It’s playtime in a Head Start program...

Two children chase a ball across the carpet. One stumbles and falls. The other child looks longingly at the ball for a moment before deciding to stop and help the hurt child back to his feet. This moment of sympathy and decision-making is an accomplishment that comes after years of growth, but how can we measure this success?

It's much harder to measure this kind of development, and too often researchers simply don't. "Soft" skills, also known as "non-cognitive" or "social-emotional" skills, are the range of the interpersonal abilities and character traits that are involved in all relationships on a daily basis. These skills include communication, decision-making, leadership, and teamwork, among many others. People depend on these soft skills to function positively and productively in every interaction and within any community, especially within the workforce. Soft skills serve individuals throughout their lifetimes, but the foundation of these skills is formed in early childhood. Fortunately, more and more research is being done on this topic, and long-term studies are showing social-emotional development in early childhood has meaningful, lasting effects in adulthood.

In the past, researchers studying Head Start have focused on measures of cognitive skills, like literacy and numeracy, and whether these gains last or fade over time. Similar to cognitive skills, soft skills begin to develop at an early age and are refined through practice. While some studies have found cognitive "fade out," that's not the pattern research shows for interventions that support soft skills.

Recently, Nobel laureate economist James Heckman commented on the so-called "fade out" of early childhood programs, writing, "The success of an early childhood program ultimately comes down to what is being evaluated, and too many evaluate the wrong things. Too many measure only half the child, focusing on IQ and cognitive gains at the expense of social and emotional skills that are often stronger determinants of adult success." He points to Head Start research as one example of how narrow research fails to capture the full impact of early childhood programs. Rather than fading, the benefits of cultivating soft skills at an early age persist and actually show incremental growth over time. (Click here to read a summary of his latest work!) As you'll read below, new findings about soft skills highlight the importance of focusing on all aspects of each child's development and help us understand Head Start's lasting effects.
Resources

The Hard Facts Behind Soft Skills
In this video, James Heckman highlights the positive effects of Head Start and Early Head Start programs, explaining why people need to develop soft skills and why his findings deserve attention from the public. To hear more from James Heckman, read the paper that preceded this video, Hard Evidence on Soft Skills, or listen to his interview on This American Life with Paul Tough, author of How Children Succeed.

The Fadeout Shibboleth
In her Huffington Post blog, NHSA Executive Director Yasmina Vinci describes the importance of Professor Heckman's recent rebuttal of the Head Start Impact Study and the reality that "long-term" should be focused on adult impacts, not the third grade.

Kernels of Learning
What are the best ways for schools to help children develop strong social-emotional skills? To find out, Stephanie Jones and her colleagues at Harvard Graduate School of Education are providing elementary schools with a range of free, flexible strategies for social-emotional learning (SEL), letting schools choose which strategies they want to use, and then testing their effectiveness, alone and in combination. Learn more and get engaged at the link above!

What is Social and Emotional Learning?
The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is a familiar resource to many Head Start practitioners, but these resources may help explain the concept of soft skills to new staff or parents! Visit CASEL for more on effective interventions, research, and policy recommendations.

Research

Emotional Intelligence in the First Five Years of Life
By Susanne A. Denham, PhD, Katherine Zinssser, MA, and Craig S. Bailey, BS

Three researchers at George Mason University examined the effect of early emotional competence (EC) on children’s early development. EC is a term used in developmental psychology for the ability to express emotions effectively and appropriately. In this article, they aim to demonstrate the importance of EC in child development.

EC has three components that are specifically developed in early childhood: expression (nonverbal displays of emotion, empathy towards others), knowledge (identifying and labelling one’s own emotions and the emotions of others) and regulation (understanding when/how to express emotions). These three components are interrelated; growth in one area affects and
requires growth in another. Denham, Zinsser, and Bailey argue that when combined, these three components “are related to young children’s success in relationships [and] early success in school” and, therefore should be supported in all school settings.

**Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences**  
**Behavioral and neural correlates of delay of gratification 40 years later**

Psychologist Walter Mischel has studied the use and power of a single soft skill: self-control. In his renowned study, The Marshmallow Test, preschoolers were offered a single marshmallow. Those who waited to eat the marshmallow were rewarded with another marshmallow. This simple test gauged preschoolers’ self-control. It also turned out to predict their success in later life.

Years later, Mischel and his team followed up with the original participants. On both computerized games and through brain scans, the research team found differences between people who had scored above and those who had scored below average. The fact that differences at age four persist so long into adulthood highlights the importance of focusing on these skills in early childhood, particularly for children who begin with weaker self-control.


**Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness**  
**By Damon Jones, PhD, Mark Greenberg, PhD, and Max Crowley, PhD**

In the 1990s, researchers conducting the Fast Track study asked kindergarten teachers in low income communities to rate their students’ social competence skills on an eight-point scale at the time that the children entered school. They collected ratings of 753 kindergartners and collected follow-up data over the next 19 years. In this article, the authors examine whether the early ratings were an accurate indicator of the participants’ adult lives.

There were significant associations between kindergarten scores and later education, employment, and mental health circumstances in adulthood. These findings are important because the researchers were able to relate early non-cognitive skills to the development of personal and public health factors that affect communities at large. The researchers believe that research and assessments similar to the methods that they used in their study could help to identify children who are in greater need for intervention because of weak social-emotional skills. They cite the Head Start REDI program for its demonstrated lasting effect on non-cognitive skill development.
How Does Your Kindergarten Classroom Affect Your Earnings?
By Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Nathaniel Hilger, et al.

A group of researchers analyzed the long-term effects of an experiment called Project Star, which gathered information on more than 11,000 students. To demonstrate relationships between kindergarten performance and later-life outcomes, the researchers gathered information from Project Star and compared it to circumstances in adulthood. They examined numerous factors, such as earnings at age 27 and likelihood of college attendance or home ownership and found high correlations. Further examination of experimental factors like class size and teacher experience led to varied findings. Notably, having a kindergarten teacher with more years of experience was correlated with eventual higher earnings of the students - which has implications for the importance of having a stable, strong Head Start workforce.

Most importantly, this study, similar to Heckman’s work, recognizes that gains in non-cognitive measures do not suffer from fade out. The researchers claim that the impacts of early childhood education on test scores fade in later childhood but reemerge in adulthood and suggest that this is a result of the lasting effects of non-cognitive skill development. The researchers hypothesize that the quality of early childhood education “may build non-cognitive skills that have returns in the labor market but do not improve performance on standardized tests.” They urge further research on the subject and conclude that their “results also complement the findings of studies on the long-term impacts of other early childhood interventions, such as the Perry and Abecedarian preschool demonstrations and the Head Start program, which also find lasting impacts on adult outcomes despite fade-out on test scores.” Taken together, these studies emphasize the critical need to support the development of soft skills in all children, and particularly the most vulnerable children served by Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

Discussion Questions

1. What does your program do that nurtures soft skills?

2. Do you have an assessment program in place to measure students’ soft skills? If so, what is it? If not, would this have value to your program or your parents?

3. How do you talk with parents to help them understand the importance of social-emotional development? How are their expectations similar or different from yours?