

Understanding Social and Emotional Development in Young Children

What's Inside...

- ◆ How young children develop socially and emotionally
- ◆ What caregivers can do to promote successful social-emotional development
- ◆ Activities by age to foster social emotional development
- ◆ Resources



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

Developing the ability to experience and control emotions, form secure positive relationships, and explore and learn in all areas of the child's environment (family, community and cultural background).

Relationships are key in developing trust, empathy, compassion, generosity and conscience.

What is Social-Emotional Development?

Social-emotional development is a child's ability to understand the feelings of others, control their own feelings and behaviors, and get along with peers. In order for children to attain the basic skills that they need such as cooperation, following directions, demonstrating self-control and paying attention, they must have social-emotional skills. Feelings of trust, confidence, pride, friendship, affection and humor are all a part of a child's social-emotional development. *A child's positive relationship with trusting and caring adults is the key to successful emotional and social development.*

Social and emotional development involves the acquisition of a set of skills. Key among them are the ability to:

- Identify and understand one's own feelings
- Accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others
- Manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner
- Regulate one's own behavior
- Develop empathy for others
- Establish and sustain relationships

Each of these skills develop on their own timetable and build upon one another. The foundation of social emotional development begins in infancy. A two-month-old infant is soothed and smiles at the voice of a parent. When the caregiver talks to the child, he/she will fixate on the face of the loved one. Being able to read your child's cues and attending to them from the day they are born starts the creation of social-emotional development in your child. You are creating a secure trusting and loving relationship with your child.

In this *ECDC Bulletin* we will explain the importance of social-emotional development, and we will also talk about social-emotional development by a child's age range, as well as give activities that will help your child's development.

Why is Social-Emotional Development Important?

A child's social-emotional development is as important as their cognitive and physical development. It is important to know that children are not born with social-emotional skills. It is the role of the parents, caregivers, and teachers of children to teach and foster these abilities.

A child's social-emotional development provides them with a sense of who they are in the world, how they learn, and helps them establish quality relationships with others. It is what drives an individual to communicate, connect with others and more importantly helps resolve conflicts, gain confidence and reach goals. Building a strong social-emotional foundation as a child will help the child thrive and obtain happiness in life. They will be better equipped to handle stress and persevere through difficult times in their lives as an adult.

How do we, as parents, support the social-emotional development in our child? In the past educators have stressed academic skills to determine success in a child. Those archaic days are long gone and now we know the

importance of social-emotional development.

The approach to teaching social-emotional development is more vague than physical or cognitive development, but there is an increasing amount of research available to support it. This being said, we as parents and educators must learn to read our child's emotional cues so that we can help them identify their emotions; model the behavior for our children; interact with our child affectionately; show consideration for their feelings, desires and needs; express interest in their daily activities; respect their viewpoints; express pride in their accomplishments; and provide encouragement and support during times of stress.

SOURCE: Moore, 1992



How Does a Young Child Develop Socially and Emotionally?

Know Your Baby

Each child is an unique individual. You know your child the best. Some children are quiet and like to sit back and watch, while others are very active and are non-stop movers. Knowing your child’s temperament is important in helping them build social-emotional skills. When it comes to social situations, some kids like to “test the waters” while others will “jump right in.” No matter what your child is like, it is fine for them to have their own temperament. Our job is to know our child’s temperament so that we can have reasonable expectations for our child and build on it.

Parents and caregivers who provide a nurturing and loving environments full of language and hands on experiences will foster all areas of development. As parents we are educators teaching our children the skills in order to understand their emotions, handle conflicts, problem solve, develop relationships, and communicate with peers and adults.



Social and Emotional Development of Babies *Birth to One Year*

- Able to calm down or self-quiet for short periods
- Uses thumb sucking, gazing at objects, or other sensory modalities to calm down
- Gives signals to caregiver about needs by crying
- Delights, smiles at a face, may be soothed by caregivers
- Smiles spontaneously to main caregiver’s voice, face, smile
- Enjoys being cuddled
- Responds to their name
- Enjoys being near other people
- Shows emotions of distress, frustration, surprise, interest
- Responds happily to play interactions with others
- Special attachment to mother/primary caregiver
- Responds differently to strangers (stranger anxiety eight mos.)
- Recognizes him/herself as individual
- Reaches out to be picked up and held

SOURCE: Landy, 2002

Birth to One: “The First Year”

Social-emotional development does start as an infant and the skills build on top of each other as your child grows. From the moment that a baby is born, parents create a bond with their child. The way that a parent reacts to their child’s needs and cues help build social connections. Before their child is four months old parents must build trust and security for their newborn by attending to their basic needs (feeding, comforting, and changing diapers).

It is important for a parent to know the different types of cries of their child. Although a child is figuring out how to self-soothe through sucking their fist, they still need a parent to help calm them. Babies are born with little self-control. They act and react naturally without the ability to stop themselves. Guidance from caregivers help them begin to manage their feelings and reactions. This can be done by talking to the baby in a soft voice, rocking the child, or swaddling the child when they are upset. Attending to your baby’s needs and helping to soothe them are creating a positive social-emotional bond with your child.

Starting at four months your baby will be able to do more things. They will start picking up their heads, holding objects, rolling over and learning to crawl. This is also about the time that your child will be forming their attachment. **Attachment** is the strong emotional tie felt between an infant and their primary caregiver—the child will form an attachment to people who take care of them most often. When attachments are formed, young infants learn that they can depend on mothers, fathers, caregivers, or older siblings to make them feel better. The quality of attachment depends upon the caregivers.

Starting about seven months, children at this age tend to have separation anxiety when their parent leaves. It is important that you prepare your child before leaving them. Talk to them and tell them you will be back soon. In the beginning, leave the child with someone they know and for just a short time. Greet the child when you return. You can continue to increase the time that you will be gone. This will ease your child into this transition.

SOURCE: Brazelton & Sparrow, 2006

Activities to Foster Social Emotional Development: *Birth to One Year*

<i>Birth to 3 months</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn the sound of your baby’s cries • Hold and touch your baby, smiling and talking softly • Sing songs to your child • Let him watch people and activities
<i>4 months to 7 months</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place a mirror in front of your child so they can see themselves • Praise your child, show pleasure in their coos and giggles • Start telling finger stories and animated stories • Tell your baby the names of things, people, parts of their bodies
<i>8 months to 12 months</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let them start picking up food to feed themselves • Play peek-a-boo • Play games and songs where the child can interact with clapping or giggling • Provide safe materials that they can explore with their hands and mouth

SOURCE: Landy, 2002



Toddlers (12 to 36 Months)

Toddlers view themselves as the “center of the world” and can be very possessive. “No” becomes a favorite word and a way to assert their independence. Your child is on the move at this age. With this new found mobility they have gained more independence. They may become easily frustrated when they cannot do the things they want which can result in temper and emotions can be very intense but short lived. This increased awareness of self and ownership (sharing and not sharing) is normal development. It expresses a toddler’s growing independence and self-sufficiency (self-control is just beginning at this age and really begins to develop in the second year.) Toddlers enjoy playing by themselves or next to (not necessarily with) other children. Although it is good to talk about sharing and other people’s feelings, it is too early to expect your child to share or understand another person’s feelings. These are skills they will develop in the coming years.

It is important to help foster your child’s independence, but you must also guide your child with set limits and discipline. It will be natural for the child to test his/her limits. Many parents worry about spoiling the child because he/she has more independence. “An independent one-year old is not a spoiled child. [A] spoiled child is one who doesn’t know when to expect limits.” Building a foundation where the child knows what to expect and their limits will make it possible for the child to learn social cues and build better relationships.

Routines are very important at this age because they make a child feel secure. One of the greatest gift we can give our children/toddlers is consistency and structure. Once toddlers become more secure in knowing what is and what is not expected, they can begin to learn how to resolve conflict, problem solve and communicate effectively with others as they move towards their preschool years.

In these first years of the child’s life, parents should help the child build confidence in their independence by creating a safe environment for them to explore, be supportive of their independence by giving praise and explaining things that the child is exploring, and develop a constant routine.

SOURCE: Brazelton & Sparrow, 2006

Activities to Foster Social Emotional Development: 12 to 36 months (Toddlers)

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12 to 15 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise your toddler for doing things independently • Give your child big boxes, blocks, crayons and paper to play with • Provide your child with love and attention |
| 16 to 18 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your toddler help you with everyday tasks • Encourage your child to explore, make decisions, and attempt challenging projects • Provide opportunities for your child to play with other children |
| 19 to 24 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play games with them, and use objects symbolically in play, playing house is a good example • Enjoy singing, clapping, and dancing together • Play games that encourage the child to imitate you |
| 24 to 36 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow them to pick their clothes and dress themselves • Teach and talk to your child about their feelings, acknowledge them—“I see you’re mad.” • Listen and talk with your toddler, move your body down to their level. |

SOURCE: Landy, 2002

Social and Emotional Development of Toddlers

- Beginning to learn rules
- Temper tantrums are common
- They enjoy playing by themselves or beside (not with) other children
- They defend their own possessions
- Beginning to become independent and will be testing their limits
- They view themselves as the center of the world
- They become increasingly more self-aware and express new emotions such as jealousy, affection, pride, and shame
- They are able to gender identify
- They may continuously ask for their parents and mother continues to be important
- They have rapid mood shifts. Their emotions are usually very intense but short-lived
- Routines are very important
- May start to comfort other children
- Begins to initiate activities
- Beginning to actively resist discipline
- Wants to control others and order them around

SOURCE: Landy, 2002



“A little consideration, a little thought for others, makes all the difference.”

—Winnie the Pooh

**Social and Emotional
Development of Preschoolers
3 to 5 Year Old Children**

- Enjoys pretend play with other children
- Beginning to learn to share and demonstrates improved turn-taking
- Has a need to know clear and consistent rules and what the consequences for breaking them
- They need to be encouraged to express their feelings with words
- Beginning to take responsibility for action
- Friends are more interesting than adults
- Plays outside with little supervision; likes to be trusted
- Using words to resolve conflicts more
- Has some ability to empathize

SOURCE: Landy, 2002

Preschoolers (3 to 5 Year Olds)

The most important people in a preschooler’s life are their family. During early preschool years, children want to please others. Preschoolers need frequent approval, reassurance, and attention. They may become fearful when separated from parents or caregivers but are generally easily consoled and adjust to new environments within a few minutes. Preschool age children are beginning to learn how to interact with their peers. Children this age are more able to acquire social-emotional skills because of they have grown more mentally and physically. They are more able to self-regulate and have been learning how to read other people’s emotions.

At three years of age a child takes a huge leap into the world of socialization. When children of this age are exposed to social opportunities, they will most naturally gravitate towards social play. It is the role of the parent and caregivers to help “coach” a child through social interactions when they need it. Parents and adults need to give the child words to join into play and give them options on how to resolve conflicts. Starting to learn these skills now will help foster self-confidence in your child and make them feel positive about playing with other children.

At this age the child’s imagination is growing. It is important to let the child be creative and encourage their imagination. “With all this bubbling imagination, two new attributes appear. A sense of humor is likely to surface, and a child’s ability to show empathy for others will become apparent.”

By four years of age preschoolers spend a lot of time playing fantasy games. They will try to be “like” all kinds of people from mom and dad, to the garbage man, to a policeman. The purpose behind this type of play is to understand the role of adults in their life. A child’s personality and emotional control develops a lot during the preschool years. Teaching and helping a child understand and recognize their feelings will help them as they get older. The foundation for their life long social interactions is being created. As preschoolers get older they become less dependent on others. They are more confident and independent. Children start to understand how to behave in social situations by cooperating, sharing, and following rules. You will notice that your child will increasingly argue with you to justify their wants and ideas. You will find that they can use your logic to justify why they should be able to do something that you previous did not agree to do. It is our job to model the behavior we want in our children, help them identify and validate their feelings, and give them skills to interact with peers.

Remember that children are different. A child may be out-going, loving, and react to new situations with curiosity. Some children may be shy, have trouble warming up to people, and cautious of new situations or they may be demanding or un-cooperative. No single personality is “better” or “worse” than any other. It may be more difficult for some children to join into play with their peers than other child and this is fine. As parents and caregivers we can help our children with their emotions by providing them with structure, consistency and realistic expectations for their behavior. This will help the child gain more confidence in building friendships and help them join into play with their peers. Social-emotional skills will stay with the child for the span of their life.

SOURCE: Brazelton & Sparrow, 2006



When children are young, the parents, caregivers, preschool teachers, and other adults are the most important influences on their social and emotional development.

Activities to Foster Social Emotional Development: 3 to 5 Year Old Children

- 3 years
- Play in small groups so you can help your child through conflicts
 - Play board games that take turns
 - Read books about different feelings
 - Set up pretend play that provides language and examples on how to play with other children
 - Have them help around the house (clean up toys, take the clothes out of the dryer, help carry items)
 - Give them choices about things they can do or have

- 4 years & 5 years
- Provide opportunities to play outside with others but keep a watchful eye
 - Have your child tell you about a book they read and ask them questions about the book
 - Take your child to the park, museums, or the library to engage with others
 - Encourage your child to make decisions
 - Have your child help with chores (setting the table, feed the dog, pick up the toys, help cook)

SOURCE: Landy, 2002

What Can Caregivers and Parents Do to Build Social-Emotional Skills?



Tips for Caregivers

- **Choices**—Let them make decisions about what to play, read or eat (giving them a choice of healthy snacks). This helps them feel in control and will make them more compliant.
- **Praise**—Give verbal encouragement when they complete a task. Make the praise specific to things they have done. Instead of saying, “Great job” say, “It is wonderful how you waited for your friend to be done with the toy before you played with it.”
- **Anticipate behavior**—Read the child’s cues. You want to talk to the child before they reach a high level of frustration and help them resolve their frustrations.
- **Humor**—Keep a sense of humor by making light of things and redirecting negative actions.
- **Distraction**—Use a book or toy and sing or talk with your child before doing something they may resist (such as being dressed).
- **Positive approach**—Take a positive approach instead of a negative approach (i.e., “Please stay on the sidewalk” instead of “Don’t walk on the grass”).
- **Label and recognize your child’s feelings**—Let them know you understand their feelings and help them calm down and regain control (i.e., “I know you want to play with Sarah’s doll, but hitting her is not a good choice”).
- **Sharing**—Initiate games of sharing and taking turns.

Parents will often notice that their child behaves differently when they are around more children. Places such as the park, birthday parties, amusement parks, museums, and school will prove to be much more stressful for some children. The child may be calm and play well at home but become anxious when they are in public places with other children around. This is natural. It is good for children to be exposed to these places so that they will learn how to deal with an environment different from home. Children are much more excited and it is sometimes hard for them to control their emotions. As parents and caregivers we must be there to help support our children. We are not born with social skills. We learn them by watching people and by how we are taught. This page gives you some tips on how to build social-emotional skills in your child or the children in your class.

Kindergarten teachers say that 20% of children entering kindergarten do not yet have the necessary social emotional skills to be “ready” for school.



Skills to Teach

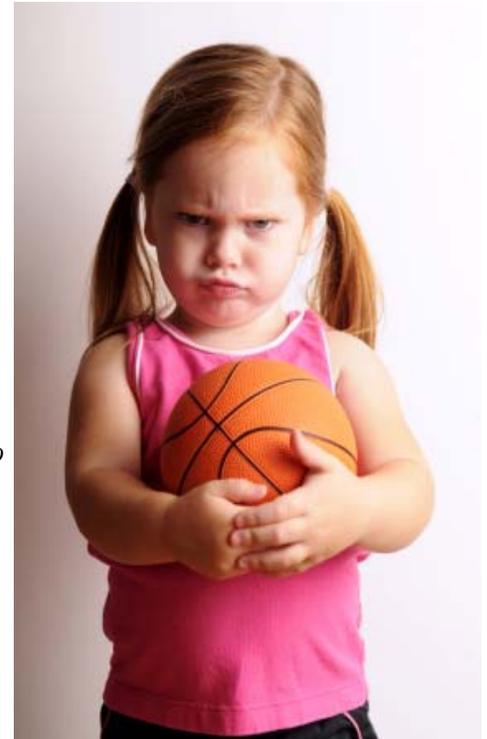
- Following rules, routines, and directions
- Identifying feelings in oneself and others
- Controlling anger and impulses
- Problem solving
- Suggesting play themes and activities to peers
- Sharing toys and other materials
- Taking turns
- Helping adults and peers
- Giving compliments
- Understanding how and when to apologize
- Expressing empathy with others' feelings
- Recognizing that anger can interfere with problem solving; learning how to recognize anger in oneself and others and how to calm down
- Understanding appropriate ways to express anger

How To Teach Social Skills

Model—demonstrate the skill as you explain what you are doing and give the child words to solve the conflict through actions and/or words	<i>“Oh, I need a blue crayon, can I use that blue crayon after you?” “Why don’t you ask her if you can help build the rocket ship?”</i>
Model with puppets	<i>A puppet can tell stories on different topics. Have the puppet ask questions and the child answer the question to help solve the puppet’s problem.</i>
Sing—introduce a new skill with a song	<i>Change the words to “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” to a song about sharing.</i>
Use a flannel board to teach a story	<i>Many nursery rhymes teach social skills.</i>
Use visual, verbal or physical prompts	<i>“Remember to...”</i>
Give verbal or visual encouragement	<i>“I like the way you are sharing the blocks”; use a thumbs up signal.</i>
Use incidental teaching	<i>“I see that you are angry that all the swings are being used. What can you do when you are angry?”</i>
Discuss children’s literature	<i>Read books about friendship, sharing, etc.</i>

The Six-Step Approach to Problem Solving

1. Help the children state the problem (“*I can see that you are mad about this*”). Ask each child to describe what is happening then restate the problem (remind the child of safety rules).
2. Help the children brainstorm ideas that may solve the problem. “*How could you solve this problem?*” (give suggestions if necessary)
3. Discuss how the ideas might work. Discuss scenarios and solutions “*What if...?*” “*How about...?*”
4. Have the children agree on what they think is fair. “*Does that sound good to you?*”
5. Help the children try out the idea. Step back and watch how they interact.
6. Review the idea to see how it worked. After they have been successfully playing for a few minutes reenter the conversation. See if they need further modeling. Give encouragement for the way they talked out the problem. Give specific examples. “*You all did a great job figuring out how to play together. Are you having fun tossing the ball to each other?*”



Social-emotional development is important both in its own right and because it facilitates cognitive development

Books to Help Build Social-Emotional Skills	
Age	Book
<i>Birth to 1 year (Begin reading at an early age. Infants needs books that are made of cloth, plastic or board so that they can hold them.)</i>	<i>Where is Baby's Belly Button</i> by Karen Katz <i>Mirror Me!</i> by Julie Aigner-Clark <i>The Going to Bed Book</i> by Sandra Boynton <i>Pat the Bunny</i> by Dorothy Kunhardt <i>Baby Faces</i> by DK Publishing
<i>1 to 2 years (Board books are best for this age group)</i>	<i>The Runaway Bunny</i> by Margaret Wise Brown, illus. by Clement Hurd <i>Tails</i> by Matthew Van Fleet. <i>No Biting!</i> by Karen Katz <i>How do I put it on?</i> by Shigeo Watanabe <i>Pretend You're a Cat</i> by Jean Marzollo
<i>3 to 4 years (Most picture books are great for this age)</i>	<i>Sometimes I Feel Like a Bomabaloo</i> by Rachel Vail; illus. by Yumi Heo <i>It's Okay To Be Different</i> by Todd Parr <i>Feelings</i> by Aliki <i>Being Friends</i> by Karen Beaumont; illus. by Joy Allen <i>Pepo and Lolo are Friends</i> by Ana Martín Larrañaga
<i>4 to 5 years (Children are able to sit through longer books and have more comprehension)</i>	<i>Alexander and The Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day</i> by Judith Viorst and Ray Cruz <i>That's What Friends are For</i> by Valeri Gorbachev <i>Pink Magic</i> by Donna Jo Napoli; illus. by Chad Cameron <i>Clementine and Mungo</i> by Sarah Dyer <i>Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs</i> by Judi Barrett; illus. by Ron Barrett

Conclusion

When raising a child, there are so many aspects of them to consider. You have to think about cognitive, physical and social-emotional development. Don't worry- these are all things that are within your grasp as a parent. Social-emotional development is just as important as cognitive and physical development. Much like these two, gaining social-emotional skills depend on the guidance and teachings of their caregivers. It is important to keep things consistent and set boundaries for your child. Give them specific positive praise for things that they are doing or saying. Create more quality time with your child throughout the day. Last but not least, be aware that all children grow at different rates and have different personalities. Have reasonable expectations for your child and they will have a better chance of succeeding and gaining confidence in themselves. Fostering social-emotional skills now will help them develop meaningful relationships for the rest of their lives.

Sources

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- Landy, S. (2002). Pathways to Competence: Encouraging Healthy Social and Emotional Development in Young Children. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Moore, S.G. (1992). The Role of Parents in the Development of Peer Group Competence. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.



Worried About Your Child's Development?

All children develop social-emotional skills at different rates. There is no one sign that can tell us if your child's social-emotional development is not on track.

If you have concerns, you should take notes on your child's behavior:

1. What about your child's behavior is worrying you? Is your child not socializing with other children? Are they aggressive? Are they too anxious?
2. When are you noticing this behavior? Is there a certain time of the day or events when this happens? Write down specific times, places, and events
3. What are ways you have tried to help your child's social-emotional development? What has worked and what has not worked.

These notes will help find a pattern and a solution. The more we know about your child and their behavior then the better we can understand him/her. You can take this information and discuss your child's development with their pediatrician, childcare provider, teacher and/or us, The Mid-State Central Early Childhood Direction Center.

Resources

Kaiser, Barbara & Rasminsky Judy S. (2007) Challenging Behavior in Young Children Understanding, Preventing and Responding Effectively (Second Edition), Pearson Education Inc.

This book gives great information and strategies on guidance, building relationships, problem solving and many other topics about behavior.

PBS: The Whole Child

<http://www.pbs.org/wholechild/abc/index.html>

PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) gives milestones for children at different ages. There are also links to other subjects about child development.

These sites below give parents information and ideas on how to foster social development in their child.

Zero to Three

http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_social

Challenging Behavior

<http://www.challengingbehavior.org/index.htm>

Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics Online

<http://www.dbpeds.org/>

Center of Social Emotional Foundations For Early Learning

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/>

Nan S. Songer 1951-2008

This issue of the *Mid-State Central Early Childhood Direction Center Bulletin* is dedicated to Nan S. Songer and her lifetime commitment to children and families. Nan served as ECDC Director since July 2001.





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WE KNOW WHERE TO LOOK FOR ANSWERS.



Workshops of Interest

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as general child development, developmental issues for children with special needs, coping strategies, and specific disabilities.

Workshops include:

- Including All Kids
- Making Parent Partnerships
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- Transitioning from EI to CPSE
- Transitioning CPSE to CSE
- Understanding IDEA Regulations and Parent Rights

Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional technical assistance center for the State Education Department providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy.

ECDC services to families are free and confidential.

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