

# Social-Emotional Skills in Early Childhood Support Workforce Success

## Why business executives want employees who play well with others



### Richard Anderson

Executive Chairman of the Board,  
CEO (Retired), Delta Air Lines

Here's the thing with air travel: Most passengers fly on planes built by the same two companies and on routes served by multiple airlines. But if you think I'm about to say the Delta difference comes down to the person behind the ticket counter, that's only partly right.

The success of our entire business, in fact, depends on a complex chain of interactions among everyone from the people who fly our planes, to the people who service them, to the people who ensure you're belted into your seat. That's because social and emotional skills are vital for keeping our entire enterprise in the air.

This means being able to see yourself in someone else's shoes. And understanding that your success on the job depends on your ability to work well within the Delta team. And being able to listen and collaborate to solve the problems that make or break the success of our company.

If you're wondering what this has to do with early learning, you can turn to Art Rolnick, former Senior Vice President for the Federal

Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, who has examined studies that demonstrate quality early education's impact. A study of children from one program found an 18 percent return on the public investment in that program, based on lower rates of special education, lower involvement in crime, and the value of having more people in the workforce.

But that's only part of the picture. Research highlighted in this ReadyNation report shows the social-emotional skills developed in early learning settings are a top priority for the nation's employers.

For these reasons and more, expanding participation in quality preschool was among our highest priorities on the Executive Committee of the Greater Twin Cities United Way in Minneapolis and St. Paul. It's also why I continue to champion its value as a member of ReadyNation. Simply put, there's no better investment for our future workforce than quality early education right now.

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Social-emotional skills are known by various names, including soft skills, character skills and employability skills. We use these terms interchangeably in this brief, referring to the ability to, for example, manage emotions and impulses, take initiative, be flexible, and work well in teams.

In a new national survey by Zogby Analytics, 92 percent of a nationally representative sample of 300 business decision-makers agreed that children's experiences in the first five years of life affect the development of their social-emotional skills later in life.<sup>1</sup> In a Wall Street Journal survey of 900 business executives, 93 percent said that character skills were as important or more important than technical skills, and 89 percent reported difficulties in finding employees with these abilities.<sup>2</sup> That's bad for profits - in fact, more

than half of the businesses Zogby surveyed are spending more to recruit applicants with these abilities than in the past.

## The foundation of adult character skills is built in early childhood

Research shows character skills formed in early childhood impact the workforce. For example, a 20-year study examined the character skills of 800 kindergarteners and followed them until age 25.<sup>3</sup> For every one-point increase in children's character skills scores in kindergarten, they were:

- **54 percent more likely** to earn a high school diploma;
- **Twice as likely** to attain a college degree; and
- **46 percent more likely** to have a full-time job at age 25.

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman analyzed data from the classic Perry Preschool program. He found that improvements in character skills, particularly related to motivation and behavior problems, explained a large proportion of the positive adult outcomes found (e.g., higher educational attainment, reduced crime, less risky health behavior, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

## Many young children face substantial challenges with long-term effects

Data from the National Survey of Children's Health show that many young American children experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): 24 percent of children age five or younger have experienced one ACE and 12.5 percent have experienced two or more.<sup>5</sup> Research shows people who have experienced multiple ACEs are at

 The pipeline to a successful workforce depends on children of all backgrounds having the academic and social-emotional skills that are vital to this economy.



**Jack Brennan**  
Chairman Emeritus, Former CEO,  
and Senior Advisor, Vanguard

higher risk of a variety of negative adult outcomes, including physical and mental health problems and issues that affect the workforce (e.g., lower educational attainment, increased social isolation and anger, unemployment).<sup>6</sup>

Children are resilient, yet by age 5, too many kids are already on a negative life course that can significantly hinder their later success in the workforce. High-quality early childhood education provides a safe, nurturing environment for these kids.

## Negative Experiences Impact Children in Every State

Percentage and number of children, ages 0-5, who have experienced at least two adverse childhood events



Source: National Survey of Children's Health



**Children in U.S. have experienced at least 2 adverse childhood events**

**These very serious negative life events include:**

- Poverty
- Parental divorce /separation
- Parental death
- Parent served time in jail
- Witness to domestic violence
- Victim of neighborhood violence
- Lived with someone mentally ill or suicidal
- Lived with someone with alcohol or drug problem
- Treated unfairly due to race/ethnicity

**Business leaders understand the vital link between experiences in early childhood and the later character skills that their employees will need. As one respondent to the Zogby Analytics survey commented, “Character is built in the first years of life and it is absolutely necessary for life success.”**

**Simply put, providing high-quality early care and education to young children—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—is the first step toward building a strong workforce that can compete in the 21st century.**



**To learn more about social-emotional skills and how they support workforce success visit [www.StrongNation.org/SEL](http://www.StrongNation.org/SEL)**

1 <http://www.strongnation.org/SEL>

2 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/employers-find-soft-skills-like-critical-thinking-in-short-supply-1472549400>

3 <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630>

4 [https://economics.sas.upenn.edu/sites/economics.sas.upenn.edu/files/u21/0\\_PerryFactorPaper\\_AER\\_2012-09-07\\_sjs.pdf](https://economics.sas.upenn.edu/sites/economics.sas.upenn.edu/files/u21/0_PerryFactorPaper_AER_2012-09-07_sjs.pdf)

5 <http://www.childhealthdata.org/browse/survey/results?q=2614&g=448&r=1>

6 [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/ace\\_brfss.html](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/ace_brfss.html)

### **ReadyNation: Business. Kids. Workforce.**

Business executives building a skilled workforce by promoting solutions that prepare children to succeed in education, work, and life.

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

1212 New York Avenue NW / Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20005 / 202.464.7005



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