

PARENT ALERT

It's hard to believe that what your child knows at age 5 could influence his future chances of success. But that's exactly what a 2015 study published in the American Journal of Public Health found.

But researchers discovered that the skills that predict future success had nothing to do with reading or writing. Instead, they say your child's social and emotional skills are what determine how likely your child is to go to college rather than end up in jail.

What the Research Found

Researchers from Penn State and Duke University interviewed kindergarten teachers about children's social and emotional competence. The teachers weighed in on how well the kids shared, listened to others, resolved problems with their peers, and were helpful.

Then researchers followed up with the kids once they became young adults to see what happened to them. They discovered that the kids with the highest social and emotional competency scores in kindergarten fared better overall.

For every one-point increase in children's social competency scores in kindergarten, they were twice as likely to obtain college degrees. They were also more likely to have full-time jobs by age 25.

But the kids who had trouble cooperating, listening, and resolving conflict were less likely to finish high school--let alone college. They were more likely to have legal problems and substance abuse issues.

For every one-point decrease in social competency at age 5, a child had a 67 percent higher chance of being arrested in early adulthood. A one-point decrease also meant a child had a 52 percent higher rate of binge drinking and an 82 percent higher chance of living in public housing (or at least being on the waitlist).

Social and Emotional Skills Can Be Taught

With all the evidence that supports the importance of social and emotional skills, isn't it incredible to think that we still pour most of our resources into teaching kids academic skills? From Baby Einstein music to flash cards for toddlers, there are tons of products on the market that promise to help your kids succeed.

But none of those products will actually help your kids become emotionally competent. You have to teach those skills yourself--your kids won't learn them in school.

And don't panic if your child is already past kindergarten. You can teach those skills at any time--but it's important to give kids the opportunities to practice using their skills firsthand.

How to Teach Kids Emotional and Social Skills

In my book *13 Things Mentally Strong Parents Don't Do*, I outline specific exercises that teach kids of all ages how to manage their emotions and sharpen their social skills. With regular practice, kids can develop the mental muscle they need to reach their greatest potential.

Here are a few simple strategies that can help your child begin to gain emotional competence:

Label your child's feelings. Say things like "It looks like you're feeling sad today" or "I can tell you are mad right now." Eventually, your child will learn to verbalize his feelings on his own.

Validate your child's feelings. Resist the urge to say things like "Calm down--it's not a big deal." Instead, say, "I know you're really upset right now." Regardless of whether you think his emotional response is out of proportion to the situation, teach your child that it's OK to have big feelings.

Make empathy faces. Say, "Make a face that shows me how that boy felt when you hit him." When your child makes a sad or angry face, he'll actually experience that emotion for a moment. And he'll develop more empathy--which is a key ingredient in social success.

Let your child experience uncomfortable emotions. It's healthy to feel bored, angry, scared, or lonely sometimes. Teach healthy coping strategies to deal with discomfort, and coach your kids as they practice. With your support, they can learn that uncomfortable emotions are tolerable.

Correct the behavior, not the emotion. Make it clear that angry feelings are OK but aggressive behavior isn't. And teach your child that it's OK to feel sad but screaming at the top of her lungs in the grocery store isn't OK. Use discipline that teaches better ways to deal with emotions.

Incorporate Skill Building Into Your Daily Life

Whether your child is 4 or 14, make mental strength training a part of your daily lives. By making it a family activity, you'll also sharpen your skills (or perhaps learn some new ones for yourself). And you'll be giving your child the tools she needs to reach her greatest potential.