

# FOSTERING HEALTHY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN

## TIPS FOR FAMILIES

Children are born with the need and desire to connect with those around them. When parents and caregivers establish positive relationships with children from birth through the early years, 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.

Parents and families play an important role in nurturing their children's social and emotional development. Supporting children's social and emotional development can be both rewarding and challenging at the same time. 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 their families.<sup>2</sup>

And remember: every child develops at her own pace and has diverse learning needs and approaches. Tuning in and being aware of your child's specific needs and where they are developmentally can help you adjust to daily routines and activities with your child. But if you are ever worried about your child's development, don't wait! Talk with your child's doctor if you have concerns. Acting early can make a big difference. Remember: you know your child best. Get tips to help at [www.cdc.gov/Concerned](http://www.cdc.gov/Concerned) and [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!](#)



### DID YOU KNOW?

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

The following tips are organized by age (Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers) and are intended to help parents and families support their 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.

## TIPS FOR INFANTS

### CREATING A PREDICTABLE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT:

A safe, loving home can help encourage children to learn, play, and explore.

- Cuddle, comfort, talk, and play with your baby during feeding, dressing, changing, bedtime, bath time and other daily routines. When you are affectionate and responsive to your baby's needs, you help her to feel safe and develop trust.
- Talk, read, and sing together every day. Infants learn by interacting with others around them.
- In the first few months, help your baby get into a regular routine with sleeping, feeding, bathing, and dressing. Knowing what to expect helps children feel secure, confident, and in control of their world.
- Give your child time to get to know a new caregiver. Bringing a favorite toy, stuffed animal or blanket helps comfort your baby in unfamiliar situations. Also, be aware of your own response to a new caregiver when your baby is present; your baby notices worry or concern in your facial expressions and body language.

### 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 your baby, like peek-a-boo and taking turns cooing back and forth. These games are fun for your child and are an easy way to share enjoyment with your baby, which is an important building block for later social and language development.
- Be an emotional role model. Even at a very young age, your baby learns by watching you. Responding calmly to situations, expressing joy, and letting your child know that you love them helps them learn how to behave and what to expect from future relationships.
- Imitate your baby's 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. Your cultural background may affect how your children and family express emotions; it is important to honor these values if they differ from the suggestions below.

- Say what you think your baby is feeling. For example, say, "You look so sad. Let's see if we can make you feel better." Your baby will learn that you are paying attention to her needs and want to be there for her.
- Help your baby learn to calm himself and praise him for doing it. 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 your baby's moods. He can feel a range of emotions at a very early age. Paying attention to what his behavior is indicating will help you feel more confident about how to respond.
  - Is he looking at you calmly or smiling at you? He's ready to engage! Smile back, talk, sing and interact with him.
  - Is he crying or squirming, looking away and breathing heavily? He may be overwhelmed, so decrease stimulation by talking softly, swaying back and forth with him, swaddling and cuddling.

## TIPS FOR TODDLERS

Many of the tips for infants are great for toddlers too. Below are a few additional tips for activities that you can try out with your toddler today.

### CREATING A PREDICTABLE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT:

- Look for ways, such as singing songs from your own childhood or doing traditional dances with your child, to make your culture part of your child's everyday routines. Your child's culture is an important part of who he is. A strong understanding of culture helps shape identity and boosts self-esteem.
- Provide age-appropriate toys and books in a safe environment where toddlers can wander and explore.
- Routines that are consistent and predictable are especially important for creating a safe, loving environment that helps children feel secure. For example, try giving your child a warm bath and then reading a book together before bedtime at around the same time every night.
- As your child gets older, she will move around more. Stay close enough so she knows that there is a secure base to return to after exploring the surroundings.

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS:

Having realistic expectations for a toddler's behavior can make parenting easier. For example, most toddlers are still learning how to share and they take away important information from conflicts with other toddlers – like wanting the same toy at the same time. Learning to take turns – and other important social skills – takes time and practice.

- Encouraging early friendships will give your child the chance to practice sharing, taking turns, resolving conflicts, and experiencing the joy of friendship. It is normal for toddlers to struggle with sharing and play next to, instead of with, each other.
- Before playing with a friend at your home, give your child the chance to put aside a special toy to show it isn't necessary to share all her toys at once.
- Keep in mind that sharing with others is often challenging for young children. Balance allowing children to work through challenges on their own with stepping in to teach them how to take turns.

### RECOGNIZING AND TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS:

- Observing out loud what your child's play says about feelings and emotions helps your child learn to express her feelings in the future. If two stuffed animals are play fighting, you could say, "They are angry. Did they both want that toy?"
- Talk about your own feelings when spending time with your child to show how to use words to communicate about emotions. You might say, "Reading bedtime stories is so warm and cozy!" or, "It's really hard for me to wait my turn for the truck, so I'm going to play with blocks while I wait."
- You can help your child learn to understand others' feelings by describing feelings and asking about them. For example, when reading a book, describe the expressions of the characters and talk together about what feelings their actions could be expressing. Such as, "The rabbit is running so fast! He might be scared."



## ENCOURAGING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS AND USING POSITIVE DISCIPLINE PRACTICES.

Setting clear, consistent limits is one of the most important things parents and caregivers can do for children. Additionally, recognizing and celebrating positive behavior can build children's confidence and encourage them to repeat these behaviors. Become familiar with typical early childhood developmental milestones so you know what you might expect. 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.

- Notice aloud when children are engaged in positive behavior. For example, praise your child when she comforts a friend, puts a toy away, or follows a simple direction.
- Set limits and point out the consequences of your child's behavior. For example, "After you pushed Jordan, he started to cry. It hurt and he felt upset. Let's tell him you are sorry." Use difficult moments as opportunities to teach better ways for next time, but diffuse the immediate situation first.
- As your child gets closer to preschool age, encourage her to help with very simple chores at home, like putting things away. She may actually enjoy helping out. Praise your child for being a good helper, focusing on the desired behavior and progress they've made, rather than the child's personality (e.g. "You helped clean up! That makes me proud of you.").

## TIPS FOR PRESCHOOLERS

Many of the tips for younger children are great for preschoolers too. Below are a few additional tips that you can try out with your growing preschooler.

### CREATING A PREDICTABLE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT:

- Try to establish routines. Children feel secure and in control when they know what is coming next. For example, your child's daily routine might include eating breakfast, brushing teeth, going to preschool, and going to grandma's house after preschool. If each day is a little bit different in your family, talk with your child each morning about his schedule that day. Packing a visual schedule with stickers or drawings in your child's backpack or asking your child's teacher to provide reminders can help him feel prepared.
- When you listen to and respect your child, you show them that you care about what they are saying. As they grow, it's important for your child to be able to manage their feelings when you aren't immediately available – when you're taking care of a baby sibling, for example. If you look your child in the eye, tell him you want to help but need him to be patient, and consistently return to him, he will learn that you care even when you can't respond immediately.

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS:

- Encourage pretend play. Let your child take the lead in developing a pretend story to help prepare them for social scenarios or challenges. Play along and add to the story. For example, if your child is pretending to be a new student at school, pretend to be a student as well, and ask what type of games he would like to play.
- If your child is not in preschool, try to find opportunities for him to play with other children, such as at a park, museum, or library, or during formal or informal recreational activities.
- Be aware that your behavior – both positive and negative – is a model for your child and that you can use your behavior to teach lessons on social skills. Model strong social skills in your own interactions with others and describe for your child what worked well and what you will do better next time. For example, if someone cuts you off while driving and you get frustrated, after the moment has passed, you could explain that it didn't do much good to lose your cool.

## RECOGNIZING AND TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS:

- As your children get older and have an understanding of basic emotions, talk to them about more complex emotions – such as embarrassment – and find opportunities to point out those emotions in yourself, your children, and in others.
- Discuss with preschoolers the difference between emotion and behavior – e.g. it's OK to be angry about something, but there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing anger.
- Though preschoolers are more independent than infants and toddlers, they still need a lot of help. Consistently communicating your intentions and then following through (“I’ll be right back after I answer the door”) will help them to feel confident that you will meet their basic needs, and partner with them to solve problems and manage frustrations.
- Be sensitive, nurturing, and encouraging. Preschoolers need hugs and kisses, too. They are going through many transitions in their own development and in their understanding of the world and need your encouragement and patience.



## ENCOURAGE POSITIVE BEHAVIORS AND USE POSITIVE DISCIPLINE PRACTICES:

- Give children warnings before transitions occur, especially when they will need to stop doing something fun. For example, “In five minutes, we are going to clean up your toys and take a bath.” Some children may need additional or different types of reminders, like a one-minute verbal warning, using a timer on your cell phone, a gentle touch on the shoulder, or a visual cue. Try to add a fun component if your child is reluctant. For example, if your child doesn’t love bath time, let her pick out a toy or an object she can bring with her to splash around. You can also make up a fun game that the two of you only play at bath time.
- During the preschool years, children are continuing to develop their ability to manage their own emotions. Sometimes they will have behaviors that are challenging to manage, like tantrums or aggression. Here are some tips to help manage those tough behaviors.
  - Away from stimulation, sit next to your child and breathe deeply in and out. Show them how to place their hand on their stomach and notice and count their breaths.
  - Work through your child’s emotions with them. Though it can be challenging, try to remain calm when your child is not. Stay near him to make sure he is not hurting himself or others. After he calms down, help him name his emotions and talk through the situation. Discuss what made him upset and what a more appropriate response would be in the future. Practice the more appropriate response over the next few days when he is not upset. And give him lots of love and encouragement.
  - Role play positive ways to solve problems, take turns, and cooperate. For example, practice what your child would do if another child took her toy or if she was asked to do something she didn’t want to do by her teacher. Talk together about what the appropriate and inappropriate responses would be.
  - Give your child plenty of opportunities to make choices. Providing choices is a simple way to give your child a sense of control, while also accomplishing what you would like him to do. If you ask your child to help set the table, give him the choice of setting the forks, the cups, or the napkins. When he’s getting dressed in the morning, give him two different options for clothes to wear.

## 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...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.

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](#).

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## 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.
2. ZERO TO THREE. (2016, June 6). National parent survey overview and key insights. Retrieved September 10, 2016, from <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1424-national-parent-survey-overview-and-key-insights>

