



Promoting Social-Emotional Competence for School Readiness among Children with Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

Promoting social-emotional competence is an important component of school readiness for children with intellectual disability. School readiness extends beyond academic skills and includes the child's ability to communicate, understand and express emotions, interact with others, follow routines, regulate behaviour, seek assistance, develop independence, and participate meaningfully in classroom activities. Children with intellectual disability may require additional and individualized support to develop these skills because they may experience differences in communication, adaptive functioning, emotional regulation, social interaction, and learning. This article focuses on the importance of developing social-emotional competence as a foundation for successful participation in inclusive and early learning environments. Key areas include emotional awareness and expression, self-regulation, social communication, sharing and turn-taking, following classroom routines, developing peer relationships, problem-solving, help-seeking, and independent functioning. Effective strategies include modelling, role play, social stories, visual supports, structured routines, prompting and prompt fading, positive reinforcement, repetition, practice in natural situations, and opportunities for peer interaction. Collaboration among special educators, general teachers, parents, caregivers, and relevant professionals is essential for providing consistent and individualized support. Continuous observation and progress monitoring can help identify strengths, assess emerging skills, and modify teaching strategies according to the child's needs. A strengths-based and child-centred approach can promote confidence, participation, communication, independence, and positive relationships. Therefore, systematic promotion of social-emotional competence can play a significant role in preparing children with intellectual disability for meaningful participation in school and inclusive educational settings.

Key Words

Social-emotional competence, school readiness, intellectual disability, emotional awareness, emotional expression, emotional regulation, self-regulation, social skills, social interaction, communication skills, peer relationships, positive behaviour, self-confidence, independence, self-help skills, cooperation, sharing, turn-taking, problem-solving, decision-making, classroom routines, functional skills, adaptive behaviour, inclusive classroom, visual supports, social stories, role play, modelling, positive reinforcement, individualized support, peer support, family collaboration, teacher support, behaviour management, communication support, classroom participation, social awareness, emotional development, adaptive skills, holistic development.

1. Introduction

Education is not limited to the development of academic knowledge. For a child to participate successfully in school, several developmental areas need to be addressed, including communication, social interaction, emotional development, adaptive behaviour, self-help skills, attention, independence, and pre-academic abilities. These areas together contribute to **school readiness**.

School readiness refers to the child's preparedness to enter and participate meaningfully in the school environment. A school-ready child should gradually develop the ability to communicate needs, understand simple instructions, interact with teachers and peers, follow routines, manage emotions, participate in activities, and perform appropriate tasks with increasing independence.

For children with **Intellectual Disability (ID)**, school readiness may require more systematic and individualized support. Intellectual disability is associated with limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, including conceptual, social, and practical skills. The degree and nature of support required differ from one child to another. Therefore, educational planning should focus on the individual child's strengths, needs, interests, communication abilities, and learning pace.

One of the important components of school readiness is **social-emotional competence**. Social-emotional competence enables children to understand their own emotions, recognize emotions in others, express feelings appropriately, regulate their behaviour, communicate effectively, develop relationships, cooperate with others, solve simple social problems, and respond appropriately to classroom situations.

Children with intellectual disability may sometimes experience difficulties in understanding social cues, expressing emotions, communicating their needs, waiting for their turn, managing frustration, adapting to changes, or interacting appropriately with peers. These difficulties can affect classroom participation if appropriate support is not provided.

Therefore, promoting social-emotional competence should be an integral part of inclusive education. Through structured teaching, modelling, visual supports, role play, social stories, peer interaction, positive reinforcement, repeated practice, and collaboration with families, children with intellectual disability can be supported to develop meaningful social and emotional skills.

2. Meaning of Social-Emotional Competence

Social-emotional competence is the ability to understand and manage one's emotions and behaviour while interacting appropriately and positively with other people.

It includes the ability to:

- Recognize different emotions.
- Understand one's own feelings.
- Express emotions appropriately.
- Understand the feelings of others.
- Control or regulate emotional responses.
- Communicate needs and preferences.
- Establish and maintain relationships.
- Cooperate with others.
- Share and take turns.
- Follow social rules.
- Respond appropriately to different situations.
- Solve simple interpersonal problems.
- Seek help when necessary.
- Demonstrate increasing independence.

For children with intellectual disability, these skills may need to be explicitly taught rather than being expected to develop only through observation. Teaching should be functional, meaningful, repetitive, and connected with everyday situations.

3. Meaning of School Readiness

School readiness is the preparation required for a child to enter school and participate effectively in learning and social activities.

It includes several interconnected areas:

A. Physical Readiness

The child develops basic motor, health, and self-care abilities necessary for participation in classroom routines.

B. Cognitive Readiness

The child develops attention, memory, problem-solving, matching, classification, concept development, and other foundational learning abilities.

C. Language and Communication Readiness

The child develops the ability to understand and communicate information, needs, choices, and feelings.

D. Social Readiness

The child learns to interact with teachers and peers, share materials, cooperate, wait for turns, and participate in group activities.

E. Emotional Readiness

The child gradually learns to identify emotions, express feelings appropriately, manage frustration, and adapt to changes.

F. Adaptive and Functional Readiness

The child develops everyday skills such as managing belongings, following routines, eating, toileting, maintaining personal hygiene, and completing simple tasks independently.

Thus, social-emotional development is an important foundation of overall school readiness.

4. Importance of Social-Emotional Competence for Children with Intellectual Disability

Social-emotional competence has an important role in the educational and overall development of children with intellectual disability.

4.1 Helps in Classroom Adjustment

Entering a classroom involves many new experiences, such as meeting new people, following a timetable, sitting in a group, listening to instructions, and moving from one activity to another. Social-emotional skills help children adjust to these experiences.

4.2 Promotes Communication

Children need to communicate their needs, preferences, discomfort, emotions, and requests. Appropriate communication reduces frustration and supports participation.

4.3 Develops Positive Peer Relationships

Children who learn to greet, share, cooperate, take turns, and respond appropriately can participate more successfully in peer activities.

4.4 Supports Emotional Regulation

Children may experience frustration when they cannot complete a task or communicate what they want. Teaching emotional regulation strategies helps them respond more appropriately.

4.5 Promotes Independence

Social-emotional competence contributes to the child's ability to make choices, ask for help, solve simple problems, and complete daily activities with decreasing assistance.

4.6 Improves Participation

Children who feel secure and understand classroom expectations are more likely to participate in learning and group activities.

4.7 Develops Self-Confidence

Successful completion of small tasks and positive interactions can help children develop a sense of competence and confidence.

5. Objectives of the Journal Activity

The major objectives of promoting social-emotional competence among children with intellectual disability are:

1. To understand the importance of social-emotional development for school readiness.
2. To identify individual social-emotional strengths and needs.
3. To develop recognition of basic emotions.
4. To help children express feelings appropriately.
5. To improve functional communication.
6. To develop appropriate classroom behaviour.
7. To improve interaction with teachers and peers.
8. To encourage sharing and turn-taking.
9. To develop self-regulation skills.
10. To improve the ability to follow classroom routines.
11. To develop problem-solving abilities.
12. To promote independence in everyday classroom activities.
13. To improve participation in group activities.
14. To encourage positive peer relationships.
15. To develop confidence and a positive self-concept.
16. To facilitate successful participation in an inclusive classroom.

6. Major Components of Social-Emotional Competence

6.1 Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness means understanding one's own emotions and recognizing emotions expressed by others.

Children can be taught basic emotions such as:

- Happiness
- Sadness
- Anger
- Fear
- Surprise
- Excitement
- Frustration

Teachers can use photographs, drawings, emotion cards, stories, puppets, mirrors, and real-life situations.

For example, the teacher may show a picture of a smiling child and explain that the child is happy. The teacher can then ask the learner to identify a situation in which they feel happy.

6.2 Emotional Expression

Children need appropriate ways to express their feelings.

A child who cannot communicate "I am angry" may communicate frustration through inappropriate behaviour. Therefore, the child should be taught alternative communication methods.

Depending on individual needs, the child may use:

- Spoken words
- Gestures
- Facial expressions
- Sign language
- Picture cards
- Communication boards
- Visual symbols
- AAC systems

The goal is to ensure that the child has a meaningful way to communicate emotions and needs.

6.3 Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to manage emotional responses in different situations.

Children can be taught simple strategies such as:

- Taking slow breaths.
- Counting slowly.
- Asking for help.
- Taking a short break.
- Moving to a quiet area.
- Using a communication card.
- Talking to a trusted adult.
- Engaging in an appropriate calming activity.

These strategies should be taught when the child is calm and then practised in appropriate everyday situations.

7. Development of Social Skills

Social skills are essential for successful participation in an inclusive classroom.

7.1 Greeting Skills

Children can be taught how to greet teachers and classmates using words, gestures, or culturally appropriate forms of greeting.

7.2 Sharing Skills

Children can practise sharing toys, books, stationery, and other classroom materials.

7.3 Turn-Taking

Turn-taking can be taught through simple games. Children learn to wait while another child participates and then take their own turn.

7.4 Listening Skills

Children should be taught to attend to the speaker, listen to simple instructions, and respond appropriately.

7.5 Asking for Help

One of the most important functional social skills is learning how to ask for assistance.

The child can be taught phrases such as:

"Please help me."

or

"I don't understand."

7.6 Joining a Group

Children can be taught how to approach peers and join an ongoing activity appropriately.

Developing Communication Skills

Communication is closely connected with social-emotional development.

Teachers should provide opportunities for children to communicate throughout the school day rather than limiting communication practice to a separate language activity.

Children can practice communication during:

- Morning greetings.
- Attendance.
- Play.
- Classroom activities.
- Lunch.
- Outdoor activities.
- Storytelling.
- Group discussions.

- Transitions between activities.

Children who have limited speech should receive appropriate alternative communication support.

Developing Self-Regulation

Self-regulation can be developed gradually through structured activities.

Example:

If a child becomes frustrated because a preferred activity has ended, the teacher can:

1. Acknowledge the child's emotion.
2. Use a simple statement such as, "You are upset."
3. Show the visual schedule.
4. Explain what activity comes next.
5. Provide a suitable choice where possible.
6. Encourage the child to use an appropriate calming strategy.

Repeated practice helps the child understand how to respond to similar situations.

Developing Independence

Independence is an important part of school readiness.

Children can be encouraged to:

- Carry their school bag.
- Keep belongings in the appropriate place.
- Arrange books and materials.
- Wash hands.
- Eat independently according to their abilities.
- Use the toilet with appropriate support.
- Follow a classroom timetable.
- Select between appropriate choices.
- Complete simple classroom responsibilities.

The teacher should provide the **least amount of assistance necessary** and gradually reduce prompts as the child becomes more independent.

Developing Positive Peer Relationships

Inclusive education provides opportunities for children with and without disabilities to learn together.

Peer interaction can be promoted through:

- Pair activities.
- Cooperative games.
- Group art activities.
- Music and movement activities.
- Storytelling.
- Classroom responsibilities.
- Buddy activities.
- Group projects.

Peers should be guided to support inclusion respectfully rather than doing tasks for the child unnecessarily.

Teaching Social Problem-Solving

Children with intellectual disability may require explicit teaching to understand simple social problems.

For example:

Situation:

Two children want to use the same toy.

Possible solutions:

- Take turns.
- Use a timer.
- Choose another activity temporarily.
- Ask the teacher for assistance.

The teacher can demonstrate these solutions through role play and then allow the children to practice them.

Teaching Strategies

1. Modelling

The teacher demonstrates the desired behaviour.

For example, the teacher demonstrates how to greet someone and then encourages the child to imitate the behaviour.

2. Role Play

Role play allows children to practise real-life social situations in a safe environment.

3. Social Stories

Short, simple stories can explain what happens in particular social situations and what behaviour is expected.

4. Visual Supports

Visual schedules, emotion cards, picture sequences, and classroom rules can make information easier to understand.

5. Positive Reinforcement

Appropriate behaviour should be acknowledged through specific positive feedback.

For example:

"You waited for your turn. That was good waiting."

6. Prompting

Teachers may use verbal, visual, gestural, or other appropriate prompts when necessary.

7. Prompt Fading

As the child learns the skill, prompts should gradually be reduced to encourage independence.

8. Repetition

Repeated practice helps children consolidate newly learned skills.

9. Generalization

Skills should be practiced across different people, places, activities, and situations so that children can use them beyond the original teaching context.

Suggested Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Emotion Matching

Materials

- Emotion cards
- Pictures
- Chart paper

Procedure

The teacher displays pictures showing different emotional expressions. Children match the pictures with the corresponding emotion words or symbols.

Expected Outcome

The child develops the ability to identify basic emotions.

Activity 2: Emotion Mirror

The teacher demonstrates different facial expressions and asks children to imitate them while looking in a mirror.

Expected Outcome

The child develops awareness of facial expressions and emotional communication.

Activity 3: Turn-Taking Game

Children participate in a simple game where each child gets a turn.

Expected Outcome

The child develops waiting, sharing, cooperation, and turn-taking skills.

Activity 4: Asking for Help

The teacher creates simple classroom situations where assistance is needed and teaches the child to use an appropriate communication method.

Expected Outcome

The child learns to seek assistance appropriately.

Activity 5: Visual Daily Schedule

The teacher creates a visual schedule showing the sequence of classroom activities.

Expected Outcome

The child develops understanding of classroom routines and transitions.

Observation and Assessment

Assessment should focus on functional performance rather than only academic achievement.

The teacher can observe whether the child:

Skill	Emerging	Developing	Independent
Recognizes basic emotions	✓		
Expresses feelings		✓	
Greets others		✓	
Takes turns		✓	
Shares materials		✓	
Follows classroom routines			✓
Asks for help		✓	
Interacts with peers		✓	
Manages frustration	✓		
Completes simple tasks independently		✓	

Assessment should be individualized and based on observable behaviour. Progress should be monitored over time rather than judged from a single observation.

Role of the Special Educator

The special educator plays an important role in identifying social-emotional needs and designing appropriate interventions.

The special educator should:

1. Assess the child's current level of functioning.
2. Identify strengths and areas requiring support.
3. Develop individualized goals.
4. Select appropriate teaching strategies.
5. Adapt materials and activities.
6. Support communication development.
7. Guide classroom teachers.
8. Collaborate with parents.
9. Monitor progress.
10. Modify strategies according to the child's response.

Role of the General Teacher

The general classroom teacher is essential for creating an inclusive environment.

The teacher should:

- Maintain predictable routines.
- Use clear and simple instructions.
- Provide adequate response time.
- Encourage peer participation.
- Avoid unnecessary exclusion.
- Use visual supports.
- Recognize individual differences.
- Provide opportunities for meaningful participation.
- Reinforce appropriate behaviour.
- Coordinate with the special educator and family.

Role of Parents and Family

Parents are important partners in developing social-emotional competence.

Parents can provide opportunities at home for:

- Greeting family members.
- Expressing feelings.
- Making choices.
- Sharing.
- Waiting.
- Following simple routines.
- Completing household responsibilities.
- Communicating needs.
- Practicing self-care.

Consistency between home and school helps children use skills across different environments.

Collaboration with Other Professionals

Children with intellectual disability may benefit from coordinated support involving professionals such as:

- Special educators
- General educators
- Psychologists
- Speech and language professionals
- Occupational therapists
- Physiotherapists, when required
- Counselors
- Parents and caregivers

A multidisciplinary or collaborative approach helps ensure that educational, communication, behavioral, adaptive, and social-emotional needs are considered together.

Challenges in Promoting Social-Emotional Competence

Some common challenges may include:

Limited Communication

Children may have difficulty communicating their needs and emotions.

Difficulty Understanding Social Cues

Some children may require explicit teaching to understand facial expressions, gestures, and social expectations.

Emotional Regulation Difficulties

Frustration or changes in routine may sometimes lead to difficulty managing emotions.

Dependence on Adults

Children may become accustomed to receiving assistance and therefore require planned opportunities to develop independence.

Difficulty Generalizing Skills

A child may demonstrate a skill in one setting but have difficulty using it in another setting.

Limited Peer Opportunities

Some children may have fewer opportunities to participate in social activities.

Inconsistent Expectations

Different expectations between home and school can make learning and generalization more difficult.

These challenges can be addressed through individualized planning, consistent teaching, family collaboration, visual supports, repetition, positive reinforcement, and opportunities for practice.

Reflection

Through this journal activity, I understood that preparing children with intellectual disability for school involves much more than teaching reading, writing, and numeracy. Social-emotional competence is a fundamental component of school readiness because children need to communicate, interact, regulate their emotions, follow routines, and participate in classroom activities.

I learned that a child's behaviour should be understood in relation to the child's communication abilities, developmental level, environment, expectations, and support needs. Instead of simply correcting inappropriate behaviour, the teacher should identify what skill the child needs to learn and provide an appropriate alternative.

I also learned that visual supports, modeling, role play, social stories, structured routines, positive reinforcement, and repeated practice can make social-emotional learning more accessible to children with intellectual disability.

Another important learning was the significance of **individualization**. Every child has different abilities, preferences, communication methods, and learning needs. Therefore, the same strategy may not work equally well for every child. Teaching should be adapted according to the individual learner.

The activity also highlighted the importance of collaboration. Teachers, special educators, parents, peers, and other professionals should work together to provide consistent opportunities for the child to practice social-emotional skills.

Expected Learning Outcomes

After systematic intervention and regular practice, children may be able to:

1. Identify basic emotions.
2. Express feelings using appropriate communication.
3. Recognize emotions in others.
4. Follow simple classroom rules.
5. Follow daily classroom routines.

6. Wait for their turn.
7. Share materials.
8. Participate in group activities.
9. Interact appropriately with peers.
10. Ask for help.
11. Make simple choices.
12. Manage minor frustration with support.
13. Use appropriate calming strategies.
14. Complete selected classroom tasks independently.
15. Develop greater confidence in participating in school activities.

Recommendations

To promote social-emotional competence effectively, the following recommendations can be followed:

- Begin intervention at the child's current developmental level.
- Set small, measurable, functional goals.
- Use simple and clear language.
- Provide visual supports wherever appropriate.
- Use real-life situations for teaching.
- Provide frequent opportunities for practice.
- Encourage peer interaction.
- Give children sufficient response time.
- Reinforce appropriate behaviour positively.
- Gradually reduce adult assistance.
- Practise skills across different environments.
- Maintain communication between home and school.
- Review and modify individualized goals regularly.
- Respect the child's dignity, preferences, and communication style.
- Focus on participation and independence rather than perfection.

Conclusion

Promoting social-emotional competence is an essential component of school readiness among children with intellectual disability. Academic learning becomes more meaningful when children have the social, emotional, communication, adaptive, and behavioural skills necessary to participate in the classroom.

Through systematic instruction, structured routines, modelling, role play, visual supports, social stories, positive reinforcement, peer interaction, and repeated practice, children can develop important skills such as emotional recognition, emotional expression, self-regulation, communication, cooperation, turn-taking, problem-solving, and independence.

An inclusive classroom should provide every child with meaningful opportunities to participate according to their abilities. Children with intellectual disability should not merely be present in the classroom; they should be supported to **communicate, interact, learn, participate, and develop independence**.

Therefore, promoting social-emotional competence should be considered an integral part of individualized educational planning and inclusive classroom practice. A coordinated partnership among the child, family, teachers, special educators, peers, and other professionals can create a supportive environment that promotes successful school participation and holistic development.

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