

# 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!<sup>1</sup> For more information, see *Social and Emotional Development Research Background* in this series.

# AWARENESS OF CHILDREN'S UNIQUE BACKGROUNDS, EXPERIENCES, AND ABILITIES

Each child comes with a unique set of experiences, abilities, and needs. Children come from diverse families and communities and bring rich cultural and linguistic strengths and perspectives. They also come with diverse learning needs and approaches. For example, one child may have a special need, developmental delay or disability, while another may be experiencing stress in their home or community caused by violence, trauma, abuse, or neglect. Tuning in and being aware of each child's specific needs and where they are developmentally can help you adjust your care, environment, and daily activities. This may include managing the expectations you have for each child's behavior and learning, remaining sensitive to his or her individual needs, and if necessary, reaching out for additional support. For more information, visit [Learn the Signs. Act Early](#) and [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!](#).

One critical piece to supporting the positive development of all young children is **Connecting with Families**. When you connect with families to discuss children's development, everyone benefits — especially children. Early childhood programs and providers should create regular opportunities throughout the year to set shared goals on children's learning and development and to review progress on these goals. Figure out the best way to communicate regularly with families — through email, phone, text, or notes to share updates along the way. Create opportunities for families to visit or volunteer in your program in ways that are comfortable for them. If a child continually struggles with challenging behavior, reach out to the child's family early to problem solve and involve experts such as behavioral specialists in your local school district or community. For more information about family engagement in early childhood programs see [ED and HHS's Policy Statement on Family Engagement](#).

## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH INFANTS

### CREATING A PREDICTABLE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT:

From the moment children are born, it is essential for them to feel safe, secure, and loved, so they can form a strong social and emotional foundation.

- **Talk, read, and sing together every day.** Infants learn by interacting with others around them. These simple interactions help young children feel special and loved in addition to supporting their early development.
- **Provide warm, responsive, and consistent care.** Smile, laugh, and cuddle with infants often throughout the day. Take time to read their cues — what are they trying to tell you? Do they need attention? Are they hungry or do they have a wet diaper? Do they want to be held? Based on what their cues tell you, meet their needs consistently and sensitively.
- **Maintain consistent, predictable routines.** Knowing what to expect during the day helps infants feel safe and secure. As much as possible, try to follow the same order of routines and activities each day, like regular feeding and naptime schedules or reading a book together before children go home.
- **Get to know each child and follow their lead.** What does each child seem curious about? How are they feeling? What activities do they enjoy? Following their lead will help you know how to respond and plan your daily activities around their interests, which increases their eagerness to engage with you and learn.

## 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, 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...

## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH TODDLERS

The tips listed above for infants are great for toddlers too! Below are additional tips that address the developmental needs of toddlers in your care:

### CREATING A PREDICTABLE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT:

A welcoming and well-designed physical and emotional environment helps children feel safe and encourages learning, play, and exploration. Foster a positive relationship between yourself and the toddlers in your care. Greet every child in your care at arrival by making eye contact and saying their name. Throughout the day make time for one-on-one interaction with each child, even if it is a quick hug, smile, or positive word. Toddlers get their cues from their caregivers; your positive words and actions can go a long way toward making a toddler feel safe and secure.

- **Provide age-appropriate toys and books at the children's level so toddlers can safely explore.** Toddlers enjoy exploring their environments. Set up the space so they have safe access to developmentally appropriate toys they can explore independently.
- **Set predictable daily routines.** Knowing what to expect during the day helps children feel safe and secure and gives them a sense of control. Post a visual daily schedule for the children to see and refer to it throughout the day (e.g. "We just finished snack, let's look at our schedule to see what comes next"). When the schedule or routine changes, communicate this to the children so they know something will be different.
- **Tune into how each child responds to the environment.** All children respond differently to their environment. How do they respond to others around them? How much stimulation is too much for them? How can you tell when they are bored and need more play, stimulation, or attention? The right balance of learning and play, with cuddling and down time, can help children feel safe, secure, interested, and engaged.

- **Celebrate children's home cultures.** Encourage families to help you include toys, books, stories, and songs that reflect the rich diversity of the children in your care. This fosters a stronger connection with families while helping children develop self-esteem and a sense of appreciation for other cultures starting at an early age.

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS:

Toddlers continue to develop their social skills through interactions with parents and caregivers and also begin to develop social relationships with peers. Having realistic expectations for a toddler's behavior is important in understanding how best to support their developing social skills.

- **Provide plenty of opportunities for playful group activities.** Place developmentally appropriate toys on the floor and allow children to play and explore together. Even if children are playing side-by-side, they are learning from their peers and developing social skills.
- **Offer children choices throughout the day.** Create opportunities for children to choose activities, toys, or snacks. For children who don't yet have the words to express their choices, provide other communication options such as pointing to items or pictures and even signing. Giving children choices helps them feel heard, engaged, and in control.
- **Teach children how to share and take turns through daily routines.** Toddlers are beginning to learn how to share and take turns, which is hard to do and takes time and practice. During snack time, hand out two different snacks to each child and let them choose one snack to keep and one to share.
- **Encourage early friendships.** Toddlers typically play next to, instead of with, peers. With adult help, this important "parallel play" can give children the chance to practice sharing, taking turns, resolving conflicts, and experience the joy of friendship.

## 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."



## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH PRESCHOOLERS

Building on the tips listed above for toddlers, here are additional tips that address the developmental needs of preschoolers (three and four year olds) in your care:

### CREATING A PREDICTABLE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT:

Just as with toddlers, a welcoming and predictable environment helps preschoolers feel safe and encourages learning, play, and exploration. Additionally, preschoolers are ready partners in building their classroom community. Your role as a caring adult in children's lives matters enormously and can have a positive impact on individual social and emotional development and create a strong sense of community.

- **Provide warm, consistent, and responsive care.** Be responsive to children's needs. Though preschoolers are more independent than infants and toddlers, they still need a lot of help! Make sure they feel confident that you will meet their basic needs and partner with them to solve problems and manage frustrations.
- **Tune in, observe, and use information you gather about children to guide their learning.** What are your preschoolers curious about? What types of activities interest them? How are they feeling? Follow these cues and use their interests to help you know how to respond to their needs and expose them to many learning opportunities.
- **Create consistent, predictable routines and a developmentally appropriate schedule.** Children feel safe, secure, and in control when they know what to expect throughout the day. Post a class schedule with pictures for families to review with their children and reference it daily. Create a schedule that is reflective of the developmental levels of your children.
- **Tell children before transitions occur.** Transitions are a time when many preschoolers struggle with inappropriate or challenging behavior. Providing children with a "warning" before a transition occurs is especially important when they are transitioning away from doing something fun. For example, "In 5 minutes we are going to clean up your toys and move to our next activity." Some children may need a few additional reminders, like a one minute warning or a physical reminder, like a gentle rub on their back.
- **Celebrate diversity and help all children feel included.** Try to encourage children to communicate in multiple ways they are comfortable with, like using their home language, body movements, gestures, and signs. Build in activities that are structured so that children have to work together in small groups to accomplish a task. Assign buddies to assist children that struggle to stay engaged at certain times of the day.



## 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.

## ENCOURAGE POSITIVE BEHAVIORS AND USE POSITIVE DISCIPLINE PRACTICES:

During the preschool years, children continue to develop their ability to make good choices and exhibit positive behavior. Recognizing and celebrating positive behavior can build preschoolers' confidence and help them repeat these behaviors. It takes time for young children to learn certain behaviors so your patient response will help, especially when their behaviors are challenging.

- **Communicate behavior expectations.** Engage children in developing the classroom expectations and clearly discuss what is and is not acceptable behavior. Provide children with many opportunities to practice these expectations and to receive feedback about their behavior.
- **Model caring relationships and recognize positive behavior.** Children often learn by watching adults' interactions with others, so help them see you modeling patience, kindness, and helpfulness throughout the day. When children act appropriately and kindly, provide special attention, hugs, or specific words of praise such as, "It made Maddie really happy when you helped her clean up today," and "I notice how you are waiting patiently for your snack. Great job waiting!"
- **Offer preschoolers plenty of opportunities to make choices throughout the day.** Providing choices is a simple way to give children a sense of control, while still accomplishing the task at hand. For example, when it is time to clean up, ask a child if he'd like to help clean up the blocks or the books. At snack time allow children to choose between two snack options; let children take turns choosing the book to be read to the group.
- **Engage children in problem solving about their challenging behaviors.** Giving children a chance to practice and "do-over" particularly challenging interactions can be a powerful learning tool. Help children role play positive ways to solve problems, take turns, and cooperate. Practice appropriate responses to typical preschool scenarios and give lots of positive encouragement!
- **Teach children calm down strategies.** Remain calm when a child is not. Stay near them to make sure they're not hurting themselves or others. Teach and practice calming strategies and appropriate responses to individual children or in a group when children are not upset. And give them lots of positive encouragement! Appropriate calm down strategies that can be taught to preschoolers include:
  - In a quiet space, away from stimulation, sit alongside a child and together breathe slowly and deeply. Show them how to rest their hand on their stomach to watch and count their breaths.
  - Encourage children to draw a picture of what happened to make them upset – before, during, and after the episode. Ask them to narrate the picture and describe what they were thinking and feeling at each stage. Record their narration under the picture.
  - If a child is angry, provide a pillow or other soft, safe object that they can use to express themselves physically. Ask them to describe what they are thinking and feeling in this process ("You took my toy and that made me mad!").





## 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](#).

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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.

