

EVIDENCE BRIEF

January 2018



FIRST STEPS TO SUCCESS IN ETOBICOKE

Social-Emotional Development

Healthy social-emotional development in young children refers to a range of skills related to self-regulation, confidence, and prosocial behaviour⁵. Emotional competence includes expressiveness, insight into the causes of emotions, and the ability to take the perspective of others. Children who demonstrate social competence are able to get their needs met through successful social interaction¹¹. Social-emotional competence in children aged 0-3 establishes a necessary foundation for academic success when transitioning into the school years^{5,11}.

Need for Intervention

When problems interfere with the development of healthy social-emotional competence, this can result in the onset of challenging behaviours in infants and toddlers¹¹. When these problem behaviours are not resolved, they can have lasting negative consequences and interfere with social

adjustment and academic performance^{4,9,12}. Aggression in preschool-age children is highly correlated with aggression at age ten, leading to peer rejection, underachievement, delinquency, and substance use^{2,8}. These social-emotional deficits contribute to decreased positive feedback from teachers at later ages, and higher rates of expulsion, school failure, and dropout^{8,15}. Children who express challenging behaviours also place their families at greater risk of isolation from community supports⁴.

Estimates of the proportion of young children with problem behaviours range from 10-40% and evidence suggests this statistic is only increasing^{7,8,9,15}. Early childhood educators report that they lack necessary skills and struggle to meet the needs of these children^{5,7,9,11,15}. Referrals to behavioural specialists can be difficult to access and frontline staff end up experiencing stress and burnout^{3,7,8}.

Social skills training and universal approaches to care that target social-emotional competence through positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviours can help prevent the development of these challenging behaviours^{2,4,8,9}. Early intervention that fosters the social-emotional development needed to protect children from future stressors can reduce the need for more costly interventions at later ages^{11,15}.

Support for the Pyramid Model

The Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children is an early childhood intervention that uses a systematic approach to create nurturing and responsive environments to help children communicate in positive ways⁸. It fosters healthy social-emotional development for all children by combining universal practices with targeted skill development for more at-risk children and behavioural support strategies for children requiring intensive intervention^{8,9}. This focus on promotion and prevention reduces the risk of children needing more intensive supports to as low as 4%^{8,11}, which is essential for staff who are typically more focused on managing problem behaviours after they occur⁵.

The ongoing, strengths-based coaching employed by the *Pyramid Model* ensures early childhood workers are applying the principles to their everyday practice with significantly increased levels of fidelity^{3,13}. Studies have demonstrated reliable improvements in teacher scores on standardized observation tools associated with *Pyramid Model* practices, as well as reductions in staff behaviours considered unhelpful for children's development^{3,5,9}.



WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT?

This document is a summary of academic literature related to use of the *Pyramid Model* as an early intervention for infants and toddlers. It is a starting point for summarizing empirical evidence but it is not a comprehensive literature review.

Frontline workers themselves have also reacted positively to the *Pyramid Model*, indicating that they felt more confident in their ability to manage challenging behaviours. They have reported being less stressed, more patient, and less likely to require additional specialized services for crisis intervention^{7,9}.

Outcomes for children affected by this intervention are promising. They include marked increases in social skills and significant reductions in problem behaviours^{3,9}. Rates of expulsion have decreased to half their previous rates when the *Pyramid Model* was implemented on a large scale¹⁵. Adults providing sensitive and attuned care for young children is also related to more secure attachment to caregivers¹².



A Foundation in Positive Behaviour Support

The *Pyramid Model* was established in the tradition of positive behaviour support, a systematic approach to improving student outcomes by embedding the use of behavioural principles across entire programs^{6,8,14}. Positive behaviour support has an established evidence base of effectiveness in reducing problem behavior and reliance on more restrictive interventions in elementary school-aged children^{3,7,8,12}. Using similar intervention components, the *Pyramid Model* builds on the positive behaviour support literature by integrating these practices within early childhood contexts^{3,6,7,8,9,11}.

The Role of Culture

Evidence suggests that there can be challenges when implementing the *Pyramid Model* across families from diverse cultures^{1,10}. Language barriers, misinterpretation of behaviours, variations in how challenging behaviour is conceptualized, views that universal practices perpetuate the social norms of a Eurocentric majority, and lack of trust between service providers and families all contribute to this tension^{1,10,12}. As a result of institutional policies, racial bias, and lack of staff training, racialized students are also disproportionately affected by expulsions in early learning settings^{1,9}.

Deliberate and strategic use of the *Pyramid Model* can be a tool for closing this gap for infants and toddlers of colour by reducing these expulsions¹. Despite challenges, the *Pyramid Model* practices are flexible and can be adapted to meet the needs of the target population when culturally responsive practices are incorporated into the intervention^{1,10}.

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