Caring about Caring:
What Adults Can Do to Promote Young Children's Prosocial Skills

Marilou Hyson and Jackie L. Taylor

> "I worry about how the children treat one another every day. There are those moments when they struggle to be kind, and when they make fun of someone else."
>
> —Amanda, Pre-K Teacher

> "[Some children] have a tough time fitting in. Children who . . . physically lash out at other children, hit, punch. I have a large number [of children] who need help."
>
> —Rachel, Teacher

> "I feel . . . responsible for the quality of the interactions children experience. Sometimes children make fun of one another or bully each other."
>
> —Maria, Pre-K Teacher

AS REFLECTED IN THESE TEACHERS' COMMENTS, many early childhood educators are seriously concerned about bullying and aggression. Children's negative social behaviors also dominate the media and are the focus of much current research. Recent studies result in some progress in understanding the early origins and harmful effects of physical and relational aggression (Crick et al. 2006) and designing interventions to reduce its occurrence (Ostrov et al. 2009). It is equally important to nurture positive alternatives—children's *prosocial* feelings and behavior toward others.

Nancy Eisenberg, a leading researcher in the area of prosocial behavior, and her coauthors describe prosocial behavior as "voluntary behavior intended to benefit another" (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006, 646). This article draws extensively on their excellent literature review. The second author of this article (Taylor) conducted a survey and face-to-face interviews about prosocial development with early childhood teachers and directors in the spring of 2010. In the interviews, early childhood educators used terms such as *empathy, sharing, compassion, helping others, compromise, respect for others,* and *hugging other children* to describe prosocial behavior in young children (Taylor 2010). Prosocial behaviors might also include cooperating, including others in play, giving a compliment, and comforting a child who is upset (Honig 2004; Ramaswamy & Bergin 2009).

One word, *voluntary,* is especially important in Eisenberg's definition of prosocial behavior. If children are forced to "be nice and share" or told to "say you're sorry," then their behavior is not voluntary and cannot be considered prosocial. The research we share in this article highlights many ways that children's prosocial development can be actively promoted without being forced.

A preview

With Eisenberg's definition in mind, we summarize the research on young children's prosocial development and behavior. In doing so, we emphasize studies and literature reviews published within the past 10 years, especially those with implications for how early childhood educators might intentionally

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promote prosocial skills among preschool and kindergarten children.

It is important to know that much of the prosocial research has been done with parents and children at home, not with teachers and children in center-based or family child care settings. Also, most of the research is correlational: thus it cannot show definitively that certain experiences *cause* children to be more prosocial or that children's prosocial skills *cause* them to develop other desirable competencies. However, we are confident of our conclusions here because in this review we have relied not just on the results of small individual studies but also on evidence from a number of different types of studies.

> A recent study of Head Start children showed that those who scored higher on assessments of prosocial competence were, later on in the year, assessed to be among the most "cognitively ready" for school.

The scope of this short review is intentionally limited. We will be able to touch only briefly on research on prosocial development in infants and toddlers, in children with disabilities, and among culturally diverse children within and beyond the United States. Many of the general references listed at the end of this article will help readers pursue these and other topics in more depth.

Key questions

Our discussion of the research is organized around three questions: (1) Why is prosocial development so important—that is, why care about caring? (2) How do children develop prosocial skills—that is, are prosocial children born or made? and (3) What can early childhood professionals do to promote children's prosocial development?

Why care about caring?

Early childhood educators want to help children become kind, generous, and empathic. Starting early is important, because early prosocial tendencies often continue into later years. Children who are more prosocial when they begin school continue to be more prosocial in the primary grades (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). And this pattern seems to continue: one study that followed children from preschool into early

adulthood found that children who were observed to spontaneously share toys more often than their classmates showed more prosocial skill 19 years later (Eisenberg et al. 1999).

Children's prosocial competence also predicts their strengths in other areas, correlating with academic as well as social-emotional skills. For example, a recent study of Head Start children showed that those who scored higher on assessments of prosocial competence were, later on in the year, assessed to be among the most "cognitively ready" for school (Bierman et al. 2009). Another study showed that first-graders with low-income backgrounds who were more helpful to others had greater literacy skills in third grade (Miles & Stipek 2006). So there are many compelling reasons to care about caring.

Prosocial children: Are they born or made?

> "I have students who are 'natural' helpers. These are the students who clean up without being asked, help a friend clean up spilled milk, or give someone a toy without having to be asked. I am not sure why some children have a predisposition toward prosocial behavior and some seem to struggle."
>
> —Amanda, Pre-K Teacher

Although research has identified early signs of empathy and prosocial behavior among infants and toddlers, it takes a sensitive observer to notice these signs (see, for example, Quann & Wien 2006; McMullen et al. 2009; Gillespie & Hunter 2010). By their first birthday, many children show what Hoffman (2000) calls "empathic distress"—for example, crying when they see other children cry, or looking sad when caregivers look unhappy. Around 14 months, many toddlers spontaneously try to help if someone seems unhappy. Usually this involves the toddler doing something that would be comforting to the toddler, not necessarily what would comfort the other person. By 18 months, toddlers will even help a stranger in a research

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What can early childhood professionals do to promote children's prosocial development?

Adults are the most important features of young children's environments (see Pianta 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). In various ways, adults may encourage or discourage children's development of prosocial behavior. Across the grades, including preschool, classroom observations reveal how seldom children behave in prosocial ways and how seldom teachers explicitly encourage, reinforce, or discuss expectations for prosocial behavior (Spinrad & Eisenberg 2009). Even in some infant classrooms, observers may find active discouragement of prosocial interactions and relationships, as seen in one center (McMullen 2010) where staff always "taught" babies one by one, in isolation from others, and where staff moved a baby away from another when the two had contentedly been playing side by side.

Basing our discussion on relevant research, in the next section of the review we describe five areas in which early childhood professionals' actions can promote prosocial development.

Promoting children's prosocial development

Educators can promote prosocial development by building secure relationships, creating classroom community, modeling prosocial behavior, establishing prosocial expectations, and supporting families.

1. Building secure relationships

When teachers intentionally create secure relationships in early childhood programs, children benefit socially, emotionally, and academically (Howes & Ritchie 2002; Hamre & Pianta 2001; Palermo et al. 2007). Now we have

> "Some [children] have much more prosocial families [who are nurturing], and in a classroom they are more caring with peers."
>
> —Jermayn, Pre-K Teacher

laboratory, picking up an object if they notice that the adult seems unable to do so (Warneken & Tomasello 2006).

During the preschool years, more signs of empathy, helpfulness, and concern for others usually appear, and preschoolers become more aware of and intentional about their prosocial actions (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). School-age children often behave more prosocially than they did as preschoolers, in part because of their growing ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings and to regulate their own distress and impulsive behavior.

Most children begin early in life to act in ways that show empathy and prosocial tendencies. Yet it is obvious that—at any age—some children are more helpful, concerned, and caring than others. Are such children simply born more prosocial than their peers?

Just as there are genetic influences on children's general sociability and empathy (Knafo et al. 2008), there may also be genetic influences on prosocial tendencies, as seen in studies of identical twins later raised in different families (Knafo & Plomin 2006). However, researchers agree that these influences are small in comparison with the strong influence of children's environments, especially when it comes to children's actual behaviors, not just their general feelings of empathy. The researchers' findings contrast with the common belief—reflected by a number of teachers interviewed in Taylor's study and shown in this article—that differences in prosocial tendencies are essentially genetic or "natural."

evidence of the specific benefit of these relationships for children's prosocial development.

Secure relationships begin at home but extend into early childhood program settings as well. Differences in children's attachment histories (that is, whether they have previously developed secure or insecure relationships within their family) may help explain why some children enter an early childhood program with more well-developed prosocial skills than others. There is good evidence that young children who have warm relationships and secure attachments to their parents are more likely to be empathic and prosocial (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe 1989; Zhou et al. 2002; Campbell & von Stauffenberg 2008), probably because children are more likely to notice and copy the behavior of adults to whom they feel a close connection.

Turning from parents to teachers, whether or not a child's parental attachment has been secure, when teachers have warm, secure relationships with individual children, those children show more empathy and behave more positively toward others in the classroom and as reported by mothers (Pianta & Stuhlman 2004; Spinrad & Eisenberg 2009).

Teachers can nurture warm relationships in many small ways: responding sensitively to children's everyday needs, interacting in emotionally supportive ways, listening and conversing with sincere attention. Sharing these small moments has been called "banking time" (Driscoll & Pianta 2010)—that is, investing brief, positive moments with individual children, especially those who are often overlooked or viewed negatively (Hyson 2004, 2008).

2. Creating a classroom community

A core value of developmentally appropriate practice is to create a caring community of learners (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). Just as warm teacher-child relationships predict children's prosocial skills, being a member of a close-knit learning community—in a classroom or family child care home—can also support children's prosocial development.

Humans are social creatures, and even subtle changes in children's social environments can make them more aware of their connection to the group. In a recent experimental study (Over & Carpenter 2009), 18-month-olds were much more likely to spontaneously help a stranger in need after they were shown

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photographs of people together with others than after viewing photographs of individuals alone. Teachers can help create this affiliative atmosphere in many ways, such as posting class photographs, talking about group projects, and reminding children that they are all members of a caring group of friends.

Young children are actually more likely to use prosocial behavior when they are with other children than with adults (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). Teachers can tap into this tendency by creating many opportunities for children to work and play together. As they do so, however, teachers need to scaffold children's emerging prosocial skills; for example, teachers can give a child words with which to offer help to a classmate or suggest ways that two children can extend their pretend play in a mutually interesting direction.

Friendships are especially important as contexts for prosocial development. Children who have more "supportive friendships" in preschool have been found to be more prosocial (Sebanc

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2003). Wanting to play with their friends, young children may feel motivated to behave prosocially, because other children may not want to play with them unless they cooperate, help solve problems, and engage in flexible give-and-take.

There is some evidence that children who spend time with very prosocial classmates are likely to become more prosocial themselves; over time, they come to adopt the more helpful, caring norms of their peers (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). However, it is often the case that the less-prosocial children tend to spend their time with one another, thus having fewer opportunities to learn from more-prosocial classmates.

These findings should encourage teachers to identify everyday opportunities and plan strategies that will give children time, space, and support to become fully engaged members of their learning communities (see in particular Whitin 2001; Honig 2004; Jones 2005; Copple & Bredekamp 2009). As part of this effort, teachers can intentionally counteract the separation of less-prosocial children from the more prosocial by pairing and mixing up children for various activities (Bodrova & Leong 2007), creating more ways for children to experience others' prosocial and empathic behavior.

3. Modeling prosocial behavior

"I have found that most of my students respond very well to the use of puppet activities. The use of a puppet makes a huge difference. If they can talk through the problem with a puppet, they build up to talking it over with a peer."

—Amanda, Pre-K Teacher

Adults' demonstration or modeling has been found to influence children's prosocial development in study after study (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). Many of these studies have used laboratory experiments to examine influences on children's generosity. For example, when children observe an adult behave in a generous way, they are very likely to imitate that behavior, not

just immediately but even after considerable time has passed—as summarized by Eisenberg and Fabes (1998).

If an adult is warm, nurturing, and responsive, children are especially likely to notice and imitate aspects of their behavior, including prosocial actions (Hyson 2004). Thus, teachers who have those characteristics have a good chance of prompting children's empathic, helpful, caring, generous behavior by demonstrating that behavior themselves. Opportunities present themselves every day: helping a child put on a new jacket that buttons differently; expressing loving concern when a child's parent has been ill; and offering some materials that will help a child finish a project. To highlight this modeling, teachers can comment on what they are doing and why ("Oh, Carla, I see that you're having trouble with that. How about if I help you? It makes me happy to help children out when they need it."). Teachers can also promote these skills by modeling kindness and consideration in their interactions with colleagues and families.

4. Establishing prosocial expectations

"I think how I address prosocial behavior plays a large role in how the children interact with one another and what they learn in the classroom."

—Amanda, Pre-K Teacher

Important as adult relationships and modeling are, it is not enough to set up a nurturing environment for prosocial development, or even just to be prosocial ourselves. Children are more likely to develop empathy and prosocial skills if adults make it clear that they *expect* (but do not *force*) them to do so. Polite requests for children to be helpful and generous are effective and often necessary prompts for prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). Sometimes adults may think that they should be more subtle, but children— especially toddlers—may need clear prompts or cues. For example, in a laboratory study, Brownell, Svetlova, and Nichols (2009) found that 25-month-old children would share voluntarily, but to elicit this prosocial behavior the adult

needed to offer an explicit cue about what she liked or wanted ("I like crackers!" "I need a cracker!"). Note that this differs from an adult either remaining silent and waiting for the child to think of sharing the snack or, at the other extreme, telling the child that he or she must share the crackers.

> **It is important to point out that there are large cultural differences and that adults in some cultures emphasize prosocial skills far more than others.**

Researchers find that when parents are very clear about the kind of behavior they expect—and what they do *not* wish to see—children indeed become more helpful and caring than when expectations are less clearly defined (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006). An especially strong influence on prosocial development is adults' use of the discipline strategy *induction*—pointing out the reasons for rules or the effect of one's behavior on others. For example, Marta's mother explains how her daughter's friend Sarah is feeling because of Marta's hurtful comments. As summarized by Eisenberg and her coauthors (2006), research indicates that induction strategies are most likely to be effective when they are presented at the child's developmental level, clear and consistent, and delivered by someone with whom the child has a close, warm relationship—which could potentially include both parents and teachers.

Adults differ a great deal in how clearly they communicate prosocial expectations to children. Although a full discussion of cross-cultural research on prosocial development is not our intention in this article, it is important to point out that there are large cultural differences and that adults in some cultures emphasize prosocial skills far more than others (Levine, Norenzayan, & Philbrick 2001; Eisenberg, Fabes, &

Spinrad 2006; Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier, & Mayer 2007). In many cultures, including most non-Western cultures, children are often expected to do real work that helps the family, care for brothers and sisters, share even their beloved possessions with younger children, and generally be more cooperative members of the community. Teachers may notice differences between children's behaviors that emerge from families' culturally influenced prosocial expectations and may see these behaviors reflected in children's pretend play and interactions with peers. When a class includes children who are growing up within such cultures, other children may have a chance to learn more cooperative and caring ways of relating to their peers.
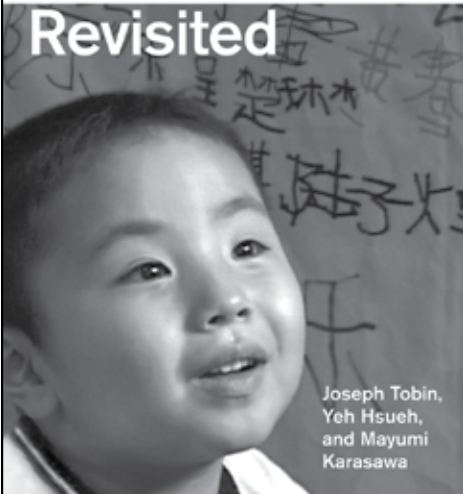
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5. Supporting families

In prosocial development, as in other aspects of children's lives, families are the first and most influential teachers. There are several areas where early childhood educators might support families in this role. Whatever their culture, many families do interact with their children in ways that are likely to encourage children to become more empathic, generous, and helpful. However, other families may, without realizing it, under-

mine prosocial development by relying on practices that are unlikely to produce these desired results. For example, many parents believe that children will become more prosocial if they are given treats or other rewards for "being nice." Research indicates just the opposite, however (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad 2006; Warneken & Tomasello 2008). Although such rewards may produce short-term results, they actually backfire

in the long term. Children may become *less* generous when the expected rewards stop coming their way.

While respecting families' home practices, early childhood professionals might share information about the risk of rewarding children for sharing or being kind, and help families think of other ways to encourage these prosocial behaviors. For example, research indicates that if parents help children learn to cope with their own negative feelings, their children become better able to tune in to and help others who are distressed. Further, when parents talk with children about their own feelings, listen to their children when they are upset, and "coach" their children about how to express emotions, their children are likely to develop more prosocial skills (see, for example, Garner, Dunsmore, & Southam-Gerrow 2008). Research points out a few cautions about these conversations, however. First, one study (Trommsdorff 1995) suggests that when a mother becomes *overly* involved in discussing her child's distress or other highly emotional issues, the child may become so focused on her or his own negative feelings that it is difficult to regulate those emotions in order to empathize with others. And second, there is evidence that children often try to avoid conversations about their prior experiences with negative emotions, especially if mothers do not use an accepting, supportive, child-centered approach during the conversation (Waters et al. 2010).

Besides helping families have productive conversations, early childhood educators can also support families during other situations that can create risks for children's prosocial development. For example, data from a study of families living in poverty (Ryan, Kalil, & Leininger 2009) shows that those mothers who had less of a social safety net (that is, fewer available sources of social support) had children who were less

prosocial, with more behavior problems, perhaps because of their mothers' stress levels. Through family and community outreach, early childhood programs may be in a good position to help families strengthen their social networks, thereby benefiting many aspects of parents' lives, including but not limited to their ability to strengthen their children's prosocial skills.

Families' child care challenges may also affect their children's prosocial development. Using data from the NICHD (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development,

Morrissey (2009) suggests that when families use multiple child care arrangements, their children, especially younger toddlers, show less prosocial behavior than those who are in a more stable child care setting. It is possible that multiple caregiving arrangements lessen opportunities for children to develop the secure caregiver relationships that predict prosocial skill development. Although early childhood educators usually cannot control the factors that lead to individual families' child care decisions, they can advocate for policies and resources that help families access consistent, high-quality child care arrangements that will support prosocial skills as well as other competencies.

Conclusion—Taking action for caring

The research reviewed in this article clearly demonstrates that the prosocial domain is a critical component of chil-

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Examples of Curricula and Other Resources for Supporting Prosocial Development

A Blueprint for the Promotion of Prosocial Behavior in Early Childhood [including the Bingham Early Childhood Prosocial Curriculum], by Elda Chesebrough, Patricia King, Thomas P. Gullotta, and Martin Bloom. 2005. New York: Springer.

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). **http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu**

Children's Kindness Network. **www.ckn-usa.org** (See especially Moozie's Kindness Curriculum, 2004.)

The Devereux Early Childhood Initiative. **www.devereux.org/site/PageServer?pagename=deci_index**

The Incredible Years: Parents, Teachers, and Children Social Skills Training series. **www.incredibleyears.com**

Second Step: Social-Emotional Skills for Early Learning, by Committee for Children. 2011. **www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/early-learning**

Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child, by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P. Goldstein. 1990. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

"Teaching Parents to Teach Children to be Prosocial," by Linda K. Elksnin and Nick Elksnin. 2000. **www.ldonline.org/article/Teaching_Parents_to_Teach_Their_Children_to_be_Prosocial**

Teaching Tolerance, a project publication of the Southern Poverty Law Center. **www.tolerance.org**

dren's development. The research shows how specific early experiences may help children gain essential prosocial skills. We hope the evidence will encourage teachers, researchers, and policy makers to be at least as intentional in this domain as they are in early literacy and mathematics. The suggestions that follow, the examples of prosocial curricula and resources, and the checklist of recommended teaching practices may jump-start this process.

Program-level actions. A good starting point for an intentional approach to prosocial development is to examine and enhance the overall quality of the early childhood program. Children who attend higher quality family child care and center-based programs seem to show more empathy and positive behavior toward other children (Spinrad & Eisenberg 2009; Romano, Kohen, & Findlay 2010). This is not surprising, as many of the features associated with overall program quality are also likely to support the development of prosocial skills. Such features include professionally prepared staff who are grounded in early childhood development and pedagogy; a program environment that encourages children to work and play together; discipline strategies that encourage collaborative problem-solving; an emphasis on teachers' knowledge of holistic child development; and supports for close adult-child and peer relationships.

As suggested earlier, teachers can reexamine everyday routines and activities to see if the prosocial potential of the activities is being fully tapped (see "Research into Action"). In addition, teachers can implement various specialized curricula and other resources (see "Examples of Curricula and Other Resources for Supporting Prosocial Development") that target positive social behavior and character education. A few cautions, however: such materials should be used to strengthen—but not replace—an across-the-board emphasis on prosocial development. And when deciding to adopt any curriculum or other resource, early childhood professionals should think about whether the resource is consistent with the research on prosocial development as well as whether there is evidence that the resource has been

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Research into Action:
A Checklist of Everyday Strategies to Promote Prosocial Development

Early childhood program staff can intentionally implement these and other research-based strategies, using them in ways that respond to children's culture and other individual characteristics. Many of the references in this article may help guide implementation.

☐ Is each child—especially any child who may be struggling with behavioral challenges—involved in frequent, friendly, individual interactions with teachers? (Even a few minutes a day help build a secure relationship, the foundation for prosocial competence.)

☐ Are classroom jobs used to build prosocial skills and a sense of community? (Invite a few children to pitch in and help open boxes that have been delivered, or ask a child for help in rearranging the books so that others can find them more easily.)

☐ Does the physical environment promote cooperation and community participation? (Set up interest areas and materials to invite small groups to work together, share supplies, and interact.)

☐ Are photos displayed that show children working and playing together, and that show children as members of their class and of their families?

☐ Do adults model prosocial behavior by showing empathy and kindness to coworkers as well as to children by using respectful language such as *thank you* and *please*?

☐ Do teachers specifically, sincerely acknowledge children's prosocial behavior? ("I see that the two of you have started cleaning up the art area together. That's real cooperation!")

☐ Do teachers explain the reasons behind rules and help children understand the effects of their behavior on others? This kind of inductive discipline seems to encourage children to be kind and helpful.

☐ Do classroom rules include positive, prosocial expectations—the *dos,* not just the *don'ts*? ("We are kind to our friends.")

☐ Do teachers scaffold children's efforts to be helpful and kind by giving them words to use or offering suggestions about what to do? ("Polly, I think Adriana looks worried about getting a turn with that doll. What if you say 'It's OK, you will have it in just a few minutes'? Or maybe you can say, 'Adriana, how about if we play together?'")

☐ Do teachers prompt children to help them learn prosocial behavior? ("Mary, would you show our new friend where to put the blocks when everyone is finished playing with them?")

☐ Do families receive practical, culturally relevant tips during home visits or at parent meetings to encourage prosocial behavior at home? (Avoid rewards for niceness. Instead, set clear expectations and foster warm relationships.)

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effective with children whose cultural or developmental characteristics are similar to those with whom the resource will be used.

Research actions. Thought-provoking as it is, the existing prosocial research is still more focused on looking at children at home with their families rather than in early childhood program environments. In the future, researchers must focus their work more closely on early childhood settings. Such research should analyze the effects of variations in classroom practices, teacher-child interactions, and teacher professional development on children's prosocial outcomes. Researchers also need to look more closely at early childhood programs' ability to support prosocial behavior among *all* children—children who differ in culture and language as well as those children who have disabilities and developmental delays (Dunlap & Powell 2009).

Policy actions. Finally, policy makers must focus attention on education standards and public policies that make

prosocial competence a priority for early childhood education programs. Prosocial behavior is as important as, and also contributes to, outcomes in other developmental domains. Social and emotional outcomes are not always well represented in state early learning guidelines (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow 2006), and specific prosocial indicators are even less evident. As states revise or expand these guidelines, early childhood professionals can point policy makers toward research that supports

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a more prominent role for prosocial outcomes.

With these actions by educators, researchers, and policy makers, the early childhood field will demonstrate with a clear, unified voice that it "cares about caring."

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