unhealthy relationships undermine psychological well-being and academic competence (Kenny & Walsh-Blair, 2012). Incidents of bullying and school violence have heightened public awareness of the negative effects of poor social and emotional competence. From a strengths-based perspective, the development of social and emotional competencies among youth is a foundation for healthy social, family, work, community, and civic relationships across the lifespan.

Integral to the attainment of healthy and effective relationships with peers, teachers, coworkers, and family members is the ability to process and engage in social interactions in a skilled and effective way; this is often referred to as social competence. A significant body of research has been conducted on social relationships and social skills, with the definition of these constructs varying based on the research questions and the theoretical orientation of the researchers. Information processing theorists (e.g., Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, Brown, & Gottman, 1986) focus on the cognitive mechanisms that underlie competent behaviors. The individual receives some form of social information, interprets the information, and subsequently produces a response. Competence results when the individual's interpersonal goals are met

and the manner of processing and responding is viewed as acceptable by society. Information processing theorists have sought to understand how experiences in social relationships impact the ways in which individuals process social information. Children who experience family abuse or conflict or teasing from peers, for example, may be inclined to attribute hostile or negative intentions to the behaviors of others. This, in turn, may lead these children to react aggressively. A focus of this chapter is to provide counselors and other mental health practitioners with an understanding of the varied factors associated with the development of social competence and of interventions intended to promote social competencies and healthy relationships among school-aged children.

Social competence should be a central concern to counselors because of its impact on the course of social, emotional, cognitive, and career development across the lifespan. To promote positive outcomes and establish a trajectory for positive development, children need to be equipped with a view of self and level of social competence that will foster positive social relationships. For young children, being ready for school includes the ability to interact with other children and adults in a positive fashion (Bierman, Nix, Greenberg, Blair, & Domitrovich, 2008). Additional social demands accompany later transitions to new social environments (e.g., college or work) and adult responsibilities. From this perspective, social competence is integral to successfully meeting internal and external challenges across the lifespan.

## DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEMS THEORY

We believe that a developmental systems perspective (Lerner, 2002; Walsh, Galassi, Murphy, & Park-Taylor, 2002) is especially helpful in understanding and studying social competencies, which evolve through the interplay of individual and contextual influences (i.e., families, schools, and out-of-school-time activities). According to this perspective, developmental outcomes are shaped

by the person, the context, the interaction of the person and context, and the processes that occur in each. Although the context exerts influence on the person, the person also plays an active role in shaping the context. Temperament is one characteristic of the person that provides a foundation for early relationships and influences social development. Young children with easy and outgoing temperaments tend to form relationships quickly and draw positive attention from others, whereas the presence of a difficult/fussy temperament may contribute to impulsivity, low self-regulation and risk for externalizing disorders, and overall poor psychosocial functioning (Tubman, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1992). The influence of temperament is moderated, however, by other developmental and contextual factors (Partridge & Lerner, 2007). Advances in cognitive development, perspective taking, and empathy, for example, can equip children with skills to control impulses driven by temperament (Selman, 2003). Social, cultural, and economic resources afforded by the environment further influence developmental pathways and outcomes. Although a child with an inhibited temperament may be socially withdrawn and be at risk for social anxiety (Schwartz, Snidman, & Kagan, 1999), this risk can be reduced when the child experiences nurturing environments and adaptive parenting that promote social interaction and the development of positive social skills (Putnam, Sanson, & Rothbart, 2002).

The skills and competencies that children bring to their relationships shape the nature of those relationships and the types of responses they will obtain from others across settings. In the school setting, for example, teachers' and peers' responses to a child are influenced by the child's behavior and the quality of their interactions in the classroom and on the playground (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). According to the notions of person- and stage-environment fit (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002), social and emotional development are optimized when a child is matched with relationships and social settings that are individually suited and developmentally appropriate. It thus follows that all efforts to promote social competence and healthy relational functioning among youth must take into

consideration the settings in which these efforts are taking place. We now focus more specifically on how the family, peer, school, and community settings can foster social competence and positive youth development.

## CONTEXTS OF DEVELOPMENT

### Family

Developmental and family researchers have identified multiple ways in which family caretakers influence social and emotional development. Attachment, parenting styles, and the role of caring adults as models of effective relational behavior influence children's social competence and relational development. With regard to caretaker attachment, longitudinal research using the Strange Situation technique found that young children demonstrating an insecure-ambivalent attachment, characterized by distress when separated from the mother and an absence of comfort at reunion, were at risk for loneliness in later childhood and were likely to feel that they could not turn to others as a reliable source of support (Thompson, 1999). Children with insecure, anxious-avoidant or anxious-resistant attachment styles at 18 months have also been found to be more likely to be involved in bullying at age 5 in comparison with children with secure attachments (Espelage, Holt, & Poterat, 2010). Early attachment style, like temperament, does not directly determine later social competencies but does establish a trajectory of development that is shaped by subsequent experience and person-environment interaction.

Parenting style, as exemplified by the research of Baumrind (2012) and others, has been associated with the development of social competence among children and adolescents in European American cultures. A responsive and warm parenting style has been positively associated with child social competence and healthy relational functioning. Families of bullies, on the other hand, have been found to be low on warmth, organization, and cohesion and high on conflict (Espelage et al., 2010). Research suggests that an authoritative style of parenting, when parents set clear behavioral and social expectations, use

reason to explain rules, and offer opportunities for children to exercise age-appropriate autonomy, contributes to child social competence. The authoritarian parenting style, characterized by low warmth and domineering, coercive, and arbitrary disciplinary practices, is associated with low social competence and behavioral difficulties (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010).

Although a high level of parental control can limit opportunities for the development of social competence and confidence among youth, parental monitoring, which is defined as the knowledge parents have about their children's whereabouts and activities as well as the guidelines they set forth for their children, is generally associated with positive social and emotional development (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000; Spera, 2005). Effective parenting styles can vary by culture and social class, however. For youth in urban neighborhoods with high crime rates, high levels of parental monitoring and low youth autonomy may be adaptive. The negative associations found between self-esteem, strict discipline, and low child autonomy found in individualistic cultures may not hold in collectivistic cultures (Rudy & Grusec, 2006). For example, in Chinese culture a high level of parental control does not hold a negative connotation and has been associated with positive child outcomes (Chao, 1994).

The family is also a setting for learning communication skills and emotional regulation. Parents' styles of communication and discipline offer models to their children regarding appropriate ways to express and handle emotions. When harsh disciplinary practices are used, children can learn that verbal and physical forms of aggression are acceptable ways to influence others or deal with emotions. Spanking is an ineffective method of discipline and is associated with increases in child behavior problems and aggression across cultures (Gershoff, 2013). Children who have been maltreated or who observe domestic violence at home may display aggression, including bullying behavior, in other contexts (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). Families also offer opportunities for social competence development through their interactions with the larger world. Families who are socially isolated

and enjoy few friendships or social interactions with the world may limit children's opportunities for observing social models and practicing social skills, whereas families who model positive social interactions within the family and in interactions with other families and social institutions provide opportunities for developing social skills.

## Peer Groups and Friendship

The development of peer relationships and friendships has long been recognized as an important developmental task of the middle childhood years. Children develop social skills, such as communication, sharing, conflict resolution, and empathy, through engagement in peer group activities and friendships. For children with less advanced social skills, interactions with more skilled children can lead to increased social competence. Close friendships, which can offer companionship, emotional security, a context for sharing intimacy and affection, and a source of self-esteem, are more intimate than peer group relationships (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995).

Peer acceptance and the number and quality of close friendships are relational factors that affect the social and emotional well-being of youth in nuanced ways. The presence of well-developed social skills contributes to peer acceptance, yet 30% of children who are generally accepted by peers still lack friends. Some children tend to be ignored or neglected by their peers because they are quiet, lack social skills, or are otherwise withdrawn. Some children may be satisfied with a small number of friends, and some research suggests that having just one close friend can buffer the negative impact of being left out by the larger peer group (Way & Robinson, 2003). Although having a small number of friends or being ignored by peers does not always have negative social or emotional consequences, being actively rejected by peers and having no friends often has harmful effects (Wentzel, 2002). Children who are actively victimized or bullied by peers, including physical, verbal, and relational aggression, are also at increased risk for loneliness, school avoidance, low

self-esteem, social withdrawal, depression, and suicidal ideation (Espelage et al., 2010).

Bullying is aggression that is repetitive and involves a power differential. Some young people, referred to as bully-victims, are both bullies and victims of peer aggression. Like bullies, bully-victims are characterized by aggressive behavior and difficulties in regulating their emotions, but like victims, they also have poor social skills, have few friends, and experience social rejection (Gullan, MacEvoy, & Leff, 2010). Bullying can take many forms, including physical aggression, verbal name calling, cyberbullying through the Internet and other electronic technologies, bullying in dating relationships, and relational aggression. Relational aggression includes actions that are taken to damage the friendships, acceptance, or group inclusion of the victim, leading to rejection, humiliation, or manipulation. Some estimates suggest that approximately 30% of students in the United States are engaged in bullying (Espelage et al., 2010).

Bullying can be linked with peer acceptance and aggression in complex ways. Although many aggressive children are neither popular nor well liked by their peers, some aggressive children are popular and enjoy high social status (even though they may be not liked by their peers). When high-status children act aggressively or as bullies, their behavior tends not to be challenged by the peers (who are often bystander witnesses to the bullying incident) and bullying becomes accepted as normative. This dynamic is problematic because it perpetuates unhealthy relationships among youth. Because of the complexity of factors associated with peer and relational difficulties, variations in child characteristics and the interactions between individual and contextual factors need to be carefully considered in designing efforts to promote healthy relationships and to prevent bullying.

## Schools

Although schools are the primary setting for academic learning, they are also a site for social and emotional learning, both informally and through direct instruction. Schools can be a location for

experiencing healthy and effective relationships, as well as for damaging relationships. Students are impacted through their interactions with other students, with teachers, through the formal curricula, through informal interaction on the playground, in the cafeteria and elsewhere, and through the broader entity, described as school climate. School climate, which encompasses the educational, social, and physical environment of the school, has been associated with student academic learning and social and emotional development (Bosworth, Orpinas, & Hein, 2009). The values, organization, classroom management, discipline practices, and quality of relationships among students, teachers, parents, and administration contribute to the school climate (Kuperminc, Leadbetter, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997). In general, when all stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, and administrators) perceive the school as a place where they are respected, feel emotionally and physically safe, and feel they are working together toward a shared vision, children exhibit social and emotional growth and reduced behavioral problems (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Student behavior problems tend to be low at schools where interpersonal relationships are positive. High rates of conflict between students and teachers and among students are associated with student behavioral problems at school and alcohol abuse and delinquency over time (Espelage et al., 2010).

A positive school climate, including feelings of teacher respect and caring, can buffer the negative effects of bullying and peer rejection on middle school students, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) or LGBT questioning (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). The importance of perceived teacher support, including perceptions of teachers as caring and offering opportunities for growth and independence and for student academic and social development, has been widely documented in the research literature (Kenny & Walsh-Blair, 2012; Wentzel, 2002). Ethnic and racial discrimination and perceived lack of racial fairness by students, teachers, and other staff can undermine the capacity of the school to create a supportive environment and can

have a negative impact on student behavior and psychological well-being for all students (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Bullying is less likely to occur in classrooms where students are actively engaged in learning, where teachers display warmth and care, and where teachers respond quickly and effectively to bullying behaviors (Espelage et al., 2010). School hallways, stairwells, bathrooms, and cafeterias, which are not closely supervised, are frequent sites for bullying. Although schools are an ideal environment for offering structured learning experiences to promote social and emotional learning, curricular efforts require an overall positive school climate to be effective (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

## Out-of-School Time

Outside of school, many youth engage in athletic and other structured social and recreational activities that provide opportunities to develop social and emotional competence and practice relational skills. Out-of-school time (OST) activities can be beneficial by merely reducing the amount of time youth spend unsupervised, but they also have the potential to promote numerous positive outcomes and reduce some negative outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). OST activities include academic enrichment programs, sports, community service, faith-based groups, language and music lessons, and other activities that seek to promote skills or youth civic or social contribution beyond the school day.

Lerner and colleagues (2005) developed the positive youth development (PYD) thriving model through the study of more than 8,000 youth who participate in 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and other OST activities. This research has been important in identifying how OST settings that provide sustained positive interactions with adults and opportunities to build skills and exercise leadership can strengthen youths' individual assets (e.g., hopeful future expectations, self-regulation, and school engagement). This combination of individual and contextual assets (sustained positive interaction with adults, skill-building opportunities, and opportunities for youth leadership) fosters five social and emotional



competencies (confidence, competence, character, caring, and connection) that are associated with social and civic contributions across adolescence.

Effective OST programs demonstrate many characteristics also found in healthy families and school settings, such as safety; structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive pro-social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and alignment with family, school, and community efforts. Programs with these features enable youth to develop new skills, enhance existing skills, develop connections and bonds with social institutions, and advance the ability to understand and manage cultural issues (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). OST activities also need to be developmentally appropriate. During late childhood and early adolescence, youth appear to benefit most from activities that stimulate growth in academic, cognitive, and social domains, whereas leadership and career-related opportunities are beneficial for older youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

For adolescents, work-based learning offers experiences beyond the school walls in settings that are aligned with the contextual assets identified by Lerner et al. (2005). Work-based learning (WBL) programs include internships, apprenticeships, job-shadowing, and other vocational-specific curricula, which offer opportunities for youth to explore possible future selves and foster positive school and work attitudes and skills. Sustained positive interactions with work supervisors, who serve as teachers, mentors, and bosses, are a critical component of the WBL learning experience (Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010). The demands and support offered by the WBL experience appear to foster psychosocial maturity and internalized self-regulation and motivation among youth from low-income communities (Bempechat, Kenny, Blustein, & Seltzer, 2014).

As with the family and school contexts, cultural values and other individual differences need to be considered in defining social competence and developing OST programs. The types of OST activities valued by youth and their families may vary by culture. Among some Asian cultures, for

example, the value placed on education may influence a preference for academically related OST activities. The values and choices of youth may change, however, if those cultural values shift as they assimilate with the broader youth culture (Taylor & Wang, 2000). For some youth, excelling in OST activities may offer opportunities for achievement outside of a school context. Gender, race, and ethnicity are fundamental components of identity, and OST coordinators need to tailor programs to enhance the development of identity, social, and emotional competence in culturally appropriate ways (Rutter, 1995).

## DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been developed to intentionally and systematically develop the social and emotional competencies of youth. Broadly speaking, SEL programs address the domains of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, with a focus on recognizing and managing emotions, caring about and respecting others, developing positive relationships, and behaving responsibly and ethically (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Some programs target specific skills, such as emotional intelligence, which enable youth to understand their emotions and more effectively manage and express them; other programs focus on self-awareness and identity development. The latter may be especially salient during secondary school and associated with physical and mental well-being at that age (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2009). Many SEL programs are carried out in elementary and middle schools, where, according to researchers and educators, understanding and managing emotions are key to being socially competent. SEL lessons and activities can be incorporated into the normal school day or delivered in afterschool programs and other out-of-school settings.

Many SEL programs seek to promote social and emotional competencies for all children, not only those children who are demonstrating aggressive or withdrawn behavior. This universal prevention

and positive development approach seeks to enable all youth to thrive by developing the social and emotional competencies to successfully navigate a diverse range of situations. Preventive interventions can be complemented with more intensive and individualized social interventions for children already evidencing significant social problems. The most successful SEL programs persist across multiple years and often extend beyond the student and the teacher to include roles for administrators, other faculty, and families. For children who do not learn these competencies at home, learning SEL competencies in school and community settings by adults who display effective social and emotional competencies can be particularly beneficial.

A growing body of research documents the importance of promoting social competence not only with children but also among the adults who engage with young people. SEL skills are optimally displayed and reinforced by adults across multiple settings who model effective and healthy interactions. Jones, Bouffard, and Weissbourd (2013) found that teacher social and emotional skills are related to student academic and behavioral success. This may be due to the quality of relationships, classroom management, and reactivity to stress for teachers with many versus few social and emotional skills (Jones et al., 2013). Research also reveals that those teachers who respect the diverse backgrounds of their students and work collaboratively with other school personnel and parents make the best strides in teaching social and emotional skills to their students (Fleming & Bay, 2004). Attention to promoting teacher social-emotional competence is gaining traction in some teacher education programs and in online evaluation tools such as My Teaching Partner (Pianta, Karen, Paro, & Hamre, 2008).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) disseminates information on various school-based SEL programs and their success across different levels of education (CASEL, 2012). The findings of a recent meta-analysis reveal that students who participate in SEL programming gain skills in recognizing, understanding, labeling, and expressing emotions

that have positive impacts on their relationships with peers, teachers, and families (Durlak et al., 2011). Research has documented moreover that the benefits of well-designed and well-implemented SEL programs extend beyond positive social and emotional development to behavioral and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Next, we describe a few of the most successful SEL programs. Given the importance of adult role models on effective social and emotional behaviors, we also identify the efforts of some programs to foster adult development.

In recognition of the importance of the family in the development of social and emotional competence, parent-training interventions have been designed to develop family capacity. The Incredible Years Training Series (Webster-Stratton, Mihalic, Fagan, Arnold, Taylor & Tingley, 2001) is an early intervention program that seeks to promote social and emotional competence among children 2 to 8 years of age who show early signs of aggressive or oppositional behavior. Parent training based on attachment and social learning theory principles is the main component of the program, in addition to teacher and child components. Didactic presentations, videotapes, and group discussion are designed to teach skills related to parent empathy, responsiveness, use of nonviolent discipline and positive behavior management, monitoring, and responding to child behavior in a firm and consistent manner. Twenty years of evaluation in schools, Head Start, and community settings supports the effectiveness of the program in improving parent management, increasing child social competence, and reducing child behavior problems (Masten, Burt, & Coatsworth, 2006).

The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is implemented in elementary schools (pre-K through Grade 6) and seeks to foster student empathy, conflict resolution skills, regulation of emotions, and responsible decision making. The program incorporates a variety of cultures and ethnicities and includes handouts for family members and suggestions for engaging parents. PATHS has undergone multiple evaluations, including randomized controlled trials that reveal

increases in academic performance, prosocial behavior, and self-regulation, and decreases in aggression, emotional distress, and conduct problems (CASEL, 2012). Findings from a British study (Kelly, Longbottom, Potts, & Williamson, 2004) reveal that students were better able to understand, control, and manage their behavior after being exposed to the PATHS curriculum. These improvements not only affected students but also carried over to improved student-teacher relationships and overall classroom climate.

Another SEL program that has exhibited positive outcomes and includes programming beyond the student level is the 4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution) intervention. Created by the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, the 4Rs program seeks to promote student social-emotional skills, including understanding and managing feelings, having empathy, solving conflicts, and honoring diversity by integrating lessons in a multicultural rich language arts curriculum. The 4Rs program also guides teachers in developing their own social and emotional competencies and includes family connection activities that students take home to complete with their caregivers. A randomized controlled trial at the third-grade level in urban schools serving low-income and racially diverse students indicated that both teacher- and student-level components of this intervention produced positive classroom effects for student academic and prosocial behavior (Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010).

The RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating Emotions) approach includes systematic professional development for teachers, school administrators, support staff, and family adults (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). The school-wide approach, implemented from kindergarten through 12th grade, begins by building emotional vocabulary and integrates lessons that foster self-awareness and social awareness, empathy, and perspective taking into the standard curriculum. The teacher-based component emphasizes the role of emotions in learning and the importance of emotional awareness. Direct instruction is

provided to family members on ways to incorporate social and emotional learning at home. In addition to improvements in social and emotional competence, research on the effectiveness of the RULER approach reveals academic benefits, with participants earning higher grades at the end of the year than youth who were not exposed to the RULER curriculum. When synthesized into English language arts curriculum, students' ability to understand literature is also improved, indicating that SEL interventions that improve classroom emotional climate are positively associated with students' academic performance.

The *2013 CASEL Guide* (2012) provides descriptive and evaluative information on 23 programs that meet criteria derived from the research literature as integral for effective SEL. All of the programs described earlier are reviewed in the CASEL guide and meet the specified criteria, which include (a) being a well-designed classroom-based program that seeks to build social and emotional competencies across five domains, is offered across multiple years and delivered in a sequential approach, and provides opportunities for students to actively practice the skills they are learning; (b) offering initial training and ongoing support to ensure quality implementation; and (c) having been evaluated through a rigorous research design (including a comparison group and pre and post measures) and demonstrated student improvement in student social behaviors and/or academic performance. The 23 programs included in the guide vary, however, in demonstrated effectiveness across four outcome domains: increasing positive social behaviors, decreasing conduct problems, reducing emotional distress, and improving academic performance. The 4Rs and PATHS programs described earlier are two of the three programs available at the kindergarten through eighth grade (K–8) level that document positive outcomes across all four domains. The Incredible Years program demonstrated increases in positive social behavior and decreases in conduct problems, with the RULER approach demonstrating gains in academic performance and positive social behavior. The CASEL guides are available through their



website and are an excellent resource for counselors seeking to identify an appropriate school-based SEL program that is a match with the context in which it will be implemented.

## BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Bullying is the antithesis of healthy relationships and represents one of the most prevalent forms of violence in schools. Concern for reducing bullying has prompted the development of prevention programs with an explicit focus on reducing bullying and promoting healthy relationships. A number of approaches have been taken, including strict punishment and zero-tolerance policies and programs designed to promote prosocial behaviors, such as empathy and social skills, problem solving, and anger management. Programs that impose strict punishments without providing interventions to address the underlying causes for bullying have not proved effective. Consistent with the developmental systems perspective described early in this chapter, bullying is best understood as nested in multiple contexts that can serve to increase or decrease the likelihood for that behavior. To be effective, bullying prevention thus needs to go beyond a focus on the individual child as bully and should attend to fostering prosocial interactions and a positive climate at the family, classroom, school, and community levels (Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

Bully Busters (Horne, Newman-Carlson, & Bartolomucci, 2003) is an example of a program at the elementary and middle school level that seeks to reduce bullying by creating classrooms where children and teachers are treated with respect and dignity and engage in democratic problem solving. The program has been shown to reduce office referrals for misbehavior and classroom behavior problems overall. A supplemental 8-hour multiple family group prevention program (Horne, Stoddard, & Bell, 2008) was developed to communicate to parents the values being taught in the classroom and to foster skills for implementing the values of respect and democratic problem solving

in the home. Parents learn about the dynamics of bullying and approaches for addressing bullying, how to implement a Family Council in the home, and methods for parental stress management, problem solving, and coping, with added unstructured time to talk with other families. The program thus focuses on promoting positive climates at home and at school.

Second Step (Committee for Children, 2008) is an example of a classroom-based program that includes an explicit focus on bullying prevention at the middle school level. Given the interrelationship of social, emotional, and behavioral problems, a broad prevention approach that addresses interrelated and overlapping risk factors makes sense. Second Step is similar to other SEL elementary level curricula with a focus on improving problem-solving, emotion management, communication skills, empathy, and assertiveness. Second Step is rated by CASEL (2012) as demonstrating positive impact on increasing prosocial behavior and on the reduction of emotional distress and conduct problems. The middle school version of the program additionally seeks to reduce substance abuse, aggression, and bullying through lessons that focus on recognizing bullying in friendships and dating relationships, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, bystander power, and the roles of labels, stereotypes, and prejudice. Because bullying is perpetuated when it is perceived, and actual norms result in peers' failure to intervene or in peers condoning the bullying (Farrell et al., 2012), the middle school program strives to reduce bullying by increasing interaction with prosocial peers and changing peer norms and attitudes that support bullying and sexual violence.

Espelage, Low, Polanin, and Brown (2013) evaluated the effectiveness of Second Step through a randomized clinical trial of 36 middle schools in Illinois and Kansas. The evaluation yielded positive findings with regard to decreases in physical aggression but did not find significant intervention effects for verbal/relational bully perpetration, peer victimization, homophobic teasing, or sexual violence. Although all desired outcomes were not realized, the results are promising and suggest the

need for further efforts to refine and strengthen program design and implementation with attention to the complexity of factors that influence bullying.

As is true of SEL programs (CASEL, 2012), the effectiveness of bullying prevention depends on a variety of factors at the school and community levels. The extent to which school leadership and staff buy into the program and are fully prepared to implement the program across all school activities appears to be the key to success. Espelage et al. (2013) found that Second Step was most effective in schools where school leaders and parents supported the program. Espelage and Poteat (2012) have identified additional school factors that impact the success of bully prevention, including an environment where students and teachers can report incidents of aggression and bullying, with confidentiality emphasized for students. A clear code of conduct also needs to be established, with school personnel prepared to intervene. Counselors need to attend to the psychological needs and state (i.e., depression and anxiety) of the perpetrator, victim, and bystanders, with a plan for counseling based on individualized needs. Although research on the effectiveness of bullying prevention suggests limited effectiveness to date, efforts to promote healthy and effective relationships can potentially be enhanced if counselors are trained to identify and respond to the mental health needs of students and work with school leaders, teachers, and parents to address systemic factors and to address mental health needs.

## CREATING ATTITUDES OF ACCEPTANCE AND INCLUSION

Researchers are gaining increased awareness of factors linking prejudice, exclusion, and bullying. Targets of bullying generally occupy low status on peer social hierarchies, and attitudes and behaviors related to prejudice and bullying are promulgated in peer groups (Espelage & Poteat, 2012). With regard to problems of bullying, Polanin and Vera (2013) maintain that the development of social and emotional competence is insufficient in remedying the problem. Youth who are representative of groups

that have historically been the victims of prejudice and marginalization—including youth with disabilities; gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth; ethnic and racial minority youth; and English language learners—are disproportionately targeted by bullies (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2010). The negative psychological, social, and academic effects of discrimination and bullying have been widely documented (Espelage & Poteat, 2012). To promote healthy relationships for all youth and to address the underlying biases that fuel bullying, greater attention needs to be paid to creating attitudes of acceptance and inclusion at an early age. Research suggests, for example, that children incorporate societal attitudes about ingroups and outgroups by first grade and that these attitudes become increasingly solidified through messages conveyed by family, peers, teachers, mass media, and institutional practices (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012; Buhin & Vera, 2009).

Efforts to create attitudes of acceptance and inclusion have drawn heavily from social contact theory (Allport, 1954; APA, 2012), which proposes that intergroup contact can serve to reduce prejudicial attitudes when certain essential conditions are met. In addition to opportunities for close contact, individuals across groups should be afforded equal power and status in the setting, work together toward mutual goals, feel a sense of connection and belonging, and be supported by leaders who enforce equity in their settings and understand themselves as racial and cultural beings (APA, 2012). Cooperative learning strategies are based on contact theory and have been found to promote interracial friendships when designed to effectively structure student interactions (Slavin & Cooper, 1999). The Jig-Saw Classroom (Aronson, 2002), which is structured so that children from different ethnic and racial groups are experts on different aspects of a problem, has been shown to reduce intergroup bias and prejudice and facilitate academic learning. Polanin and Vera (2013) suggest that school structures, such as dual-language immersion programs, might also serve to reduce prejudice through the process of cross-group learning.

Families and schools can be a context for learning prejudicial attitudes or can be a forum

for teaching acceptance and inclusion. Frequent, consistent, and honest communication about race, disability, sexual orientation, and social class across multiple settings is optimal for promoting positive and inclusive attitudes (APA, 2012). A small number of instructional and prevention curricula have also been designed for that purpose. The Teaching Tolerance program developed through the Southern Poverty Law Center, for example, provides resources for teachers and parents that can be used to address prejudice. The National Education Association offers a Diversity Toolkit, with resources for teaching children about race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, disability, and English language learners in school and OST settings. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL; 2006) produces a comprehensive array of anti-bias education programs to address classism, racism, heterosexism, bullying and cyberbullying, and religious bigotry. Based on the assumption that attitudes and beliefs affect actions, their World of Difference programs are designed to teach participants to recognize bias and understand its harmful effects, develop understanding of the benefits of diversity, improve intergroup relations, and teach skills to confront bigotry. World of Difference resources include lessons that can be integrated with children's literature and existing academic curriculum from pre-kindergarten through Grade 12, professional development materials for teachers and administrators, workshops for adults in families, and peer education programs for middle and high school students to enable them to confront bias and foster inclusion at school and in the community. Reports of rigorous evaluation of antiracism curricula are limited, although a study of the ADL middle school anti-bias and peer education program found the program to not only enhance participants' understanding of the nature and manifestations of prejudice but also to increase the likelihood of students to intervene when other students are targets of name calling or other types of bias (Anti-Defamation League, 2006; Paluck, 2011).

Program evaluation of Kids' College, a multicultural awareness program for 11- to 14-year-olds delivered in a 6-week summer camp setting,

also documented promising results. Reductions in prejudice and gains in self-esteem at post-test were assessed, although more rigorous evaluation is needed to determine long-term effects (London, Tierney, Buhin, Greco, & Cooper, 2002). With attention to elements of contact theory, the program engaged small groups of diverse peers in cooperative and ongoing learning activities, provided direct instruction about racism and discrimination with structured facilitation, and created a safe place for discussion and sharing feelings on a daily basis.

The 2012 report of American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity (APA, 2012) concluded that although society has made gains in reducing conscious and overt prejudicial attitudes and beliefs, covert implicit biases may be deeply ingrained and difficult to change. Consequently, early learning and socialization that seek to prevent prejudice and discrimination are important and should be guided by the available evidence base (APA, 2012; Buhin & Vera, 2009). Evidence suggests that youth should be provided with early and ongoing opportunities through school and out-of-school activities for intensive, meaningful, and cooperative interactions among members of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Parents, teachers, counselors, and school leaders should model positive interracial interactions with children and other adults and foster age-appropriate discussions about race, culture, and the social structures that contribute to societal prejudices and oppression. Children can be assisted in developing the psychological, social, and cognitive skills to foster racial and ethnic pride and to challenge negative societal attitudes.

## SUMMARY AND ROLES FOR COUNSELORS

Social competence and the capacity to engage in effective and healthy relationships are central dimensions of human functioning related to important outcomes across the lifespan. Social competence

impacts not only the quality of peer, family, and intimate relationships but also success and satisfaction in school and work contexts. In this chapter, we adopt a developmental systems perspective for understanding the development of social competence and healthy relationships among youth. This perspective not only acknowledges the interrelationship of the social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and biological domains of functioning but also recognizes how human functioning in each of these areas interacts in a reciprocal manner with the many contexts in which the child is embedded. Although children may be predisposed biologically with a style of temperament, the family, peer group, school, and communities in which children grow and develop ultimately shape the development of social competencies and relational skills. Culture is a central attribute of context, with the cultural aspects of the family, peer, school, and community and the larger societal culture in which they are embedded interfacing with the development of the individual across all domains. Social competence needs to be understood through a cultural lens and efforts made to ensure that healthy social relationships are not threatened by prejudice or intolerance. The social competencies that children bring to each of these contexts inevitably impact their experiences and learning in each context.

The complexity of the developmental systems model for understanding the development of social competencies means that there are many intervention opportunities for counselors and other mental health professionals who seek to promote the social competence and healthy relational functioning of children and youth. Counselors should adopt a contextual approach to assessing social competence, considering not only the attributes and skills of the child but also how these interact with the context. Through this understanding, opportunities are identified to work individually with children in social skills training and counseling and to shape the contexts in which children grow and develop. Parent and family training and counseling, peer group interventions, consultation and collaboration with schools, teachers, community organizations, and other youth settings, and social

advocacy to impact policies that foster healthy relational settings represent some of the strategies through which professionals can seek to promote social competence. Although some of this work will take place after children are identified as demonstrating social difficulties, this chapter highlights a number of prevention programs focused on developing social and emotional competencies of youths and relational competencies of the adults in their lives. A focus on prevention and positive youth development strives to help all youths to thrive socially across the multiple contexts of their lives.

Social competence development programs, such as SEL and bully prevention, and prejudice prevention programs are often delivered in school settings by counselors and by teachers. Social competence programs may be developed as components of a comprehensive school guidance program. Counselors who work in schools can engage with school leaders and teachers in reviewing evaluation research, selecting programs, and discussing ways to optimally deliver the program school-wide with attention to child developmental needs and individual differences. Race, culture, ability levels, sexual orientation, and mental health status are only a few of the individual differences that need to be considered in program choice and implementation. When teachers are assigned to deliver programs to foster SEL and healthy relationships, the counselor can play a supportive role in implementing the program and attending to group dynamics, as well as designing methods to evaluate the program and developing modifications to enhance effectiveness as needed. Counselors can also play an important role in leading age-appropriate discussions about acceptance, inclusion, and bias; can assist teachers in fostering such discussions in the classroom; and can strive to create a safe school culture where students can openly discuss difference. Counselors can also help parents and other caretakers to understand the importance of SEL, bully prevention, and antiracism and can guide them in being strong role models for healthy relational functioning and extending the lessons of these programs into the home. Moreover, counselors play a key role in



identifying those youth who need individual intervention, beyond what can be offered by a universal preventive intervention. In some cases, the counselor can offer individual counseling and, in other cases, can work with families to refer children for intervention outside of the school setting. To be effective across these roles, counselors need to attend to their own social and emotional learning and their own self-understanding as a racial and

cultural being (APA, 2012). Through individual and group counseling, counselors in school and community settings can reinforce the skills that are being promoted in prevention programs. By focusing on both prevention and treatment across the multiple life settings in which young people grow and develop, counselors can attend to individual and systemic factors that promote healthy and effective relationships.

## Case Example

Sophie is a sixth grader who attends a public middle school in a suburban setting. Just as Sophie was entering middle school, her family moved from the city to the suburbs, entailing transfer into a new school district for the children. During elementary school, Sophie had many friends with whom she played at recess and collaborated during class time. Outside of school, Sophie had some independence, as both of her parents worked long hours, leaving her alone with her older brother most afternoons. Her mother always made sure that neighbors were able to check in on her when she got home from school, but Sophie was told to remain in the apartment safeguarded from the dangers of living in the housing projects. This routine worked for Sophie, as it was all she had known her entire life. She would make herself a snack, do the worksheet her teachers gave each day for homework, and then watch TV until her parents got home. Sometimes she wished she could go to the playground, but she knew it was too dangerous to go by herself, and her brother would never agree to take her.

Sophie's parents expected that a move to the suburbs would be a positive change as they had saved enough money to move out of the government subsidized housing and send their two children to better schools. However, Sophie did not adapt well to the changes. In school, Sophie had difficulty making new friends. All of the children she was interested in talking to and eating lunch with already had existing friendships from attending the same elementary school. She also felt that her secondhand clothing and hand-me-down backpack made her an outcast, as the other children around her had new clothes, backpacks, and lunch boxes. Sophie sometimes withdrew from peers and behaved in what her teacher described as "socially awkward ways" with the few friends she was able to make.

Sophie also experienced changes at home. Her parents still worked long hours but had longer commutes than before. When Sophie finally saw them at the end of the day, they were irritable and sometimes arguing with each other. Neither her mother nor her father was able to make it to Parent Night at school and seldom discussed academics with Sophie. The middle school curriculum was difficult for Sophie, and without help from her parents or collaboration with friends, she began to fall behind and her grades were not as high as they had been in elementary school.

Close to the end of the fall semester, Sophie's teacher saw that Sophie was in fact eager to learn but overwhelmed by the changes of a new school and environment. She referred Sophie for a social and emotional skills group that met twice a week after school. Through this program, Sophie learned how to identify and manage her emotions, and she practiced dialogues with other students that promoted help-seeking behaviors and friendship development. By the end of sixth grade, Sophie had made two close friends from the program, and her grades in math and science had improved. She had less time home alone to ruminate on her difficulties during this transition year, and she even walked to the playground a few times and played with neighborhood kids.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

In this case study, Sophie's teacher played an integral role in making the transition from an urban elementary school to a suburban middle school a positive one. Teachers, mental health counselors, and school counselors are central in fostering the social and emotional development of children. These professionals should be trained in identifying students at risk for internalizing and externalizing behaviors that result from poor social and emotional competencies, as well as presenting programming to help them develop such competencies.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe what you envision as “better schools” and “socially awkward” as stated in the case study. Reflect on the ways in which culture and social class may influence definitions of these phrases.
2. Assume that Sophie's family is economically and culturally different from the children in her new school. How could teachers promote a classroom climate that embodies inclusion and acceptance of children from diverse backgrounds? What other supports/activities outside of the school might have been helpful to Sophie in easing this transition?
3. In this chapter we recommend a developmental systems approach for understanding how social competencies are shaped by the person, the context, and the interaction of the person and the context. Identify the person, context, and person-context interaction factors presented in the case of Sophie. What are the implications from this analysis for promoting Sophie's social competence and the presence of healthy and effective relationships in her life? What is the importance of developmental factors in your analysis?
4. Describe a multimodal in-school and OST intervention that you think would help improve Sophie's social competence. Include teachers, parents, and other students as the modes of implementation. Sophie's teacher referred her to a social skills group for children with difficulties in this area. What might be the benefits and limitations of a universal prevention program that includes all students in the class in comparison with a program designed only for students who struggle with social competencies? What concerns and recommendations

might you offer to Sophie's parents for a positive summer experience? What recommendations might you have for the types of supports that will sustain Sophie's adaptation and success in her new school as she transitions into seventh grade?

**Acknowledgment:** We appreciate the assistance of Sarah E. McInnis in editing and library searches.

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