DESSA
Comprehensive SEL System

APERTURE EDUCATION

STRATEGIES GUIDE:

Relationship Skills

- 2018 -

Relationship Skills

A child's consistent performance of socially acceptable actions
that promote and maintain positive connections with others.

What are Relationship Skills?

Relationship Skills are "a child's consistent performance of socially acceptable actions that promote and maintain positive connections with others." Children with strong Relationship Skills will appear polite and kind, attracting positive attention from others, but most importantly, these children will have positive relationships with individuals such as family members, friends and mentors. Relationship Skills lead to mutual, long-lasting, back-and-forth bonds with others, including parents, siblings, peers, teachers and other important adults in a child's community. In many ways, Relationship Skills are an extension of attachment in the early years – learned from early bonds, these skills promote ongoing supportive relationships that encourage learning and development (Pianta, Hamre & Stuhlman, 2003). Nurturing and affirming relationships serve as foundations for social-emotional development and learning; therefore, the skills to develop and maintain relationships are critical (Pianta, et al., 2003).

There are many ways to think and talk about the construct of Relationship Skills. Terms such as social skills, interpersonal skills, friendship skills, altruism, etiquette and manners may refer to similar skillsets or sub-skills within the construct of Relationship Skills. Furthermore, the DESSA construct of Relationship Skills may seem to overlap with other social-emotional constructs such as Social-Awareness and Self-Management. In fact, some overlap does exist within these constructs. However, they emphasize different behaviors. The construct of Relationship Skills emphasizes behaviors which form and maintain positive

relationships, whereas Social-Awareness emphasizes the ability to respectfully tolerate and cooperate with different types of people, and Self-Management emphasizes regulating and controlling emotions and behaviors.

The DESSA constructs were developed to align with the Social and Emotional Core Learning Competencies promoted by the Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL provides a more descriptive definition of Relationship Skills: "The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed" (CASEL, 2012). Many of the specific details within the CASEL definition of Relationship Skills fall under "acceptable actions that promote and maintain positive connections with others," as outlined in the DESSA definition. However, it is also true that some of the elements in the CASEL definition fit best within other constructs on the DESSA. For example, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help are more explicitly captured within the Decision Making skills construct on the DESSA.

The DESSA measures Relationship Skills with 10 items. Following is a list of the items that comprise the Relationship Skills scale on the DESSA.

38. compliment or congratulate somebody
40. do something nice for somebody
45. show appreciation of others
47. greet a person in a polite way
50. attract positive attention from peers
55. express concern for another person
61. attract positive attention from adults
64. make a suggestion or request in a polite way
70. offer to help somebody
71. respond to another person's feelings

Items 38, 40, 45 and 47, represent *treating others as valuable*; items 55, 64, 70, 71, represent *helpful behaviors*, whereas items 50, and 61 indicate *attracting positive attention*, all of which promote and maintain positive connections with others.

The Different Aspects of Relationship Skills

The construct of Relationship Skills, like all the Social-Emotional Competencies on the DESSA, has multiple facets. As you encounter the Relationship Skills strategies within this resource, you may notice that they focus on one or more aspects of the construct. As described above, we have identified three facets of Relationship Skills.

ATTRACTING POSITIVE ATTENTION

One of the first steps in promoting positive connections with others, is to attract positive attention, as opposed to negative attention. Two DESSA items (questions 50 and 61) illustrate a child's capacity for behaving in a way that will elicit positive attention. Attracting attention can be a rewarding experience for children, and many children find that receiving any attention is rewarding, whether negative or positive (Cipani & Schock, 2007; Gresham, 2002). Therefore, it is important to help children develop the skills to attract attention through socially acceptable acts, rather than using disruptive or negative behaviors to get attention. Disruptive behaviors may provide children with the short term reward of attention, but over the long term may deteriorate relationships with others, such as influential adults. Teaching children socially acceptable behaviors, such as to listen attentively, engage in constructive activities, discuss positive events and topics, communicate effectively, and show appreciation for others will help them attract positive attention. The attention attracted through these acts is rewarding, encouraging further enactment of socially acceptable behaviors - a cycle that promotes ongoing relationship skill use and development (Gresham, 2002).

TREATING OTHERS AS VALUABLE

At the heart of developing, promoting, and maintaining positive relationships is the ability to treat others with respect and appreciation - recognizing their value. Relationships, whether temporary, or long term, rest on the members' ability to establish positive regard. Many of us are familiar with the "Golden Rule" – "treat others as you would like to be treated." Internalizing this tenet, and acting upon it at a young age, will serve children as they seek to establish and sustain positive relationships throughout life (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). This aspect of Relationship Skills can be promoted through simple actions. Teaching children to greet others kindly and politely, use active listening

skills, compliment or congratulate others, and do nice things all serve as wonderful practice for current and future relationships (Kusche & Greenberg, 2011). It is also important to keep in mind that bullying is related to relationship skills (CDC, 2009). In many ways, bullying behaviors are the opposite of relationship skills, they are socially unacceptable, and involve victimizing others, rather than treating them as valuable.

HELPFUL BEHAVIORS

An important feature of relationships is the varying types of support that they provide for those involved (Wentzel, 1998; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Therefore, it is important for children to learn to engage in helpful, supportive behaviors to promote long-lasting relationships. While being helpful may seem similar to treating another as valuable, behaviors that are considered helpful involve extending oneself to support another person physically or emotionally. Helpful behaviors include expressing concern for another person, making a suggestion in a polite way, offering to help somebody, and responding to another person's feelings. Children who are given opportunities to learn and practice these behaviors will be able to apply them in establishing and sustaining relationships throughout their lives (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998).

The Development and Importance of Relationship Skills

The "positive connections" established and maintained through using Relationships Skills can be extremely meaningful for children (Benard, 1997). Relationships serve as a foundation for other social-emotional development, and provide opportunities for formal and informal learning (Pianta et al., 2003; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Kress, 2006). Moreover, research studies suggest that parents,

peers and teachers play relatively independent roles in young adolescents' lives and that different kinds of relationships provide different kinds of beneficial support to children and youth (Wentzel, 1998; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The connections built through using Relationship Skills can enhance children's self-worth and provide them with validation, care, help, guidance, companionship and intimacy (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Parker & Asher, 1993). Through friendships, children also learn about commitment, personal responsibility, and loyalty (Parker & Asher, 1993).

Relationship Skills not only promote positive experiences, and healthy behaviors in all children, but also may provide alternative behaviors for children with behavioral and social-emotional concerns. Deficits in Relationship Skills comprise two of the five criteria specified in the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004) used to describe students with emotional disturbance (34 C.F.R. § 300.8). These two criteria are 1. Inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, and 2. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances (34 C.F.R. § 300.8; Gresham, 2002).

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIP SKILLS IN CHILDREN

The skills used to build and maintain strong, healthy relationships are learned, and most relationship skills are acquired through social learning – observing others enacting behaviors, trying out the behaviors observed, and getting formal or informal feedback on the behaviors that are tried (Merrell & Gimple, 1998; Bandura, 1971). Relationship skills begin to develop through attachment bonds with significant, caring adults such as parents, but continue to be developed and learned through observations of, and interactions with, other important people in a child's life (Pianta et al., 2003). These important individuals may be siblings, teachers, neighbors, grandparents, extra-curricular staff and peers. Therefore, the behaviors and actions of individuals surrounding children will guide their acquisition of Relationship Skills.

Since so much learning comes from observing significant individuals in our environment, adults have a unique opportunity to make an impact on the children in their lives. By establishing heartfelt connections, adults can serve as influential models of Relationship Skills they hope to impart such as trust, mutual respect, active listening, clear and positive communication, caring and helpful behaviors, and appreciation (Matson & Ollendick, 1988; Jones, et al., 2013; Pianta et al., 2003). Whether intentionally demonstrating specific behaviors desired of children and youth, or simply interacting with others casually, students will observe the behaviors of adults, begin to internalize them, and as a result begin to utilize these behaviors themselves (Bandura, 1971). Keeping this in mind, adults should reflect on their values and behavior, with the understanding that how they behave sends a direct message about the behaviors they expect of their students (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). Adults should also consider their own self-care and resilience. Teachers who are calm, positive, and content are likely to be better equipped to

treat students warmly and sensitively, even when students behave in challenging ways (Jones, et al., 2013).

Peers are equally influential as adults for modeling Relationship Skills, particularly as students grow into the adolescent years (Wentzel, 1998). Learning through modeling often occurs informally, occurring through natural interactions, and opportunities (Gresham, 2002). Therefore, it is important to help children and youth build positive relationships and use relationship skills with one another. Leading a classroom, or a group of youth that uses positive relationship skills will expose children to socially acceptable interactions for large portions of their day. If students see others interacting with respect, trust, appreciation and kindness they will learn to act accordingly.

In additional to modeling and demonstrating, Relationship Skills can be explicitly taught. For example, adults may choose to teach children how to practice treating others as valuable by teaching students to complement each other, or to say "please" and "thank you" (Kusche & Greenberg, 2011). They may intentionally teach children helpful behaviors through requiring participation in service projects, or developing assignments geared at making or writing something for another person. Formal lessons for building Relationship Skills can be found in the DESSA Strategies, in other social skills curricula, or developed. While these approaches can be very beneficial, it is also important to recognize that thousands of behavioral situations occur in home, school, and community settings creating rich opportunities for naturally learning Relationship Skills (Gresham, 2002, pg. 1033).

Relationship skills, like skills in sports, the arts, and academic subjects, are carefully developed through practice (Matson & Ollendick, 1988; Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). Students benefit from intentional practice of these vital skills in order to strengthen the neural connections that help them utilize these behaviors freely

and regularly (Jolles, Grol, Van Buchem, Rombouts & Crone; 2010). Therefore, it may be helpful to provide structured and formal opportunities for children to practice and rehearse relationship skills. For example, kind greetings can be taught, and then rehearsed, by asking children to practice greeting each other nicely each day.

Practice of Relationship Skills, whether structured or unstructured, should be followed by genuine and helpful feedback or reinforcement (Matson & Ollendick, 1988). While positive relationship skills are often naturally reinforced through the reactions and attention they elicit from others, it is also helpful to provide intentional reinforcement. Reinforcement comes in many forms including positive attention, praise, special activities, points, or stickers (Gresham, 2002). Adults might also choose to spontaneously point out and praise individuals who demonstrate positive Relationship Skills. This can encourage children's ability to notice, name, and adopt these behaviors themselves. Hearing that important adults value helpful and positive ways of interacting with others will encourage children to work toward competence in these areas (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Weissbourd & Jones, 2014). It can also serve to establish a classroom environment where children appreciate and encourage each other to develop and use these skills. Just as adults can, children can cue, prompt model and praise positive behaviors, and discourage negative behaviors in both adults and children (Gresham, 2002).

The DESSA Strategies are presented for three different developmental levels: the primary grades, the intermediate grades, and the middle school grades. However, individual children may have different needs, and be at different stages when it comes to developing their Relationship Skills. While some children may struggle with simply *knowing* positive Relationship Skills, others may struggle with the act of *performing* the skills (Gresham, 2002). This might indicate that different levels or types of support and instruction are needed to address the unique needs

of individual children. Furthermore, it is important to remember that some students have problem behaviors that can inhibit their ability to learn positive relationships skills (Gresham, 2002). In these cases, it may be helpful to consult with another professional for additional support, such as a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker.

THE BENEFITS OF RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Children who do not learn Relationships Skills at home, can be provided with opportunities to learn and practice these behaviors in other settings such as school, afterschool or faith-based communities. With this in mind, the DESSA Strategies were written to include activities for developing children's social-emotional strengths in school, in out-of-school-time programs, and at home. The opportunity to learn these skills in multiple settings can be vital to some children's future success. If children learn to utilize Relationship Skills in one setting, they will ideally generalize the use of these social-emotional skills to situations and environments outside of those where they were learned. For example, relationships with parents and peers can have a potentially powerful influence on students' emotional well-being at school (Wentzel, 1998; Benard, 1997). Having opportunities in multiple settings for learning and practicing social-emotional skills allows children to reap the benefits associated with these skills at home, at school, and into the future.

IN THE HOME

Rewarding and loving relationships are central to a comfortable and healthy home life. Children with strong relationship skills will do their part to maintain positive bonds with caregivers and family members at home. These students can serve as models and positive catalysts, encouraging closer bonds between family members such as parents and siblings and more agreeable, peaceful interactions

overall. These children will respond to the feelings of family members, and offer to help them or make kind suggestions when needed. They might be observed doing nice things for individuals at home. They are also likely to show appreciation of those in their home community, complimenting, and congratulating them on their attributes and achievements.

Furthermore, research by Wentzel (1998) has shown that children who perceive the relationships between their family members as supportive tend to have positive experiences at school. Children with this type of family cohesion show interest in school which can positively affect their grades (Wentzel, 1998). Positive relationships with family members may also influence children's desires to master content and achieve in the school setting (Wentzel, 1998).

IN THE SCHOOL

Having and utilizing Relationship Skills can be vital to children's success in the school setting. Children spend the majority of each day in school, surrounded by individuals with whom they can connect with in acceptable, engaging ways, or in negative, harmful ways. When students can interact positively with others they are more likely to be accepted. Therefore, teaching children to connect in positive ways assists them in developing supportive relationships to help them feel welcome, comfortable and accepted in school (Coie & Dodge, 1988). Bullying behavior can vary widely from class to class within a school, suggesting that teacher behavior and interventions at the class level to build relationships can truly make a difference for students (Atria, Strohmeier & Spiel, 2007; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003).

In one study, youth classified as bullies, and/or victims of bullying reported poorer school adjustment than their non-involved peers (Nansel et al., 2001). Being poorly accepted by peers, lacking a friend, or having friendships that fail to meet a child's needs can cause loneliness, and undermine children's feelings of well-being

(Parker & Asher, 1993; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason & Carpenter, 2003). Children who report being lonely often have friendships that are conflictual and less validating, companionate, helpful, and intimate (Parker & Asher, 1993). When children feel accepted and comfortable at school, rather than lonely and uncomfortable, this opens the door to learning (Kusche & Greenberg, 2011). Children who perceive their peers as supportive may also be more likely to share and act helpful in the classroom (Wentzel, 1998).

Relationship skills at school go beyond peer relationships. The ability to connect positively with teachers or staff can have strong effects on students. "School Connectedness" is defined by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2009) as "the belief by students that adults and peers care about their learning, as well as about them as individuals." The CDC found that School Connectedness can influence substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence and risk of unintentional injury, emotional distress, disordered eating, as well as suicidal ideation and attempts. Furthermore, school connectedness is related to educational outcomes such as school attendance, higher grades and test-scores, and staying in school longer.

Stephanie Jones et al. (2013) cite research showing that when students have high-quality relationships with teachers, they have better social adjustment and higher academic competence. Conversely, when teachers and students have negative or conflict-filled relationships, students are less likely to be engaged in school and more likely to have low academic achievement. If students perceive their teachers to be supportive they are more likely to be interested in school (Wentzel, 1998).

Like many social-emotional skills, having students with Relationship Skills in the classroom can lead to fewer behavioral problems and disciplinary actions

(Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Rules or agreements about classroom behaviors are only effective to the degree that the people involved are willing to abide by them - positive relationships between students and teachers can make the difference. Children who view their teachers as supportive may be more likely to comply with the expectations of the teacher and be more willing to contribute to a positive learning environment (Wentzel, 1998). Furthermore, the socially acceptable behaviors referred to as Relationship Skills are often the behaviors expected for a positively functioning classroom (e.g. being helpful to other students, being active listeners, treating others as valuable, and working effectively with partners or in a group in the classroom).

IN THE FUTURE

The skills to establish and maintain meaningful relationships are invaluable as students move toward the future, and throughout adulthood (Weissbourd & Jones, 2014; Mackrain & Bruce Poyner, 2013). Students with relationship skills are able to attract positive attention from peers and adults which can spark ongoing positive connections with others, including peers, siblings, parents, teachers and other individuals in the communities where we live and work (Matson & Ollendick, 1988). These connections may include mentorships, friendships, or romantic relationships which can serve individuals personally and professionally, helping the grownup child find paths to success in spite of adversity (Cherng, Calarco & Kao, 2012; Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, Martinussen, 2003).

For example, a best friend can influence an adolescent's completion of college (Cherng, Calarco & Kao, 2012), students involved in mentoring relationships have shown high academic achievement, fewer risky behaviors, and better mental health (Stewart & Openshaw, 2014), and social connectedness at school can influence substance use and other health and academic behaviors that can

influence a child's future (CDC, 2009). One research study indicated that when socially connected adolescents reach adulthood they are more likely to rate their well-being as high on a number of domains (Olsson, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2012). In contrast to these examples, poor relationship skills have been shown to be related to juvenile delinquency, dropping out of school, bad-conduct discharges from the military as well as behavioral health concerns (Matson & Ollendick, 1988).

As children develop, they accumulate a toolbox of aids for social and emotional interaction that they will carry with them to various settings throughout life. The tools that children develop now will not be forgotten in the future. There is a strong correlation between children's early social competence and later psychological adjustment (Foster & Ritchey, 1979). Youngsters who develop more acceptable relationship skills are likely to grow into adults with the same strengths. With early intervention, children that demonstrate less competence in social skills can learn more adaptive behaviors, before their future outcomes are affected. Therefore, it is important that adults cultivate Relationship Skills so that children reap the benefits, in the home, school and future.

The description above is not a comprehensive literature review, but a foundation for exploring the strategies and work within this resource. Please feel free to use the references below, or the additional links provided to further explore the construct of Personal Responsibility.

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