

## 64 - Teacher Mental Wellness

### The Role of Supporting Social-Emotional Development in Young Children

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**Purpose:** The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. [www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast](http://www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast)

**Audience:** Current Active & Enrolled Students

#### Episode Transcript

**Host Dr. Shipley:** Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

**Host Dr. Heald:** Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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Today, we are so thrilled to have Donna Toole with us. Donna has been working in early education for 33 years in a variety of roles, including teaching children ages birth to five, mentoring and training.

She was the executive director of a nonprofit childcare program. She's the social emotional support specialist for her, and her area Head Start. She coaches teachers on best practices in supporting the social and emotional development of young children.

Phew, that's a whole lot to say. We are so excited that you are here with us today, Donna. Thank you for coming.

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** Yes, Donna, we are so excited because today you're here to talk about teachers' mental health and wellness.

And that is such a hot topic right now. Every time I jump on a social media platform, teachers are talking about their mental health, how they're burnt out, what they can do and sharing ideas. So, I'm so glad that you're here to talk about that.

And you're also going to talk about how it helps children's social and emotional needs. So, let's get started with teachers' wellness first, and why it's important for students and their social emotional learning development. So, what do we need to know? What do our listeners need to know?

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Well, social-emotional learning is the foundation of the classroom experience.

You know, children come into the classroom with lots of feelings and emotions. And a lot of times, that is what is the hardest for teachers to react and respond to. You know, I think about the teaching experience where we hear teachers say they're overwhelmed, and they're getting burned out, and they're tired.

And a lot of times, it's because they're engaging with the hardest parts of the social experience for children. So, what we really want to do is create classroom communities, that are built around children feeling safe and engaged with their peers and their teachers. And that's a lot to ask of a young child, right? So, what happens is we have teachers who are co-regulating with them, and they are teaching skills with really big emotions.

But sometimes what's happening is they're forgetting to practice that skill themselves. And they're coming to the table, you know, burned out and exhausted. And when we do that, we're working with the teacher who is less likely to help that child co-regulate in positive ways.

So that's why really looking at the holistic, the teacher's experience and making sure that they have a healthy positive mindset, is critical in helping children develop that as well.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** So, I totally agree with you. I taught pre-K in kindergarten.

And so, I remember at lunch being exhausted. I remember after school being exhausted. I was so tired all the time.

And I just thought that it was because it's exactly what you just said, right? And so, when I started building those classroom communities, which I am so glad you brought up, it helped me so much. So can we, I want to just talk about that for a second, because I think that's hard for teachers. If you've never set up a classroom community with jobs and things for students to do and responsibilities, it's like, where do you start? And I've presented on it before but tell us about a classroom community that you've seen or that you've set up.

And can you give us just a few short, simple things that teachers can do right now, even in the fall to help?

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Yeah, so absolutely. So, I think that one really important piece is teaching children the art of listening to each other. So, you know, in the teaching role, we expect children to hear us, hear what we say.

You know, we're often, you know, hopefully in play-based learning settings where children have a lot of time to experience the classroom on their own. But we also expect them to, you know, hear us and move through transitions. And transitions are really hard for teachers and children.

But I think that a link that is really missing with the classroom community piece, is teaching children to respond, and hear, and show empathy towards their peers. And so, you know, when we move through in the moment teaching of these skills, a lot of time it's conflict resolution. You know, children are possibly arguing over space or materials.

And when we create a community, it's when we have the children develop skills where they're responding to each other. And one thing that I do every day, is welcome children to the classroom and ask them to welcome each other as well. If someone's not there, we acknowledge that, and we say, oh, you know, this child's not here today.

We hope that they're well. We hope they're not feeling, you know, sick. We hope they're here tomorrow.

And that lets the kids know, hey, they're probably thinking about me if I'm not at school too. And that builds a community and a sense of trust and friendship with each other.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** I love that, Donna.

And I did the same thing, but I didn't do the end part that you just talked about, talking about the child who has gone. So that is a great idea. Thank you so much for sharing that.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker:** And as I hear, you know, both of you contribute to this conversation, there's such a focus on our children and our students. And that's so incredibly important, in creating these learning communities. On the flip side, we always want to make sure as the educator in the situation, or the educators looking into the situation, that we're okay too, right? So, there's some terminology, mental wellness and self-care that are very often in these conversations.

And I'm just wondering if you can just talk about the difference between these two.

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Right. So, I look at mental wellness as the framework for how we approach and respond to the world around us.

And, you know, when we look at teacher mental wellness, teachers are caregivers. And I think this goes across the board for all caregiving roles, you know, nursing and anyone really in education and support roles. You know, you are typically running with passion and dedication to the work.

And it's easy to forget, to take that time to take care of yourself. So, I look at the mental wellness piece is looking at yourself holistically. So, your physical health, your emotional health, your financial health, intellectual, spiritual, you know, your occupational, are you happy with what you're doing? There's a lot of different areas of our life that can kind of ping at us and pull us into a sense of overwhelm.

So, you know, the mental wellness piece is that whole framework. The self-care piece comes in with the tools that we access to support all of those different areas, of our holistic self. And that holistic teacher self is what enters the classroom every day.

That's what creates an experience for children to have you as a trusted, supportive anchor, you know, that they want to come to. And if you're worried about your financial health, or your physical health, and you're not taking care of that, you know, that's when that overwhelm begins to creep in.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** I love it.

And we have to think about families too. So, we need to teach the families about what we're doing in our classroom, because I think a lot of them, it's the same thing when their children come home at night, and they've been at work all day, their mental wellness, we've got to think about that.

So how do we teach families to do this? How can we help them? Where do you start in that process?

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Well, one thing that I do is with teachers and with families, is teach the art of reflection, right? So, what is the biggest obstacle that you find preventing you from having that healthy mindset or pulling you into a feeling of overwhelm? And once you identify that one piece, then start, you know, that's when you look at the self-care piece of how you can find tools to access that.

So, I think with families, it's really providing resources to say, hey, I hear you. Parenting is hard. And, you know, you might possibly come in in need of something.

And how can I support you? What are the tools that I can also give you as the caregiver of your child? And I really think that creating a resource area, that is varied really helps families. So, you know, I work sometimes with families who need just different resources like medical direction, or social emotional learning. I mean, I work with a lot of families who experience, you know, emotional dysregulation sometimes with their children at home.

And we can provide the same tools, the visual tools and things like that, that we use in the classroom to the families as well.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** 100 percent. Thank you so much for that.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker:** The tools are crucial. I mean, I think you touched upon it, but I want to know for educators, a large population of our listeners are educators in the classroom. And what would you tell them would be the very first step, in beginning their teaching of social emotional learning in a developmentally appropriate way?

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Well, creating the classroom community, that's the biggest thing.

So really letting the social-emotional learning aspect of your classroom be what you teach. So, hear me out. A lot of teachers think I'm not teaching if I'm not teaching something directly, like a concept or a skill.

However, one of the obstacles sometimes for teachers is that they're dealing with, you know, emotions all throughout the day. And so, teaching in the moment, making social emotional learning the language of your classroom and the

foundation of everything that you're teaching, will allow you to have children participating and actively engaged in play-based learning throughout the classroom.

So, I would say that, really making that sort of the foundation of everything, creating classrooms where children learn to respect and listen to each other, where you value their emotions, and you let them have that emotion.

So, if someone's dysregulated and having a tantrum, create a space where that is OK for them to do it. And you're there for them. And as soon as it's done, you say, I'm here for you.

I have a hug for you. And now let's move on, and letting kids know how they feel is OK. That will help them engage and respond in their classroom environment, and with each other in more positive ways.

Just hearing you talk about that makes me want to be a part of that community as an adult, as a grown up, as an educator. And I can only imagine how students are feeling. We often wind down our podcasts with three takeaways for our listeners.

What would those be from you?

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Well, so I've thought about this a lot over the pandemic. You know, I think that teacher wellness has to be priority. Our personal wellness has to come first.

And when I hear teachers tell me that they're overwhelmed with multiple parts of their life, and that it's impacting their teaching, I say, let's find one thing. So, the first thing I would say is reflect. Reflect on the skills that you know that you're teaching the kids.

And how can you access that skill in your life before you come to work? So, one of the things that I really like to do, is start the day with some sort of affirmation, or meditation, or journaling. Those are things that are meaningful to me. But reflect, find that one thing that helps you feel centered and balanced in your day.

You know, if we come to work going, oh, I know I'm going to have a rough day. You know, you've set that intention for the day. So, starting the day with a reflective moment saying, okay, I'm going to, if I feel dysregulated, I'm going to let myself have that.

I'm going to do some breathing. And then I'm going to move on to the rest of my day. Versus letting it pile on. And then I think really taking care of your health needs.

I think that educators often forget to do that. You know, I was working in a classroom recently. And I realized, you know, a couple hours into the day, I hadn't had a sip of water, you know, and that, you know, that could blow someone's mind who, you know, would regularly access their water when they want.

But the fact is, when you're a teacher, sometimes the basic things that are part of your day, like bathrooming and water and things like that, are difficult to obtain when you're busy. So, paying attention to your health needs, paying attention to what helps you find calm, when you're filled the busiest, and then setting up a routine that works for you. I think that we try to do these things and access these tools when they're not happening, so that when you are in the midst of overwhelm, you can tap into that skill better.

So, practicing breathing, affirmations, something that helps you find balance, when you already feel balanced is key. So that when you, you know, get into that busy situation, you're able to go, I know how to get that. I'm going to take four deep breaths and feel centered again.

You know, you have to find what works for you.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** Donna, that's great. Everything you said, I'm smiling.

I'm nodding my head. No one can see me. But yes, I totally understand, not being able to use the restroom, and not getting a drink.

So yes. Let's leave our audience with one challenge.

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Yes.

So, the challenge would be to find one thing that you're going to tackle, one new habit that you're going to bring into your morning routine. So, a before work routine. It could be in the car right before you enter the classroom. It could be before you even leave the house.

But one thing that you think is going to help you find balance and set an attention for the day. And once you have that habit developed, and I would say, you know, at least two or three weeks of practicing this one skill, then adding in one more. And, you know, I have, I have done this myself.

I've started getting up half an hour earlier, every day. And I do a morning meditation, and deep breathing. And I believe it has transformed my daily life.

It has helped me to feel more balanced, before I even enter my workspace. And now that's personal to everyone. You might find that you read, or you write, or you take a walk but find that one thing that you find a connection with to start your day off in a positive way.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** Donna, that is spot on. Thank you so much. I've been teaching a mindfulness class.

And so, I totally agree with you. And I think that it makes you just really self-reflect. And you have a different outlook.

So, this has been amazing. Thank you so much for being here. And we hope you'll come back and visit with us again.

**Donna Toole Speaker:** Thank you so much. It's been wonderful. Thank you.