

## Facilitating Social and Emotional Learning Through Outdoor Play

'SKIP Research Bites' is a series of short summaries based on findings from the Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project.

### What does research tell us?

Social and emotional competencies are vital in promoting skills that contribute to learning and development, such as engagement and concentration in classroom tasks (Denham & Brown, 2010), as well as time management and organisational skills relating to behavioural self-regulation (McClelland et al., 2007). Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework describes five social emotional knowledge and skills:

- Self-awareness and positive self-concept
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship management
- Responsible decision-making

Teachers can facilitate these social emotional knowledge and skills through various classroom activities. One such activity is outdoor play, where teachers' support for children's social and emotional development (SED) was found to occur most frequently over other types of activities, such as lesson time, meal times/transitions and learning centres (Ng & Bull, 2018). As well as encouraging higher levels of physical activity and stimulating creative thinking, outdoor play promotes SED (e.g., Ahn & Fedewa, 2011). For example, children may experience issues with handling equipment during outdoor play, which presents an opportunity for children to resolve the problem, thereby promoting responsible decision-making. However, the amount of time dedicated to outdoor play and physical activity is likely to be decreasing, as children typically spend more time on electronic gadgets and computer games (Karupiah, 2015).

### To Learn More:

- © Ng, S. C. & Bull, R. (2018). Facilitating social emotional learning in kindergarten classrooms: Situational factors and teachers' strategies. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 50(3), 335-352. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-018-0225-9>
- © Ministry of Education. (2013). *Nurturing early learners: Social and emotional development*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- © Ahn, S. & Fedewa, A. L. (2011). A meta-analysis of the relationship between children's physical activity and mental health. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 36(4), 385-397.
- © Denham, S. A., & Brown, C. (2010). "Plays nice with others": Social-emotional learning and academic success. *Early Education & Development*, 21(5), 652-68.

### Contributors:

NG Siew Chin,  
Instructor &  
Project Supervisor  
[scng022@suss.edu.sg](mailto:scng022@suss.edu.sg)\*  
Research Assistant  
[siewchin.ng@nie.edu.sg](mailto:siewchin.ng@nie.edu.sg)

Rebecca BULL,  
Professor  
[r.bull@mq.edu.au](mailto:r.bull@mq.edu.au)

\*corresponding author

### What is this study about?

Six K1 classes from six pre-school centres were video-recorded for up to 4 hours, capturing a variety of activities that occur on a typical day. Based on the descriptions in the NEL Framework, 32 instances of teachers' facilitation of SED were identified in the recordings. From these, we selected two examples to showcase how early educators supported SED during outdoor play.



## What did we find?

From our study, we found that 41% of teacher's support for children's SED occurred during outdoor play (See [Facilitating SED in EC Classrooms](#) for more details). Here are two examples from our observations:

SED competencies	Examples of Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Responsible decision-making:</b> Children were prompted to consider possible options/actions to manage a situation.</li> <li>• <b>Relationship management:</b> Children were working cooperatively as a group.</li> </ul>	<p>Two children were standing on one 'log' in the climbing equipment area while facing each other, and each was trying to reach the other end of the log.</p> <p>Teacher: Ok... how can we settle this problem? Daniel wants to go here and Emma wants to go (<i>teacher moves to Emma's position</i>) here.</p> <p>Kathy: Hold the hands.</p> <p>Teacher: Ok, see. You hold her hand ... now you turn ... (<i>Teacher holds onto children and leads them to turn to the opposite side.</i>)</p> <p>See, this is how you change (sides).</p> <p>Henry: No, Daniel goes this way and Emma goes that way. (<i>Henry suggesting for the children on the log to turn their backs and take the direction which they came from.</i>)</p> <p>Teacher: That is another way to suggest it.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Relationship management:</b> Children were prompted to show appreciation and care for peers as well as to provide and seek assistance when necessary.</li> <li>• <b>Self-management and Relationship management:</b> Teacher acknowledged and built on Danny's comment to develop his self-concept. She also encouraged him to show care for others.</li> </ul>	<p>The issue on taking care of peers in the playground was highlighted by the teacher.</p> <p>Teacher: Alex, you know he needs help right? So please take care of your friend. Take care of each other. If your friend needs help, you must help.</p> <p>Danny: He is our special friend in class.</p> <p>Teacher: Yes, so we need to take care of him. Everybody else also needs to take care of one another.</p> <p>(A few minutes later...)</p> <p>Teacher: Be careful because it's quite heavy (<i>referring to hose-like equipment</i>) and you do not want to hurt your friend. You need help, you ask your friend to help.</p>

## What does it mean for teaching and learning?

The value of outdoor activity has been recognised in Singapore (NurtureSG Taskforce, 2017), as the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) has recommended an increase in physical activity to 1 hour daily for full-day programmes, with half of this time to be spent outdoors. Compared to indoor activities, children typically engage in free play in the outdoors. During these free play sessions, children have more opportunities to initiate interactions with peers, take risks during exploration, explore new equipment and natural resources, and discover how to resolve problems, providing natural opportunities for teachers to facilitate the five areas of social and emotional competencies. For example, self-awareness and positive self-concept can be promoted when teachers encourage safe risk-taking (Little et al., 2011). To maximise the potential of outdoor play in supporting the development of social emotional competencies, teachers may:

- Guide children to express their need for assistance when necessary (e.g. asking for help from a friend to walk on a balancing beam)
- Encourage children to try out different activities (e.g. running, balancing, climbing) to develop their confidence
- Encourage children to take risks and go beyond their comfort zone (e.g. trying out new playground equipment)
- Allow children choices, e.g. free choice of materials and playing buddies
- Encourage children to listen to each other's ideas (e.g. share ideas on how they could use the climbing equipment)
- Prompt children to think of and try out different options to resolve problems (e.g. turn-taking on using the playground equipment)
- Discuss how children's own actions may affect peers and help children see the importance of self-regulation (e.g. ask "What will happen if you pour the sand too near to your friend's face?")

