2, 4, or 6?

Grouping Children to Promote Social and Emotional Development

Nancy P. Jones

JEANNA, age 3, waves good-bye to her mother at the door of her half-day preschool. It is early October, and two classes of children are busy playing together outside during the 15-minute arrival period. Jeanna stands and watches for a long time, then slowly walks to the sandbox. Just as she begins to play beside Lori, a new friend, the teacher calls the children inside for class meeting time.

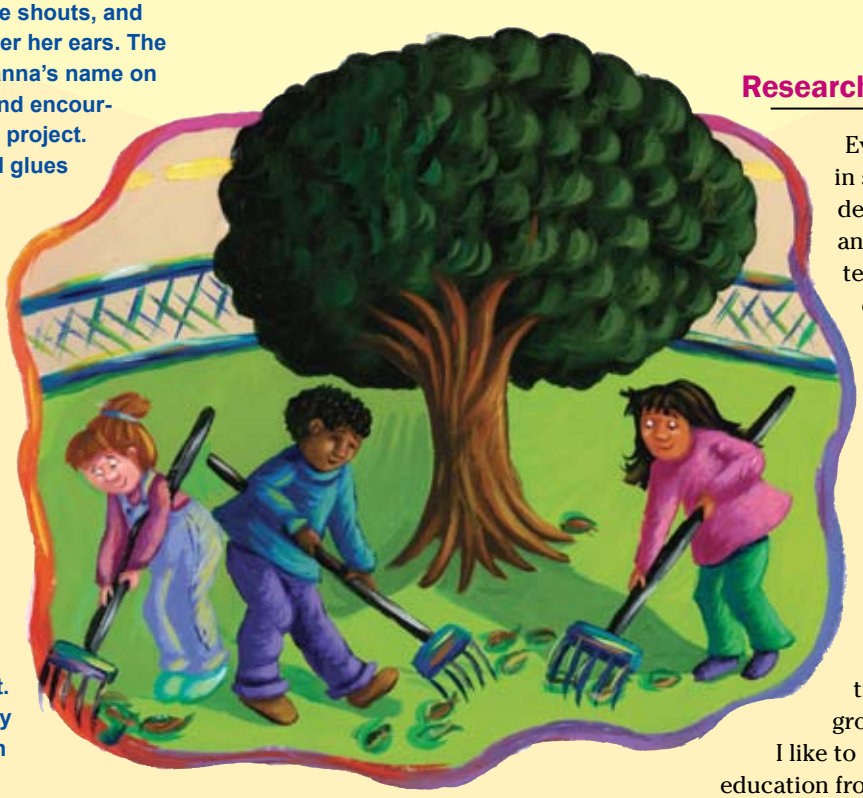
Jeanna tries to sit beside Lori, but the teacher directs her to an assigned spot. Jeanna listens to the book and sings the songs with her group. After group time, she tries to join her new friend in the play kitchen, but now it's her turn to do an art project.

A teacher sitting at the table asks Jeanna to choose a piece of paper. "No!" she shouts, and puts her hands over her ears. The teacher writes Jeanna's name on a piece of paper and encourages her to do the project. Jeanna colors and glues for a few minutes, then leaves to walk around the room, watching the other children play until it's time to line up to go outside.

When Jeanna's mother comes to pick her up, she asks the teacher how her daughter is doing. "Well," says the teacher, "she's pretty quiet. We wish she'd play with more children and choose more activities. She doesn't even want to do the art projects."

"How odd," says Jeanna's mom. "She's so talkative at home and has several friends in the neighborhood. And she loves to draw!" "Maybe she just needs a little more time to become comfortable here," responds the teacher.

Teachers of young children plan for activities and ways to encourage children toward social and emotional growth. We do this, hopefully, as well and as frequently as we plan for the daily cognitive, aesthetic, or physical activities. Yet social and emotional development is about feelings. We need to look at how the whole day *feels* to the child. There may be some unintentional side effects of everyday practices that teachers have not anticipated. Evaluating routines and classroom structures can help educators plan a day that supports children's social and emotional growth.



Research on feelings

Every school is unique, both in setting and in classroom demographics. Schedules and routines that work for teachers and children in one setting may not be as effective in another school. My approach is to evaluate how school procedures feel to a child and how they might help that child's social and emotional growth. We have seen at our school that the creative use of group size and configurations can encourage positive social and emotional growth.

I like to look at early childhood education from the viewpoint of emotions: feelings of safety, confidence, autonomy, social

Nancy P. Jones, MS, is director and founder of The Children's Farm School, a licensed school for young children near St. Paul, Minnesota. She has taught young children, their families, and teachers for 30 years. nancy@childrensfarm.org

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awareness, and social facility. The staff of our school has chosen these areas from their readings of psychology and of child development theorists and researchers. It may be helpful to see these emotions in a Maslow-like pyramid of stages. One builds on the next, with safety needs first, followed by increased confidence leading to autonomy (Maslow 1970).

Research in many areas of child psychology, from attachment theory to resilience studies, confirms the importance of feelings of safety, confidence, and autonomy. Erikson's description of stages of psychosocial development uses some slightly different words, such as *trust, autonomy,* and *initiative.* The drive for autonomy begins at age 1, and by age 3 the child's social goals become more important (Erikson 1963). Daniel Goleman's (1995) readable summary of research, *Emotional Intelligence,* convinces many teachers that emotional intelligence—EQ—is as important as IQ.

Dreikurs (1968) encourages us to think of the child's "perception," to understand and help children to grow emotionally and socially. The new field of social neuroscience informs us that people are "socially wired" in that they take cues from sounds, voices, and feelings of others around them, both caregivers and peers, even at very young ages. In *Social Intelligence,* Goleman (2006) shows how the neurons in the brain that detect social feelings in others are closely aligned to our own centers of emotion. Goleman uses the term *social awareness* for being aware of others' thoughts and feelings and for being empathetic. He defines *social facility* as the way individuals manage relationships, interact, and show caring. The terms seem useful for educators as we look at how children become both more aware and more skilled in dealing with others.

The creative use of group size and configurations can encourage positive social and emotional growth.

It's hard to separate social development from emotional growth. The perceptions and feelings of emotions are influenced by social experiences, and vice versa. How do the environment and people around a child contribute to his feelings of comfort, confidence, and competence? How are his innate social impulses signaling to him as he grows in social abilities and experiences? As a teacher, I have taken from research the understanding that if some children in a classroom are feeling upset, others are probably "catching" these emotions as well.

From the child's viewpoint

Consider the example of Jeanna from the opening vignette. A 3-year-old might easily feel intimidated by the number of children and activity level of two classes playing together. Perhaps Jeanna doesn't feel socially safe right from the moment she arrives at the program. Her confidence goes downhill when she tries to sit near her new friend during class meeting time but is directed to sit elsewhere. Just when she feels comfortable enough to want to play in the kitchen, she is redirected to an art activity. It isn't surprising that something she likes to do at home is not enjoyable under these circumstances.

Between the overwhelmingly busy free-play time and the structure of the lines and group times, Jeanna has little opportunity to gain confidence in her social skills. Hopefully, Jeanna's teachers will soon realize why she is

not "feeling confident." They could look at social group sizes and arrangements as ways to facilitate emotional and social learning, to help children feel competent and learn social skills.

Different group sizes and arrangements

Our half-day preschool, the Children's Farm School, is located on a small, former dairy farm not far from St. Paul. Children ages 3 to 5 attend for either two or three half-days per week. They care for animals, play outdoors, and enjoy frequent nature hikes, under the guidance of experienced early childhood teachers. Because of our location, our independence (we are a private nonprofit school), and our size (just one class at a time), we have been able to think outside the box. Below are some examples, from our school and others, of activities for different size groups and different group arrangements that promote social and emotional growth.

The errand—Social learning for one

When a teacher asks a child to perform a task, social growth can occur. Emotionally, the child feels, "The teacher relies on me to do this task. I am important." Socially, the child thinks, "People need me."

Here's an example from free-play time:

A teacher tunes her guitar to get ready for singing time. Noticing that Ryan is at loose ends, she turns and asks him to please get her music book from the shelf. On his way, he passes a few children playing with musical instruments. He takes the book to the teacher. "Thank you, Ryan. That was helpful to me," she says. He turns and moseys over to the children playing and joins in on the xylophone.

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Maybe the increased confidence Ryan gained on his errand gave him the boost of confidence he needed to join the other children.

Getting to know other children

One activity at our school involves squeezing oranges to show children where the juice they drink comes from. A teacher invites a child to a table in the center of the room. After the child has had a chance to squeeze an orange, the teacher asks her to call the next child: "Can you ask Jimmy to come and be next?" Children get to know one another this way.

After children know their classmates comes a new kind of errand—teaching! To make bird feeders from the used orange peels, the teacher asks one child to tie yarn to the half-orange peel and scoop in a mixture of seeds. The teacher then asks this child to show the next one how to do it. Setting up a table to encourage child interaction is easy. Adopting the mindset that reminds us "children can help each other" is harder. When children have questions or need instructions, we encourage them to ask another child for help before coming to a teacher.

Partner activities

These are things that two can do together. In the beginning of the year, we may select a partner for a child; later in the year, we invite children to pick their own. One such activity is making grilled cheese sandwiches. The teacher calls over two children at a time, with a plan for these two to play together after snack. Our teachers testify that almost without exception, a pair who butters bread slices side by side, then cooks and eats them together, will spend the rest of the day playing together!

Another school regularly plans "buddy reading," with two children taking turns reading or listening to a story. This supports literacy *and* social growth. At our school, sledding is a partner activity: the rule is that there needs to be at least two on a sled. Yes, this keeps the hill less crowded; but another benefit is the social learning that occurs—children ask friends to go downhill with them, negotiate who will carry the sled back up, wait for buddies, and negotiate themselves onto a new sled that may be faster. This is true social learning, just as important as the healthy exercise they're getting!

Our rule for teachers is, "Never do anything a child could do."

Teamwork

When you plan an activity that two or three children need to do together, it's not just about getting the job done, it's about structuring for social growth. Resist filling the water table before class starts. Have empty buckets ready, call children by name, and ask them to go together to get water.

Another team job is sweeping. Have brooms with dustpans nearby, and watch for the children who need some social time. Cleanup is one time when children can work together, but for social and emotional growth, why not try setup too? We intentionally position some of our activities in crates or boxes beside the play area. Children have to work together to bring out the blocks, the wood for the woodworking bench, and so on. Once they've worked together to set up, it's easy to go right on playing together. Teachers can facilitate particular groups by inviting specific children to come and help with a certain setup.

For larger groups, we use "big jobs" such as shoveling snow together or raking leaves. The social and emotional benefits are many when teachers routinely ask several children to pitch in at one time. Our rule for teachers is,

"Never do anything a child could do." Give children the chance to contribute, to help their group, to be needed.

Dividing the class in half can be an effective way to increase the emotional comfort level and encourage group feelings in many activities. Examples could be a more intimate story time, a less hectic beginning for a new creative play center, or a group project in which all can lend a hand. By planning groups in advance, teachers can facilitate more positive social interactions within the group. A timid child may play with more abandon when the group at free play is smaller. A child who typically stays in the block corner with his one and only playmate may come over to the art corner now that his buddy is outdoors. This procedure allows children to remain flexible in their friendships and confident in their abilities to choose. These planned groups can change frequently as teachers observe and understand the social-emotional needs of the children.

Different ways of arranging groups

In addition to using different size groups, teachers can offer children different spatial arrangements to increase the effectiveness of group time as well as promoting feelings of emotional and social well-being. It may help to think of groups in terms of triangles, circles, and lines. The most important thing is how an arrangement affects each child's sense of belonging in the group.

The triangle

At the beginning of the day, we have a brief meeting on the steps outside the door. Children may offer a word or two, as we always expect and encourage spontaneity with involved learners. Still, it is usually the teachers who lead the conversation. We may use words like, "Listen, so you can hear the plan" or "I'm going to talk now to tell you where we'll be going." The group shape at this time is the triangle, with the teacher at the point, all faces watching her. I think sitting side by side and facing the teacher can make it easier for children to listen and be part of the group.

The circle

When children are outside playing, how do teachers get them to come together to go inside? Here's where the circle comes in. Teachers walk around to groups or individuals to tell them, "We're all meeting at the side of the granary to get ready to go in." If the plan is to go for a walk, the teachers may mention another of our frequently used waiting places. A waiting place is a clearly understood spot, such as "under the big oak tree" or "next to the big gray rock." Soon children begin to gather, standing and talking together. After the children get accustomed to the meeting place, the teachers may suggest waiting in a circle. "Let's hold hands" may follow.

A circle is much friendlier than a line. People face each other, and children are less likely to compete to be first. As the children arrive at the circle, they're welcomed by name, and all can see who it is. Soon the teachers start to count, ". . . 16, 17. Mmm . . . who else is coming?" "Tommy!" the children shout. "Ah yes, here he is. We're all here. Let's go up to the schoolhouse."

The line—or not

We use the line very infrequently, and only if it makes sense. Examples would be waiting to climb over the gate one at a time or to use the bathroom if they're both occupied. On these occasions even the children see the sense of a line. "A line is a friendly way to wait," I like to say. But

really, this is only because it lets you see who's next. It's not friendly if you have to stand in it for long, or move in it. (Even adults don't like to stand in line.)

When it's time to move, we name the next waiting place: "See you at the steps." Then children can proceed at their own pace. When first teaching this technique, the waiting places need to be close together and the teacher may need to redirect wanderers. It seems to me that we spend less time doing this than we would take teaching children how to walk in a line. We allow them the autonomy of walking fast or slow, singly or in threes, as they proceed to the place. If we're outdoors, they may even want to run, and that's OK too!

No matter the shape, it's about belonging

Waiting together in an informal circle helps children understand that they are a part of a group. Regina Buono, one of our founding teachers, used to say, "Everyone is going in, and you're part of everyone." We try to use methods that will appeal to each child's need for competence, autonomy, and social awareness. We say a few simple words very often the first few weeks: "Look, everyone's getting together at the haystack" or "Look, your teacher called the children over. They're waiting for you." The great part of this procedure is that the children begin to understand going to a meeting place and to help us round up the others. Even the counting, which we do frequently, helps children to see that they're part of the big number, that they really do count!

Recently I observed this transition in our classroom.

Teacher Jenny stood near the music area, inviting children to join her as they finished cleanup. Soon, several were standing together, waiting in a casual circle. Then, everyone was there except Josh. The young 3-year-old was wandering about the room, past the puzzles, over to, maybe . . . a truck? I waited to hear the words Jenny would use to encourage Josh to look up and join the group. Then 4-year-old Blake walked over to Josh, took his hand, and said kindly, "We're all over here now!" Josh followed Blake eagerly, which might not have been the case had the teacher called him.

Circles are the typical shape for all large group activities at many programs. Circles are great for social interaction and feelings of belonging. However, when reading a book, we find a circle is not the best shape to be in. If you want all children to look at the book, it's important to make this easy for them. We ask the children to move so they can all see, facing the book instead of their friend across the way who makes funny faces at them.

Singing too can sometimes be more effective if it's done triangle style, like a choir facing the director, at least at the beginning of the year when we're building individual confidence in singing. This way the teacher can look into everyone's face and encourage them by nodding and smiling. Over time children will become less self-conscious. However, as we begin to add circle songs and movements and dance, it's back into the circle for many group "music times." The best arrangement always depends on the goal and the group.

Understanding children's feelings

Imagine yourself in a long line of cars at the end of a tiring workday. The traffic has been narrowed to one lane, the road is bumpy, and the signs are unclear. People are butting in line, and you're upset with yourself for choosing this road at this time. You feel helpless. You can feel your emotions taking over even as your rational adult self tries to stay calm.

An observer might say, "Well, road rage could be helped by requiring all adult drivers to take classes in anger management." Alternatively, we could try to add a detour, make signs more clear, and encourage other forms of transportation. In other words, fix the road, and polite, competent drivers will emerge once again.

It's the same with our classrooms. As children learn to negotiate the road of learning, let's guide and encourage, and also make sure we are not putting roadblocks in their path. Review your routines and social groupings to see how they conform with your curriculum goals. If needed, try some changes and think outside the box—or line!—to see what works best for your classroom climate and helps children to feel safe, confident, competent, and friendly throughout the day.

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