

The Six Life Skills

The journey from childhood to adulthood is a long one. There are many paths a child might take, each one leading to a unique future. As a teacher, you have the opportunity to guide children along their path for a short distance. To be successful as a guide, however, you need a clear vision of your destination. Only when you know where you are going can you make wise decisions about which roads to take.

Take an imaginary trip into the future for a few moments. Imagine that you are meeting up with your students again when they are in their early twenties. What do you hope to see?

Think for a moment or two about your hopes for the children you work with. Jot down a list of what you'd wish for them when they are young adults.

Your work with children helps to guide them into the future. This is especially true when we consider the issue of children's behavior. How we behave with children today models skills and gives them social and emotional choices they will use for the rest of their lives. Once you have a clear vision of where you are heading, it's far easier to find the road that will lead you to your destination. As we continue to explore the factors that influence children's behavior choices, keep your destination map in mind. Begin to envision what the road that leads to your goals will look like.

Beliefs and Skills

Children are born with no preconceptions about the world. It's only through their interactions with people and the environment that they begin to develop beliefs about how the world works. Loving people, plentiful food, and a peaceful environment surrounds one child. Another is born into a life of scarcity, surrounded by hunger, loneliness, pain, and fear. Reality for each of these children is different. The first child experiences life as a safe and happy adventure while for the second, every new experience carries the threat of harm and trauma. These experiences form the child's understanding of how the world works. A young child's beliefs about how the world works has a big influence on how that child approaches life at school. Will past experiences set the child up to look at school as an exciting adventure filled with potential new friends? Or, like Lizbeth, will that child come into school believing that the world is an unpredictable place full of people out to harm her?

Each child also brings to school a set of unique skills, traditions, and customs, which they have learned by watching and listening to the people around them. Some of these may come from socially unskilled models or from the media. Children may have had the fortune to learn from others who are socially competent. Some of this training is intentional, such as when a grandmother prompts her grandchild to say, "Thank you." Some of it is unintentional, as when children pick up skills and habits by paying attention to what works to get their needs met. Some children learn that smiles get attention while others learn that whining or tantrums work to get what they need.

Home Culture/School Culture

Our interpretation of children's behavior is based on our own, very personal philosophy of "right and wrong." These deeply ingrained beliefs evolve from the cultural norms with which we were raised. Don't confuse "cultural norms" with ethnicity. Culture encompasses more than that. It includes where we grew up, our socioeconomic status, our gender, our education, and many other variables. Because these cultural norms are so deeply ingrained, they become invisible to us. They are just the way things are done.

To do our best work with other people's children, it is essential that we start to clarify our own cultural assumptions and the beliefs of the families with which we work. The better we understand the cultural beliefs of our families, the better we can provide a culturally responsive classroom.

One way of thinking about cultural differences is to envision a spectrum, with *independence* at one end and *interdependence* at the other. Cultural ways of doing

things lie along this spectrum. For example, many child-raising practices of white middle-class American families are designed to encourage children to be as independent as possible as soon as possible. It isn't "good" or "bad" to be at one end or the other of the spectrum, or to be in the middle. But teachers and parents whose child-raising practices are at different points along the spectrum may find themselves in conflict.

Let's see how a teacher at each end of the spectrum might interpret the same child's behavior. Notice how the same behavior might be interpreted as "good" or "bad" depending on the teacher's cultural background.

WHEN A CHILD ...	A TEACHER FOCUSED ON INDEPENDENCE MIGHT SAY ...	A TEACHER FOCUSED ON INTERDEPENDENCE MIGHT SAY ...
Asks for help to put on her shoes	"You're a big girl. You can do it by yourself. Keep trying." (independence)	"Who can help Lotus with her shoes? She's having a hard time by herself." (helpfulness)
Won't share stickers she brought from home	"Robin doesn't need to share. Those are her stickers from home." (ownership)	"Robin, if you're going to bring stickers to school, you really need to share with your friends." (sharing)
Says, "Look, didn't I wash these paintbrushes good?"	"You sure did!" (child as an individual)	"You did your part to help keep our room clean." (child as part of the group)
Calls out an idea or thought during story time	"You're right, Pedro! This cat looks just like the cat from <i>Cat in the Hat!</i> " (oral expression)	"When I am reading, you need to be quiet. Raise your hand if you want to speak or wait until the end of the story." (listening to authority)
Spills milk while serving himself at snack	"You poured your own milk. Good for you!" (praise to promote self-esteem)	"Go clean up the milk you spilled." (criticism to correct behavior)

Like teachers, families' cultures place them somewhere along this spectrum. A culturally responsive early childhood classroom will support the child's home culture as well as introduce the child to a spectrum of other beliefs.

The activities, scripts, and interventions in this book can be used to support children and families whose cultural ways come from anywhere on a spectrum of independence to interdependence. They are designed to help teachers meet goals like these:

- Recognize children both as individuals and as members of the group.
- Promote both independence and interdependence.
- Work with children to balance assertion with respect for authority.
- Help children recognize their areas of strength and strategize how to work on their challenges.

If you find that a strategy isn't working or that a parent disapproves of a particular strategy, look deeper to see if the reason might be a cultural clash. If it is, either modify the activity or simply try another one instead.

The Six Life Skills

For children to negotiate the world successfully, they need to develop six strengths which grow out of positive beliefs about the world around them and culturally appropriate social skills. The six essential strengths are

- Attachment—"I have a grown-up who cherishes me and keeps me safe."
- Affiliation—"I can have a friend and be a friend."
- Self-regulation—"I can manage my strong emotions and am in control of my behavior."
- Initiative—"I am constantly growing and changing and learning new things."
- Problem solving—"I can solve problems and resolve conflicts."
- Respect—"I have unique gifts and challenges and so do others."

The way teachers approach guidance and discipline can either help children develop the strengths they need to have productive and purposeful lives or hold them back.

Attachment—"I have a grown-up who cherishes me and keeps me safe."

Reflect for a moment on your own experiences, and think about the people who have affected your life. Was it a grandmother or a teacher? Was it a coach? What were the qualities of those personal relationships? Did you feel safe with that person? Did you feel valued? How did that person earn your respect?

To be successful in school and in life, children must believe there is an adult they can count on to nurture them and keep them safe. They need a vision of adults as valuable resources who can guide and support them through their journey of growth and

development. Children who have no need for or trust in adults, resist when teachers try to help them navigate their worlds. Once teachers establish warm and mutually respectful relationships with children, children become open to being influenced and guided. Often the fastest course to get a child back on track is to build up the relationship between the adult and the child.

The idea that personal relationship is vital is the most puzzling and, at the same time, the most exciting part of guiding young children. When you strengthen your relationship with a child, you earn the possibility of influencing her development. Only when you heal your relationships with difficult children can you help them heal their behavior. Attachment is the single most important place to start the healing when you are faced with a child with challenges. It is the most essential and most basic of all the strengths. The first step in working with a challenging child is to examine your personal relationship with that child and to find ways to strengthen that relationship.

Adults instinctively express pleasure with children who are behaving appropriately. It's also natural to express displeasure with children who are off track. We assume that all children want our approval and that they will change behavior that gets our disapproval. When our pleasure and disapproval fail to work, we look for "stronger" ways to express approval and displeasure, such as reward and punishment systems. However, children who are not attached place little value in our feedback. When we escalate our guidance attempts by using techniques such as rewards and punishments, we often push children even further away. Instead of drawing children closer and increasing their attachment, we erode our relationships with them. They place less value on our approval or disapproval, and the whole cycle continues.

The importance of personal attachment was driven home to me years ago by a very wise supervisor when I was teaching a particularly challenging child. My laundry list of offenses that PJ had committed was miles long and my efforts to control his behavior went nowhere. Time outs, stickers, sharp words, and lost recesses meant nothing to this child. As I grew more frustrated, he grew more defiant and disruptive. In frustration, I went to my supervisor for tips on what else I could do to manage his behavior. When she told me to start a daily journal on him, I expected her to tell me to keep track of his offenses. But that wasn't her goal at all. Instead, she told me to write down ten positive things about PJ every day. The notion was laughable. I was sure I could barely find one positive thing a day about this defiant and unlikable child, much less ten.

It was almost impossible that first day for me to come up with ten positive things to say about PJ. But each day it became easier. I never shared my list with anyone, not my supervisor and not PJ. But remarkably, the more positive things I began to write down, the more compliant PJ seemed to become. By the end of the week, it was clear that we had turned our ugly relationship around and began to actually enjoy each other. The exercise of looking at PJ through new eyes of appreciation was the trigger I needed to begin to bond with him. As I focused more on his positive and lovable traits, he felt that love and acceptance and began to draw closer to me in return. This is an example of the magic of attachment.

Self-Regulation—“I can manage my strong emotions and am in control of my behavior.”

One of the most troubling challenges for early childhood teachers is the child who lacks emotional self-management skills. These children might hit before they think, can't wait for a turn, or cry and have tantrums easily. Teachers might observe that these kids seem to be controlled by their emotions, much as newborns are. When newborns are hungry, they cry. When they are colicky, they kick their legs and scream. When they sense a nipple, they root and latch on. No thought goes into this behavior. Newborns feel and then do. Children who lack emotional self-management skills appear to behave in a similar way.

Managing emotions is a very complex skill:

- Children must have a basic understanding that actions have consequences, both positive and negative.
- Children need to know what kinds of behavior are culturally acceptable. Can boys cry? Can girls play with action toys? Is hitting okay?
- Children need an awareness that they, not their feelings, control their behavior and that they have the power to manage their emotions.

Children learn about emotions from the people around them. When adults manage their own anger and frustration, they are teaching children emotional self-management skills. The way adults guide and support children with their emotions sends strong messages to children about ways to express and manage feelings and behavior.

Some children struggle with transitions and change because they are unaware that feelings fluctuate and that their emotions don't have to control their behavior. For example, when such children are contentedly playing at the water table, they might feel frightened by being asked to move on to another activity, which requires them to leave their comfort zone. This kind of transition is threatening to their sense of well-being. A child might feel similarly uncomfortable when the room has been rearranged or when there is a new parent-helper in the classroom. Children may express these feelings in very different ways: one child might call out of turn or talk during quiet times; another might hit or call names or use profanity when asked to move out of her comfort zone; another might cry easily or collapse into a tantrum over a relatively minor obstacle, or perhaps even one that is invisible to the teacher. It's important to remember that even if you don't understand what is wrong or why the child has such strong feelings, the feelings are real to the child.

Model and teach emotional self-management skills to impulsive and emotionally overwhelmed children. Help them develop the foundations they need to eventually manage strong emotions on their own.

Initiative—"I am constantly growing and changing and learning new things."

Safari concentrates on putting together a new puzzle, trying one piece after another to find the special one she is looking for. Javonne tests what will happen when she pours water down a funnel into an empty bottle. Adrian asks his teacher how to write "I love you, Mama," and Manny sits at the table with the teacher learning how to hold scissors so they will cut better. All of these children are showing initiative.

When a child lacks initiative, they may choose the same activity day after day or quit an activity as soon as they encounter the first challenge. Children may be verbal about their lack of initiative. They might say things such as, "I can't do it," "I don't want to try that," and "This is too hard for me." You may notice that they don't look forward to events in the future.

Help children build initiative by modeling your own initiative and by paying careful attention to your interactions with children. What you say and what you do when you interact with a child who is struggling with a challenge influences how that child will react to the next challenge. Gain an understanding of which factors build or tear down initiative so you can weave initiative-building strategies into the daily life of the classroom.

Problem Solving—"I can solve problems and resolve conflicts."

Problems and conflicts are part of everyday life. Teachers can help children understand this and can also arm children with confidence that problems can be resolved. Children who believe that problems can be solved will be able to cope with the ups and downs of daily life better than children who don't.

Problems can overwhelm some children, as a result of temperament or life experiences. A simple challenge, such as being unable to put on a shoe, can feel like the end of the world. Spilled milk or a conflict over the red swing can be so overwhelming that a child feels no choice other than to strike out with fists or hurtful words. Some children become so overwhelmed by what appears to be an uncontrollable situation that they withdraw into a corner or fall apart weeping or screaming. Children who have a long history of being punished when they have problems or conflicts with others often get out of the habit of thinking of strategies to resolve problems and become resigned to just paying for the misdemeanor.

Help children understand that problems and conflicts are a natural and expected part of daily life. Model your own strength in the face of adversity to help children understand that they have within themselves the ability to work through these challenging situations. While few people find problems and conflicts pleasurable, children can learn to see these obstacles as manageable.

Children need to learn the skills of problem solving in the same way that they need to learn the skills to get dressed. Think of all the little steps children need to practice and perfect to put on a pair of pants. They have to find the front of the pants, coordinate putting in one leg at a time, pull the pants up over their hips, and learn how to work the fastenings. What is so easy for adults takes time and practice for children to master. When we realize the many skills children need to solve problems on their own, we can understand why problem solving is so challenging for young children and why they need so much support.

Respect—"I have unique gifts and challenges, and so do others."

Almost every preschool activity book includes an activity called "I Am Special." However, developing a respect for oneself and others is far more than that. "I Am Special" guides children inward toward an egocentric view, but it is equally important to turn children's attention outward. Help children focus on recognizing and celebrating the unique gifts that each individual brings to the group. At the same time, we want children to appreciate that everyone has their own challenges. When children learn to respect their own uniqueness and the uniqueness of others, they can begin to appreciate how powerful they can be when they join in with others to complete a project or a task. Help children value interdependence as much as they value independence.

What Can Teachers Do?

Children come to early childhood classrooms with a whole range of skills and personalities. Some children are beginning to read while others have no previous experience with books. Some children are social butterflies who draw peers to them like bees to a flower. Other children are content to play alone. Some children are well on their way to developing the six strengths, and others have barely begun.

What steps can a teacher take to help individual children reach their destination of social and emotional competency? What role does a teacher play in guiding children along that path?

As you read through the six strengths, specific children may have popped into your mind. Reflect now on those children you know or have worked with. Think of a child who has the six strengths. How does she behave? Think of a child who lacks many of these strengths. What kinds of behavior do you see from him? If you are like many other teachers, your own evidence shows that children who have these six strengths tend to do well in life, while those who don't have these strengths tend to struggle more.

When children present us with challenging behavior, we are in a hurry to stop that

behavior as fast as possible. The problem is, though, that behavior is just a symptom of an underlying problem. Focus on stopping the symptom and you might not eliminate the problem. Perhaps you will get the child to stop biting, but now the same underlying problem will be expressed with new symptoms such as tantrums or withdrawal.

To understand this better, imagine that you have had chronic, severe headaches. You have tried a few aspirin and other over-the-counter painkillers to address the symptom, but nothing has eliminated the headaches. What would be your next step? You might go to your family doctor. The doctor would gather information from you about your symptoms and about what you had tried so far. Next, the doctor would schedule a number of tests to diagnose the underlying problem. Perhaps the problem is low blood sugar or migraines or a vision issue or stress or a brain tumor. Each of these problems would require a different approach to eliminate the headaches.

The same is true with children's behavior. Perhaps the tantrums are a result of stress, or maybe they are a learned behavior, or they might be due to limited language or few self-regulation skills. Maybe the child doesn't know how to solve problems or maybe the child uses tantrums to get a need met. Until you figure out the underlying problem, you can't figure out the best way to address the symptom.

Build the Six Life Skills

The most effective way to help a kid change a problem behavior is not to address the behavior itself, but instead to address the strengths that underlie the behavior. Every time we intervene with a misbehaving child, here is the first question we should ask ourselves: Am I helping this child to build the six strengths, or am I moving this child even further in the wrong direction?

If the response or intervention moves a child further away from building the six underlying strengths, how can we expect more positive behavior?

When you have questions about interventions or strategies you are using or thinking of using, always ask yourself "Will using this strategy help build or weaken the six strengths this child needs to thrive in today's world?"

Attachment

Will the strategy move the child to see you as a supportive and loving ally or as an opponent who works against them? Will the strategy help the child feel safe and secure or add a layer of fear and apprehension?

Affiliation

Will the strategy build ties, friendships, bonds, and a team or family feeling? Or will the strategy single this child out as somewhat unappealing, unacceptable, and deficient? Will the strategy move the child to be more a part of the group or will the child feel more apart from the group?

Self-regulation

Does the strategy validate children's feelings and reassure them that the whole range of human emotions is acceptable? Will the strategy help the child understand that feelings change over time? Does the strategy model self-regulation on the part of the adult?

Initiative

Does the intervention promote the idea that we are all growing, changing, and learning, or does it leave the child feeling like a failure before he's even five years old? Does it leave the child feeling hopeful or hopeless, empowered or powerless?

Problem Solving

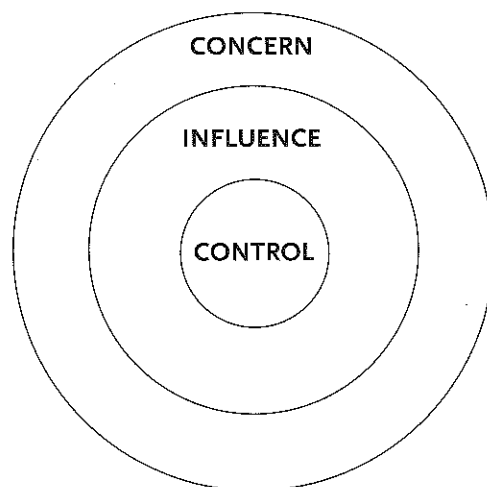
Does the intervention help children understand that all problems can be solved? Does it promote the belief that "might makes right" or does it encourage working to find the best solutions for all parties involved?

Respect

Does the intervention help the child build self-respect? Did the interaction help the child strengthen respect for others? Was the child demeaned in the eyes of peers?

Sphere of Influence

While we would love to be able to control the behavior of children in our care, the reality is that compliance is voluntary. While we might be able to influence Little Johnny, ultimately he is the only one who can directly control his behavior, just as we are the only ones who can control ours. And while we may have concerns about the neighborhood he lives in, we can't change his home environment.



How then can you control Little Johnny and the rest of the class? You can't. Attempts to control the class or make a child behave will only be an exercise in frustration. The only person you can control is you. The better question is how to expand your sphere of influence so that you can help the class function better and help Little Johnny make better choices. There are many strategies under your control that will expand your sphere of influence over the children in your care:

- Strengthen your personal relationship with children and their families.
- Learn new guidance techniques, attend workshops, read books, and consult colleagues.
- Make a plan to help all the children develop the beliefs and skills they need to manage their own behavior.

All these strategies are within your control. You will never have control over Little Johnny's bedtime or the discipline choices of his family, but by working to build bridges of trust and respect, you can expand your sphere of influence and begin to work with them as a team.

Be clear about those things over which you have direct control, those you might influence, and those about which you may have concerns but no control. Remembering the limits of your control will help you invest your time and energies wisely when you make plans on how best to approach children's behavior and social-emotional growth.

With an awareness of our sphere of control, what is our overall plan to empower children to manage their own behavior?

Our Behavior Plan

Our plan is to help each child develop positive beliefs about how the world works and learn the social and emotional skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

- We will provide a supportive and nurturing environment that meets children's needs physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively so that children feel cherished and safe.
- We will commit to providing interactions and experiences that help children develop the strengths of attachment, affiliation, self-regulation, initiative, problem solving, and respect.
- We will design specific intervention programs and support for children who need additional help in developing the strengths they need for success in today's world.

- We will bring in outside resources as necessary to help all children in our program reach social and emotional competency when we have exhausted our own resources.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What are your long-term goals for the children in your class? Twenty years from now, what kind of personal qualities would you like to see in them?
2. Are there any connections between the six strengths and what you want for children? Describe them.
3. Look at each of the six strengths from a parent's point of view. How might a parent who values *independence* describe each of the six skills? How might a parent who values *interdependence* describe each of the six skills?

Exercises

1. Take a closer look at a challenging child in your group. Which of the six strengths are they lacking? What is the relationship between the behavior that is driving you crazy and that strength or strengths? Which strengths is the child already developing?
2. Looking either at that same child or another challenging child in your group, explore whether the behavior that bothers you might be a cultural difference in expectations between school and home. Might you value independence while the family emphasizes interdependence? Might you expect more interdependence while the family guides the child toward more independence? How can you find out what the family's expectations are?

Think of yourself in relation to the six strengths. How have these strengths helped you to get to where you are today? Are you still working to develop one or more of these strengths? If so, how has lacking a strength had an impact on your life?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.