Your Successful Preschooler

Ten Skills Children Need to Become Confident and Socially Engaged
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More Praise for Your Successful Preschooler

“The authors offer a rich integration of information from current work in brain physiology as it directly applies to the developing young child. The book is very readable and will help guide parents toward healthy choices for their preschoolers. It also suggests how to accelerate vital links between learning and socialization, critical precursors to later academic and social success.”

—Bruce Hauptman, MD, child psychiatrist, Cambridge, Massachusetts

“Your Successful Preschooler covers an impressive range of important topics while still being highly readable. It will appeal to a broad range of readers because of the artful blending of examples of real children playing and talking that are interwoven with discussion of research. There is wisdom in the discussion of the value of play because dramatic play is critically important to many facets of development and the time for play is being steadily eroded.”

—David Dickinson, EdD; chair and professor of teaching and learning, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

“Your Successful Preschooler is a valuable resource for parents, teachers, childcare providers, or anyone working directly with young children. Drs. Densmore and Bauman simplify the complexities of the preschool child’s developing brain and provide concrete strategies for promoting the development of skills leading to young children’s social and emotional competence and future academic success.”

—Jacalyn Coyne, coordinator, Early Childhood Education and Pathway to Teaching Careers, Tunxis Community College

“Finally there is a book that helps parents understand the vital connection between deep engagement in play, and social and academic success. Parents who read this book will have the framework they need to navigate their children through the minefields that can derail their young children’s optimal development and fulfillment in these challenging times.”

—Diane E. Levin, PhD; professor of education, Wheelock College, Boston; author of So Sexy So Soon and Remote Control Childhood

“Bravo to Ann Densmore for recognizing that there are no issues children will confront in their lives that aren’t also experienced in play. This book should be read by every early childhood curriculum specialist who believes that learning to read in preschool is more important than learning how to navigate life.”

—Marilyn V. Walsh, head teacher, Apple Orchard School

“Parents and early childhood educators . . . will benefit from the invaluable knowledge contained in this book.”

—Kathy Wheeler, head teacher, Cambridge-Ellis School

“Dr. Ann Densmore brings to this work a wealth of professional experience and knowledge to guide parents and professionals through the language maze. In this book, Ann demonstrates skills that can make a real difference in the lives of children. Her approach is refreshingly direct
and thoughtful.”

—Nancy Fuller, executive director and founder, Community Therapeutic Day School
Your Successful Preschooler

Ten Skills Children Need to Become Confident and Socially Engaged

Ann Densmore, EdD
Margaret Bauman, MD
To my late mother, Margaret Mary Walsh Densmore, who gave me laughter and love and, most important, introduced me to the world of imagination and creativity.

Ann Densmore, EdD

To my devoted, hardworking staff at the LADDERS clinic, whose passion and devotion to the families and children we serve each day is without parallel. They are an exceptional group of people, and I am truly honored and grateful to have them as colleagues.

Margaret Bauman, MD
This book Contains Socialization tips and strategies that will help some children become more social and more successful in their preschool life. Even with dedicated parents, expert therapists who can engage children in play, and early intervention in preschool, some children may not necessarily make the kind of progress that we’d like to see. Some children may need attention to medical problems in order to be more receptive to the types of treatment and strategies described in this book. Parents and teachers must approach all of these strategies with caution and monitor the child’s progress every day. If the child doesn’t progress, perhaps another method might help the child move ahead in the socialization process. Sometimes a combination of several methods works better. Some children respond to play and to direct instruction at the same time or at different times during their preschool years. Sometimes a multifaceted approach is best. These strategies won’t help all preschoolers, but they will help many.

The names and certain characteristics of the children and the schools in this book, and other identifying details when necessary, have been changed to protect confidentiality.
I thank all of the Wonderful preschools, teachers, and administrators who inspired me to write this book. They have taught me the value of helping young children connect their emotions with language and the importance of play. They include the Children’s Meeting House, Concord, Massachusetts, and its director, Donna Cormier, and preschool teachers Janet Craig, Linda Fox, and Chris Sabella; the Leap School, Bedford, Massachusetts, and executive director Robin Shapiro; the Apple Orchard School; the Cambridge Ellis School and particularly, Jenifer Demko, the director; the Friends School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and particularly Beth Ann Boelter-Dimock; the Community Therapeutic Day School, Lexington, Massachusetts, especially Nancy Fuller, the director, Dr. Bruce Hauptman, psychiatrist, and Alan Shapiro, program director; the Infant Toddler Children’s Center, Acton, Massachusetts; the Preschool (PAWS) program in Wellesley, Massachusetts; the Tobin School, including director Mary Beth Claus Tobin, assistant head of school Lori Davis, and teachers Lindsey Nickerson, Meghan O’Hara, and Joseph Bartholomew; Eliot Pearson Children’s School, Medford, Massachusetts, particularly director Debbie Lee Keenan, assistant director Maryann O’Brien, and speech pathologist Rae Ann Somerville. I thank my associate, Lauren Alessi, for her collaboration and wonderful work with children for Child Talk, Lexington, Massachusetts.

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of neuropsychologist Tara O’Leary, who helped with the chapter on executive function and organization for preschoolers.

I thank Dr. Jerome Kagan, Harvard psychologist, who for many years helped me understand the temperament and the neurobiology of the developing child, and Dr. Torkel Klingberg, MD, for his conversation at the MIT conference on the concepts of brain plasticity and neurobiology of the brain, which provided key information for our book.

I thank a special group of colleagues and friends who provided creative ideas and support for this book: Phyl Solomon, Sandra Farrar, Susan Zorb, Arlene McNulty, Joanne Berger, Jacquie Kay, Mary Jeka, Ute Lutjens, Beth Dionne, Daniel Reinstein, Olivia von Ferstel, and Bridget Glenshaw. I thank my colleagues and friends Joan Axelrod, Jed Lehrich, Molly Smith, Steve Lessin, Roberta Hodson, Mary Coakley-Welch, Jenice Ely, Dr. Janice Ware, Sarah Measures, Karen Levine, Naomi Chedd, Lauren Weeks, Dr. James Magauran, MD, Ann Helmus, and many others. I thank the people who encouraged me to keep going: Sharon Hogan; Marjorie Gatchell; Gunnel Schmidt; Diane and Peter Gray; Carol Burt; Rachel Bulbulian; Claudia Kronenberg; Judy Raleigh; Merrily Bishop; Rebecca Kahler-Reis and her children, Jakob, Anna, and Jennifer; Jean Ayers; Betsy Janzen; Sara Serisky; Regina Pacor; Brit Iliff; Elaine Duggan; and Laura Simonian.

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At last, I thank all the many families and children I have known over the past thirty years who were devoted and dedicated to being a part of the team. With the families’ hard work and loving support, these children made progress, and I am deeply grateful for the privilege of working in my clinical practice with all of them.

Ann Densmore, EdD

I thank my late husband, Dr. Roger A. Bauman, and our three children, all of whom have been involved and supportive of my work in autism. I am deeply grateful to my longtime friend, mentor, and research colleague, Dr. Thomas L. Kemper, without whose help and influence my research career would have been impossible. I also thank the many families who, over more than forty years, have entrusted the care of their children to me and to our clinical practice. Many of us have laughed and cried together, and it has been a privilege to have been a part of their lives.

Margaret Bauman, MD
Over the past thirty years, we have diagnosed and treated thousands of children with all kinds of learning issues. Many of these children come to us with a combination of medical, emotional, and developmental problems, yet their parents are also asking us to evaluate their children’s social performance. Specifically, parents want to know if learning and socialization are linked.

We see parents who agonize over whether their child will make friends. They want to know if social skills can be taught, like reading or math, or if these skills will develop naturally. As one parent said, “My preschooler can talk, take turns, and be polite, but other children don’t gravitate to him. He’s a loner. I just don’t know why.”

Every day we see preschoolers who can play, run, and talk on playgrounds and in classrooms. Yet these same children don’t know how to connect with others and make friends, even though their teachers describe them as typical children. It is very clear to us that some children retreat from others and don’t make social connections, while others are more gregarious and seem to be the ones who become leaders and well-liked children.

As a speech and language pathologist (Ann) and a pediatric neurologist (Margaret), we know that all parents want to make sure that their children are happy, well adjusted, and social. Parents also want to know exactly how their children should behave, how they are supposed to relate with their friends for each of the preschool developmental milestones, and what their role should be to ensure that their children succeed in all aspects of life. They’re looking for ways to counter the violence children are exposed to in the media; they want their children to be just as happy when they are unplugged from video games and television as they are when they are connected.

Most important, parents want to make sure that their children are liked by others. Parents and teachers constantly ask us, “How can I get my preschooler to fully engage with the others in the classroom?” or, “How will my child develop strong relationships and lifelong friendships?”

At the same time, parents and teachers are increasingly concerned about real academic pressures: today’s children are asked to do more in school and to do it earlier than previous generations. Although most parents know that there needs to be time for play and socialization during the preschool day, most are aware of federally mandated testing requirements through No Child Left Behind or specific testing required for admission into the best public and private schools. These pressures can drive parents and teachers to value academics before play, even though studies have consistently shown that this is not the best model for preschool education.

These are some of the issues that we address in this book. Our goal is to give parents and teachers the tools they need to help preschool children prepare for academic achievement and become more socially connected. As parents, you can help your child become successful. And just as important, your child needs to be in a preschool environment that focuses on play that facilitates social interactions and relationships.

We are aware of the stress today’s parents face. Parents are under enormous pressure to be the “best,” and new and often conflicting research is readily available to them. We also know that some families have fewer resources than others or may not be geographically located near formal
preschool programs. Nevertheless, the suggestions in this book can work in any preschool or day care environment where the teachers are open to making changes, and they can be implemented right at home too.

SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGHS THAT AFFECT PARENTING

A 2008 joint study from the University of British Columbia and the Sackler Institute at Weill/Cornell Medical College has shown that the brain is more plastic, or able to change, than previously thought. These scientists state, “One major contribution of neuroscience to understanding cognitive development has been in demonstrating that biology is not destiny—that is, demonstrating the remarkable role of experience in shaping the mind, the brain, and body.”1 In another 2008 study, reported by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child through Harvard University, investigators found that experiences specifically gained during this sensitive period of the preschool years play an exceptionally important role in the capacities of the brain.2 This research suggests that the developing brain is most plastic between the ages of three and five years, a sensitive period that coincides with the preschool years. The brain architecture is build over a succession of what are referred to as “sensitive periods” that develop more circuits and more complex skills. Early experience is important for the probability of positive outcomes. Thus, we know that the period of time when parents and teachers can affect the greatest change is during the preschool years. At this critical juncture, children are best able to learn how to socialize, learn moral behavior, and develop empathy, altruism, cooperation, negotiation, and even leadership.

Our own experience, coupled with these studies, points to preschool as one of the most formative periods in child development. A 2007 report from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics documented that 57 percent of American children ages three to five attended center-based programs: day care, Head Start programs, preschools, and early prekindergarten programs. These children attended preschool for at least one year before kindergarten.3 Studies have previously shown that these children have a distinct academic advantage in both language and math skills over those who don’t attend preschool, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Alphabet songs, puzzles, and math games help preschoolers mature into higher-achieving children as long as their preschool day also includes several hours of the most important aspect: socialization. Researchers agree that because there appears to be a clear link between play and brain development during this critically important time frame, children who have attended preschool appear to achieve higher academic scores than those who have not attended preschool and may become more emotionally well adjusted by the third grade.

PRESCHOOL ISN’T ENOUGH

Facilitating peer interaction is a challenging job because each child is unique. Each teacher or parent also has a unique history and culture that often dictates how each relates to his or her children at school and at home. What each child needs stems from his or her own cultural values,
As parents and teachers, we need to see these differences and cultivate social experiences that respect each child. Some families value storytelling at the dinner table, and others may value a child’s adherence to quieter rules. Some parents may want their child to be home-schooled, other parents want their child to learn from the surrounding world, and still others want them to learn from texts or more adult-directed experiences. Some children have hunger, loneliness, and pain in their environment. And some experience trauma or deprivation.

As teachers, we need to respect and comprehend the many differences in family conversations and social cues—facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. We know there are many differences in family belief systems and values that affect each child’s life. We need to see each child in the preschool setting as unique and give them respect and a sense of community. As teachers we also need to understand our own family histories, how we talk to our own children, and how our parents talked to us. Our own culture influences how we perceive the children we are trying to help.

We believe that children are born with certain abilities but that they can learn from their environment through such experiences as play and social interactions with peers. A helpful preschool, a day care program, or a home school setting is where a child can learn to be social, build confidence, develop a sense of moral character, learn how to negotiate with peers, and succeed in social situations with peers.

Although it may not always be possible for teachers to closely observe children with peers during choice time or at recess in preschool, our experience suggests that much of the time, some children may not be really interacting with each other and may need help to do so.

Children may look as if they are engaged, but they may be just following each other. The play yard is filled with children climbing, running, jumping, and screaming. A few preschoolers are climbing together. Another group is digging in the sandbox, but only a few of the children are looking at each other. Still another group may be playing tag without rules, racing around the playground without a clear purpose. When the preschoolers move inside into the classroom, the norm is “structure” or “free play,” with some guidance by teachers. During center time, children have some chance to talk to each other and share special objects. In some preschools, center time is an opportunity for teaching social pragmatic skills, that is, turn taking, how to enter and exit a conversation, how to stay on a topic, and how to make comments to others. During this time, some teachers teach such skills as an example of the importance of showing empathy for others, how to become a kind person, and how to respect others.

Despite their best efforts, however, it’s not possible for teachers to facilitate language and social interaction for every class member who needs help. Many preschool teachers want extra guidance so that they can encourage more social conversation skills in their classroom. Even the best preschool teachers, those who allow long periods of play during the day, still ask for advice on how to teach better skills for negotiation and problem solving. The best preschool teachers know that the most important part of the preschool experience is the social component: interaction with peers and acceptance by them, which is directly associated with higher levels of functioning throughout school and in later life.

The fact is that the most socially successful children do better throughout every developmental
stage for these reasons:

- They tend to be well rounded and emotionally stable.
- They easily make the transition to elementary school with confidence due to their increased self-esteem and ability to communicate their own ideas.
- They are more likely to achieve in most academic subjects. Children who are connected to peers socially in preschool are better achievers and read faster by the third grade.
- They create connections to both teachers and other students. These relationships are essential to becoming a friendly, content child and a socially adjusted adult.

THE TEN SKILLS THAT ENCOURAGE SOCIA LLY SUCCESSFUL PRESCHOOLERS

We have found that the most successful preschoolers acquire ten unique skills. Children with these skills often attract and maintain friendships, which allow them to socialize throughout the day. These children are:

1. **Likable.** They can build long-term, meaningful friendships. They know how to play with more than one child, positively reinforce their friends when they succeed, recognize and acknowledge a peer who is sad or disappointed, and use a play date to make a real connection.

2. **Achieving.** They achieve complex language skills, which will lead to later academic achievement. They can use appropriate vocabulary, experience success as well as defeat with grace, and adjust their focus if an agenda changes.

3. **Happy.** They are optimistic and confident, and they have a sense of self. They understand the perspective of other children; interpret their peer’s gestures, facial expressions, and body language; and speak and listen attentively to others.

4. **Of strong moral character.** They have the ability to form attachments to the ideals of a larger community rather than themselves, for the good of others. They understand what is right or wrong during difficult play situations, which will increase their awareness of when they need adults to help.

5. **Resilient.** They can tap into the most effective coping skills that allow them to handle disappointment, manage a crisis, and seek positive attributes in play situations. These children can bounce back easily and regroup when they face stressful situations.

6. **Flexible.** They can allow others to change the agenda of play and develop their own ideas within an interaction. They can listen to the perspective of others and achieve compromise when necessary. When sudden problems arise in play, they can find options and redirect themselves and others to help the situation. They accept surprises and adjust easily to change.

7. **Organized.** They can use logical reasoning and organizational skills, which will foster academic achievement and a sense of capability. These children can develop stories in play. They assign roles and follow a sequence of actions as they play. They respect others’ culture and agree to follow other ways of constructing stories as long as they are formed with clear ideas.

8. **Leaders.** They can assume a leadership role within a group with both humility and positive
self-esteem without acting like bullies. They can ask a group of peers to play a game and help each child engage. They have a sense of humor when things don’t work out and are the first to forgive a friend who makes a mistake or doesn’t follow the rules of the game. They keep the group cohesive and enthusiastic about their social connection and play.

9. **Socially engaged.** They can show enthusiasm by being present, alert, and aware when engaging with their friends. They pay attention to others, know what their friends are thinking, and are able to show their friends that they are being heard. They give the group a sense of cohesiveness and a feeling of belonging.

10. **Passionate about learning.** They have a noticeable sense of curiosity and creativity and a wide variety of interests. These children are interested in the world around them and can convey their knowledge to others. They love to investigate, construct projects, and motivate others to do the same.

Many, if not most, children fall somewhere on the continuum of mastering these skills, and over time, they achieve some level of competency. Children who have more challenges—those with learning issues, behavioral issues, or developmental issues—may have a harder time acquiring these skills. The main goal of parenting should be never to give up trying to help your child.

In order to assist their development, we have created specific strategies for teaching children how to be more social. Through this process, we have found that these same strategies can help children acquire these skills. And we predict that this early intervention in mastering these skills during a period of rapid brain development will help many children become more successful.

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

The program that we have created defines a useful and practical means of talking to children that will help them become socially engaged for life. We aim to give parents, teachers, and other caregivers the specific strategies they need to provide the most effective experiences that can affect the developing brain. By reading this book, they will be able to help young children develop the effective ways to engage their friends, making social interactions easier and more meaningful.

Chapter One offers an introduction to the brain and how it acquires new information and learned behaviors. Then we provide helpful tips for reviewing and defining a preschool that is in line with our philosophy and show how to incorporate useful strategies into any preschool setting, home school, or day care situation.

Each of the following chapters discusses the ten traits that successful children share and strategies for developing these traits. Each of the strategies is geared to the achievement of specific results. For example, being a likable child requires building friendships. Being an advanced child requires understanding complex language.

These core strategies have been developed based on Dr. Ann Densmore’s theory of narrative play. Both of us have been collaborating for over twenty years about children with disabilities. Dr. Margaret Bauman evaluates and diagnoses children who would benefit from treatment using a variety of techniques discussed in this book. Narrative play incorporates speech therapy with peer relationships in natural settings. For years Ann has helped children engage socially by combining
language, play, and narrative or storytelling. This developmental play-based approach to socialization can help your child learn how to engage with other children, as well as with adults, at a meaningful level.

Each strategy is supported by dialogue from actual preschoolers who have learned to engage and sustain friendships, increasing their own social skills. According to current research, preschoolers who engage in socialization will gain self-confidence by using language for negotiating and increase their academic achievement in kindergarten and the primary grades.

Many parents who have followed this program have told us that they were able to see their child in a totally different light and were able to deepen their own relationships with them. They were thrilled to experience their child’s joy in forming friendships that can last a lifetime.
CHAPTER ONE

Children Can Learn to Be Successful

As adults, we strive to learn something new every day. Yet the youngest children can accomplish the same task almost without trying. In no other time of life can we literally see learning occur right before our eyes. We’re transfixed as an infant suddenly crawls at seven months and then can walk just a few months later. A child’s babbling at six months may become expressive speech in just a year.

This chapter introduces the basic developmental signs of a typical child in moving from toddlerhood toward preschool years, including the changes of the developing brain. Parents and teachers need to have some baseline reference to help them observe how their child is developing and learning to become more successful as a person.

- By *success*, we don’t mean that your child is destined to graduate from Harvard Law School at the age of sixteen. Instead, we mean that a child is resourceful, confident, and happy and gives to the wider community. It’s a long road toward this success, but it begins early in a child’s life.

Babies, even those who still can’t walk or talk, begin to engage in pretend play as young as eighteen months. A toddler can pretend to comb a doll’s hair with a pencil or wave a stick as if it were a magic wand, giggling as she plays to show that she knows she’s pretending. Research shows that two and three year olds giggle when they pretend play so we won’t take them too seriously. Soon even the youngest preschoolers are turning objects like blocks into fire engines as they shove them along the floor. They create simple stories and can describe their worlds—both the real one and the fantasy world of play.

We know that children who can understand and see the perspective of others and interpret what other children are thinking will become more successful. And we can see this development happen in just the same way as we witness our children learning to walk and talk. First they explore their options, and later they become more aware of others. When this occurs, children can begin to create real relationships within their family.

As children are exposed to empathy, moral behavior, and control of their emotions and behavior, they are learning the skills that will allow them to become increasingly social. They practice and learn as they pretend play with their friends and mimic the actions of their parents and teachers. Even as preschoolers, children begin to view the world and report back to us exactly what they see, how they feel, and what they think. As they master each of these developmental milestones and face new social experiences, the structure and function of their brain is altered, becoming more integrated and more efficient.
Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) is a technology that allows us to observe the complexity of the brain activity as it handles and processes different types of information. Research utilizing fMRI studies is dramatically changing the way we understand the brain. For example, we now know that when we’re writing or talking, the brain is engaged and “lights up” in several areas, where we previously thought that only one distinct area of the brain was involved in that particular activity. At the present [End of Sample]