

FOSTERING HEALTHY SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN

TIPS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS AND PROVIDERS

Children are born with the need and desire to connect with those around them. When teachers and providers establish positive relationships with children from birth through the early years, and value their diverse cultures and languages, children feel safe and secure, laying the foundation for healthy social and emotional development. This process affects how children experience the world, express themselves, manage their emotions, and establish positive relationships with others.

Social and emotional development involves several interrelated areas of development, including *social interaction*, *emotional awareness*, and *self-regulation*. Below are examples of important aspects of social and emotional development for young children.

Social interaction focuses on the relationships we share with others, including relationships with adults and peers. As children develop socially, they learn to take turns, help their friends, play together, and cooperate with others.

Emotional awareness includes the ability to recognize and understand our own feelings and actions and those of other people, and how our own feelings and actions affect ourselves and others.

Self-regulation is the ability to express thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in socially appropriate ways. Learning to calm down when angry or excited and persisting at difficult tasks are examples of self-regulation.

Early childhood teachers and providers play an important role in nurturing children's social and emotional development. Supporting children's social and emotional development can be both rewarding and challenging. Critical to providing support is having realistic expectations of children's development at different ages. Realistic expectations of when infants are able to experience emotions (hint: early!), how easy or difficult it is for a toddler to take turns, and when young children are able to follow simple directions can bring greater success – and less frustration – for young children and teachers and practitioners.

The following tips are organized by age (Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers) and are intended to help early childhood teachers and providers support children's social and emotional development — nurturing children's ability to develop healthy relationships, manage challenges and realize their full potential. These tips are based on what we have learned from research focused on social and emotional development.



DID YOU KNOW?

Research shows that a strong social and emotional foundation in early childhood powerfully impacts children's later positive attitudes and behaviors, academic performance, career path, and adult health outcomes! For more information, see *Social and Emotional Development Research Background* in this series.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS:

Social skills are critical for lifelong learning, happiness, and long-term success. Children begin developing these skills during infancy.

- **Play simple social games with infants** like peek-a-boo and taking turns cooing back and forth. These games are an early way to develop turn taking turn turning, which is an important building block for later social development.
- **Be an emotional role model.** Even at a very young age, infants learn by watching their caregivers. Responding calmly to situations, expressing joy, and showing kindness to others helps them learn how to behave and what to expect from future relationships.
- **Imitate infants' facial expressions and sounds.** Imitation is an important skill that sets the earliest foundation for interacting with others.

RECOGNIZING AND TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS:

Allowing and encouraging children to express their feelings — both positive and negative — can support their emotional development. How children and families express emotions often depends on their cultural background and it is important to honor these values if they differ from the suggestions below.

- **Say what you think an infant in your care is feeling.** For example, say, "You look so sad. Let's see if we can make you feel better." This demonstrates to the infant that you are paying attention to her needs and want to be there for him or her.
- **Help an infant in your care learn to calm himself and praise this behavior.** It's okay for him to suck on his fingers or fist; sucking helps babies self-soothe and is a first step to managing emotions.
- **Learn to read the moods of infants in your care.** Infants can feel a range of emotions at a very early age. Paying attention to what their behavior is saying will help you feel more confident about how to respond.
 - Is the baby looking at you calmly or smiling at you? He's ready to engage! Smile back, talk, sing, and interact with him.
 - Is the baby crying or squirmy, looking away and breathing heavily? She may be overwhelmed, so decrease stimulation by talking softly, swaying back and forth with her, swaddling, and cuddling.



WHEN I'M MAD
I SHOULD...

RECOGNIZING AND TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS:

Creating a safe and open environment for toddlers to recognize and express the range of feelings they have can support healthy emotional development.

- **Talk about emotions.** Identifying and discussing emotions can help young children understand their own and others' feelings. Find opportunities to identify real and play emotions. For example, if two stuffed animals are fighting, you could say, "They are angry. They both wanted that toy." Reading stories provides a great opportunity to discuss the connection between behavior and emotion. For example, "The rabbit is running so fast! He seems scared."
- **Talk about your own feelings and emotions.** Model for children how to use words or other strategies to communicate about emotions. You might say, "It's hard for me to wait my turn for the truck. I'm going to play with blocks while I wait."
- **Help children describe their own feelings.** You can use pictures of different emotions and label them for children. You can also help toddlers put their feelings into words and talk about why they feel a certain way. You might say, "I can tell you're feeling sad. Let's talk to your friend about taking turns."
- **Offer comfort and reassurance.** Let children know that it's okay to have strong feelings, like anger or frustration, and that you are there to help them manage those feelings.
- **Teach ways to manage emotions.** Introduce ways for children to handle their emotions. Each child is unique — one child may want a hug while another may need time with their comfort item (blanket or stuffed animal) or deep breaths to cool down.

ENCOURAGING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS AND USING POSITIVE DISCIPLINE PRACTICES:

To help young children develop positive behaviors, provide plenty of encouragement, and set limits in gentle ways.

- **Make sure your expectations are developmentally appropriate.** Become familiar with typical developmental milestones and adjust your expectations of children's behaviors accordingly. For example, two-year-olds are good at exploring and moving around. With so much to discover and learn, don't expect them to sit still! When they have to sit for a period of time, try to keep their hands and minds busy by reading a fun book or playing a silly game.
- **Model positive behaviors.** When you show children patience, gentleness, and care for others through your everyday interactions, you are helping them learn to treat others the same way.
- **Set limits in calm ways and focus on children's positive behavior.** Children need plenty of positive feedback and calm reminders as they learn new skills. Toddlers are just beginning to follow directions and rules. Provide numerous opportunities to practice new skills. Praise children when they are engaging in a positive behavior, especially when you know it's a behavior they have been working on, like taking turns or appropriately transitioning to a new activity. When setting expectations with children, it's more helpful to them when you focus on what they can and should do rather than using words like "don't." You might say, "Let's use gentle hands," instead of saying "Don't hit."



SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS:

The preschool years are full of opportunities to develop positive social skills — preschoolers engage in pretend play, begin to explore cooperative play, and develop early friendships.

- **Use daily activities to help children develop social skills.** Most activities, like snack time, outside play, and center time, can be used to help children practice taking turns, playing together, and engaging in conversations. Some preschoolers will easily engage with peers while others need encouragement and support from other peers and adults.
- **Encourage pretend play.** Let children take the lead in developing a pretend story. Play along, add to the story, and, if appropriate, encourage peers that are nearby to join in. For example, if a child is pretending to cook a meal, ask what he is cooking and suggest another child playing nearby set the table.
- **Help build positive peer relationships.** Teach preschoolers strategies they can use to play or work with others. For example, “Let’s tap Sarah on the shoulder and ask, ‘May I have a turn?’”
- **Use children’s books to teach social skills.** Choose books that include themes about making friends, taking turns, and cooperating. In any book, pause to ask children what they might do in a challenging social situation and reflect together on what happens in the story.



RECOGNIZING AND TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS:

Allowing and encouraging children to express their feelings — both positive and negative — can support their emotional development. Preschoolers have the capacity to label and discuss their emotions — they just need a safe and open environment to do so!

- **Let children know that their thoughts, feelings, and efforts matter.** Help your preschoolers know you are listening when they share their thoughts and feelings. Praise children for both how hard they try and for their accomplishments.
- **Help preschoolers use words to describe feelings.** You might say, “I can tell you’re feeling very mad and frustrated. Would you like to tell me why you feel this way?” You can also model using “emotion words” by describing your own feelings (e.g. “I was worried when I couldn’t find my keys, but am relieved because they were in my pocket!”)
- **Acknowledge difficult feelings and give children strategies to respond to them.** Help preschoolers know that it’s okay to have strong feelings like anger or frustration and that you are there to help manage those feelings in a positive way. For example, “I know it made you mad when Jada took your toy. Next time you can ask an adult to help you.” Each child is unique — one child may want to have a conversation while another may need a hug or deep breaths to cool down.
- **Encourage preschoolers to practice thinking about how others feel.** When reading a story, ask children to imagine they were different characters and guess how they might be feeling and why.

FROM A YOUNG CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE...

- I feel **safe** when...I can rely on you to meet my needs consistently and when you greet me with a warm and loving smile every day.
- I feel **confident** when...you praise me for my efforts and encourage me to keep trying when I'm learning something new.
- I feel **heard** when... you look me in my eyes, tune into my thoughts and feelings or notice the things I'm looking at or pointing to in the world.
- I feel **secure** when...I know what to expect in the day and when we cuddle up to talk, read, and sing together.
- I feel **happy** when...we play games and do fun activities, laugh and act silly together, and share fun stories.
- I feel **calm** when...I am in a warm, nurturing environment and cuddled when I need to be comforted.
- I feel **loved** when...you take care of my needs, hug me often, use gentle words, and show care and patience.

Each day you help children in your care feel safe, secure, and loved. You are helping to lay the foundation for healthy social and emotional development of children, which supports them to become happier individuals and succeed in school and in life.

For additional resources on supporting your child's learning and development, check out [tip sheets on early language development](#) and [STEM \(Science, Technology, Engineering and Math\)](#) and [social emotional development](#).

These resource materials are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of these materials is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.

NOTES

1. Damon E. Jones et al, "Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness," *American Journal of Public Health* 105(11) (2015): 2283-2290.

