



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

Foundations for Social, Emotional and
Academic Competence: Poverty and
the Development of Effortful Control

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QUESTIONS FROM APRIL 23RD FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

Q: What research is being done, related to effortful control in children who are dual language learners?

A: The research shows that children who are bilingual or dual language learners actually have advantages in their effortful control. The task of knowing when to speak which language and to balance their cultural differences across settings seems to promote effortful control. What we don't know as much about are low-income dual language learners. So, given the impact of low income or poverty on the development of effortful control, it's unclear if there's such a clear benefit for those children.

Q: Can you expand on the role of culture and any related research findings?

A: Our knowledge of the role of culture is mainly regarding children who are not in high-risk settings. In those contexts, children learn to titrate their behavior, or match their behavior, emotions, or goals to the setting they're in. It seems that that task of knowing "I'm in my school setting," or "I'm with my peers," or "I'm with my family," leads to different levels of emotion or behaviors or thoughts. In total, that task seems to promote children's executive functioning or their effortful control. But not much of that research has been done with children living in poverty or in low income, or even where the children are the primary immigrant generation. More of that research needs to be done for us to understand how those two things balance out.

Q: When you walk into a preschool classroom, what kinds of things do you think teachers might be doing that could help support or foster a child's effortful control?

A: Preschool PATHS, Chicago Readiness Project, and Tools of the Mind are some of the programs that have been empirically validated and shown to promote effortful control in the classroom. These are also social and emotional confidence programs. There are some commonalities across these programs. Interestingly, the Chicago Readiness Project and Preschool PATHS programs both show that having really good classroom behavior management, having the tools for positive engagement of kids and really being able to provide the structure and guidance around behavior problems, definitely promote effortful control in children.

In addition, programs like Preschool PATHS include emotion coaching kinds of behaviors, things that teachers can do to have a warm, positive teacher-child relationship with children and help structure or guide or scaffold children through not just learning tasks but also emotional tasks. Those appear to be key. Tools of the Mind promotes executive function or effortful control also through structured play activities and exploratory play activities.

Q: Do you have any recommendations for specific parenting programs that focus on the scaffolding piece?

A: Yes. What's really interesting is there are many very good and empirically supported parenting programs. The interesting thing is that none of them (that we have been able to find) have actually tested their effects on the development of effortful control. So we actually don't have any evidence that the existing parenting programs promote effortful control. But we have good reason to think that they would: Two of the factors that most behavioral parenting programs target—building a warm parent-child relationship and building parents' skills at consistent behavioral management or limit-setting—both of those contributed to development of effortful control. None of the parenting programs that we know of explicitly helps parents with learning how to scaffold. The closest programs might be emotion-coaching programs. So we're currently working on integrating scaffolding skills into parenting programs, but they don't exist yet. But I'm going to guess that most behavioral parenting programs that support or promote warm parent-child relationship and appropriate and consistent limit-setting will contribute to children's developing effortful control.

Q: What is known about parents' effortful control levels, and the impact of this on their children?

A: The impact may be seen in at least two or three different ways. First, most people will wonder about a genetic relation. There will be some genetic component or inherited component about an individual's level of effortful control, so parents who are higher in self-regulation may be more likely to have kids who have higher self-regulation or effortful control. We think that just provides a window of the development of effortful control, a range where kids can develop, and that there is still room for parents and teachers to impact the development of effortful control.

We also think that high effortful control in parents makes them more likely to be able to engage in positive parenting behaviors or in effective parenting behaviors. Parents who have less self-regulation, who are going to be more emotional or disregulated, may be less likely to be able to implement effective parenting behaviors. Lastly, we think parents with higher self-regulation or effortful control may just model better effortful control in general, and kids may learn from that modeling.

Q: How do we ensure that we are providing for the priorities and needs of the parents while at the same time being very directive in what we want them to teach their children?

A: If we're focusing on parents' building a warm, positive parent-child relationship of strategies for consistent and appropriate management of behavior, and also if we could give parents the tools for scaffolding, I think the content of in what ways parents work with their kids, whatever they're doing with them—whether it's learning reading tasks or learning tasks or emotion tasks or creative tasks—they would bring those kinds of process skills to everything they do. I think the content of teaching, especially curriculum content around social-emotional learning and the development of effortful control, is really very effective in the classroom. We just don't really know if it's as effective to have parents teaching that kind of content.

Q: What does scaffolding look like, if you were looking at the interactions between either a parent or a teacher and, say, a 4-year-old child?

A: I think this example may be applicable to both parents or teachers. In our study, we are examining it in a number of contexts. But the example I'll give is we give children a very challenging Lego-building task. They have to build a Lego figure that's just a little above their head. We instruct parents that they can help the child with the task with their words, but without touching the Lego pieces. It's really interesting to watch that challenge for a parent to be able to know how much to say, how much direction to give, when to help give their child clues and tips, and when to back off and let them work on it. For some parents, it's very hard to even just keep their hands off the Lego pieces.

One part of it is to not be intrusive, not take over for the child or try to over-control the situation. Step back and let the child try things out for themselves. That's the autonomy granting. If they are struggling, if it looks like they're not going to get it after a few tries, provide just enough structure, just enough guidance, just enough of a hint that they can then try something new or different that might lead to success. So it's really matching the child's level of need and allowing them to struggle a little bit autonomously, but then providing the structure or the guidance to increase their likelihood of success. You can see that in emotional situations, in social situations between peers, in learning tasks. Scaffolding is a skill you can bring to almost any context in working with children.

Q: Can you recommend any screening instruments or assessments for effortful control? How would you think about a program or teachers that were interested in making sure that their program was impacting effortful control?

A: There are a whole range of assessments, and it really depends on how intensive of an assessment one wants to do. The most intensive assessment would look like a neuropsychological battery. There are tool kits that are being developed by other people, including the National Institute of Health tool kit on the measurement of executive function. So that would be the most intensive or objective measure.

Then there are approaches that would just scale back from that, picking one or two measurement devices that are core to your interests. There is a researcher named Megan McClelland. She's an associate professor at Oregon State University that I mentioned earlier who's developing a task called Head, Toes, Knees, Shoulders. It's a little bit like Simon Says and a little bit like Stroop, and it combines working memory and inhibitory control. She's developing this for classroom-based applications for assessing children's effortful control or executive function—she's in the process of testing that in classrooms right now.

Those objective measures are sometimes thought to be better than having a parent or teacher report on the child, because our reports can be colored by our interactions with children. But they're also instruments for teachers and parents to report on and talk about a child's attention focusing and shifting, and their inhibitory control. So there are a lot of ways to get at this, and it just depends on how much of an objective measure is desired or how intensive an assessment people would want.

Q: When during the day does it appear that children need to demonstrate effortful control? In other words, how much do we expect the preschooler to sustain effortful control versus finding functional moments during the day in which a parent or a teacher coaches or helps to scaffold?

A: That's another excellent question, because we know some of the factors that deplete effortful control are just physiological: how tired or hungry an individual is, for instance. This is true for both children and adults. There's some great research that shows that our self-regulation is like a muscle. The more we use it, the more tired it gets. But also, the more we use it over time, we're conditioning or building our self-regulation. There isn't necessarily a time of the day or number of times a day you do activities that builds effortful control. It's more just recognizing that children will be in different places, and they have better or worse effortful control depending on how tired or hungry they are, or how much attention they've had to deploy. If they've just gotten done with a pretty attention-demanding task, then they might need something that replenishes their effortful control, like physical activity, music, nutrition, or rest.

Balancing demanding tasks with less demanding tasks may be one thing to do. But also, as children are in structured school settings, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, teachers and parents will notice their kids can sustain more attention and more activity over time. They're conditioning or building the self-regulation muscle over time.

Q: I love that idea of the muscle. I know sometimes we even talk with preschoolers, and when they're doing a really great job waiting, we talk about their using their waiting muscles, so that's kind of fun to think about.

A: Oh, that's great. They are deploying a muscle and deploying energy when they're doing that. So we have to recognize when they've done that for some time, there has to be kind of a resting period or an opportunity to rebuild that or replenish that muscle.

Q: Do you think that withdrawn or shy children may also be affected by poor effortful control? We often seem to equate self-control with kind of acting-out behaviors, but do you also know something about children who might be more internalizers?

A: I'm so glad you raised that question, because there is some thought that internalizers represent really high levels of effortful control, maybe too high. They're described as over-controlled. Our research has shown the opposite, that being high in anxiety and depression or withdrawal behavior is actually associated with lower effortful control. I think what happens is when we're measuring effortful control with things like cognitive tasks, when children are very young, someone who's shy or withdrawn may act more slowly and get more items right on the test. But as children get older, those tests seem to be going in the opposite direction. That is, children who are more anxious or depressed or withdrawn tend to have lower effortful control.

If you think about what effortful control is, it's matching your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to the demands of the situation. And if a child is low in effortful control and they feel shy or anxious or withdrawn, they're unlikely to overcome their impulse to withdraw. They're unlikely to overcome the motivation to stay away from people. What we know decreases this anxiety over time is exposure to the very thing you're nervous about. A shy child who's afraid to engage people—but who can overcome that fear long enough to try it—is more likely to grow out of that shyness than a child who doesn't overcome the impulse to withdraw. The latter is likely to remain shy and anxious over time. Effortful control can really help the mental health in children even on that internalizing spectrum.

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