



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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CONTACT
Lisa Michals
(803) 734-0867

ATTENTION EDITORS & NEWS DIRECTORS: During National Week of the Young Child (April 19-25, 2009), South Carolina First Steps is highlighting early childhood brain development. Cutting-edge research in this field is empowering parents and policymakers alike in creating the brightest of futures for young children.

Young brains need social-emotional development, too

A child's social-emotional development is peaking between ages 1 and 3. During this time, children develop a capacity to form relationships through experiences regulating and expressing emotions. This is the critical window for setting the foundation for a child's later ability to feel empathy. Priming a child for empathy is essential to the future lifelong ability for pro-social behavior and management of conflict.

During this period of social-emotional development, parents and caregivers foster optimal brain development by staying attune to a child's ever-developing abilities for self-regulation and expression of emotion. Parents foster growth by helping a child build upon these rapidly emerging skills. In the early childhood field, professionals call this "scaffolding." According to the think-tank Zero to Three, "Scaffolding happens when you follow your child's lead and provide just enough support to challenge him to the next level without overwhelming him with frustration."

TIPS FOR BRANIACS

TIP: State clear expectations for a child's behavior that are consistently enforced.

WHY IT MATTERS: This focuses the child's attention on the desired behavior, thereby guiding the child in the development of self-regulation.

TIP: Help children achieve what they set out to do by recognizing aloud when they do the right thing. Further, notice positive behaviors aloud, rather than praising everything. For example, "You shared a toy with your brother. Doesn't that feel good?"

WHY IT MATTERS: This exposes children to the concepts of accomplishment, success and responsibility.

TIP: Support toddlers in resolving social conflicts.

WHY IT MATTERS: These first incidences of social conflict are key to the development of a child's conscience and future ability for empathy. Children also learn cooperation when they are supported in the positive resolution of conflict.

TIP: Comfort and soothe children.

WHY IT MATTERS: Regardless of the emotion a child is feeling – anger, fear, etc. – validation of a child's emotion helps her understand that the emotion is important and meaningful. The next step is teaching children that there are positive ways to cope with emotion (example: verbalizing a child's feeling, "I don't like that") versus unacceptable ways to cope with emotion, such as hitting another child. Validation of children's feelings sends a message that they are special; when they are loved for who they are, they can love others that way, too.



Sources: Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning; “From Neurons to Neighborhoods,” Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips; WestEd: The Program for Infant/Toddler Care, Ronald J. Lally; South Carolina First Steps staff.

***About National Week of the Young Child:** The Week of the Young Child is an annual celebration sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The purpose of the Week of the Young Child is to focus public attention on the needs of young children and their families and to recognize the early childhood programs and services that meet those needs.*

***Week of the Young Child in South Carolina:** To read Gov. Mark Sanford’s South Carolina Week of the Young Child Proclamation – and to learn more about early brain development and the work of First Steps and our partners – go to www.scfirststeps.org.*

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South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness is a comprehensive, results-oriented statewide education initiative to help prepare children to reach school healthy and ready to succeed. Public and private support are combined through county partnerships to enable individual communities to address the unmet needs of young children and their families.