

Childhood Social and Emotional Development

A child with well-developed social and emotional skills is more likely to experience positive mental health throughout childhood and beyond.



Why is social and emotional development so important?

Learning to manage and express emotions is beneficial for everyone, regardless of age. As parents, role modelling these skills is important, because a child with well-developed social and emotional skills is more likely to experience positive mental health throughout childhood and beyond.

Healthy social and emotional development in children includes sharing, cooperating, showing empathy for others, the ability to resist impulsive behaviour and manage emotions and form positive relationships. The potential for academic achievement is greater in a child with healthy social and emotional development.

What role do emotions play in development?

Research¹ has provided convincing evidence of the importance of emotions in early development and learning.

- Emotions are the principal guides and motivators of behaviour and learning from infancy throughout life.
- Both positive and negative emotions – joy, interest, surprise, as well as sadness, anger and fear – play important roles in development.
- Young children's ability to express, understand, and regulate (manage) their emotions follows typical developmental sequences or pathways.
- Both biological and environmental factors influence that pathway – temperament, culture, relationships with adults and peers, and many other factors come into play throughout childhood and beyond.

Young children learn through interest, curiosity, and the desire to explore and discover. Interest and curiosity can enhance memory and comprehension. Similarly, feelings of joy and happiness are usually accompanied by confidence, energy and self esteem, helping to open a child's mind to new experiences as their thinking is often more creative and flexible as a result.

Play is an important learning tool for young children. When children play together, they create, imagine, practise skills and problem solve and this is usually done in a positive emotional environment of sharing and co-operation.

Healthy social and emotional development is revealed in a young child's perseverance and resilience in learning to master a particular skill or ability. Children who experience feelings of success and happiness at mastering a skill are more likely to tackle something new to enjoy feelings of happiness again.

¹The Emotional Development of Young Children, Marilou Hyson, 2nd Ed.

Signs of social and emotional well-being for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers

Every child is unique and every child develops at their own, individual rate. However, there are typical signs of social and emotional well-being that apply to children at different stages of their development.²

From birth to age 3 months:

Looks at faces; listens to voices; quiets when picked up (the majority of the time); cries, smiles and coos.

From 3 to 6 months: Gives warm smiles and laughs, cries when upset, and seeks comfort; is able to be comforted; shows excitement by waving arms and legs; likes to look at and be near special person(s).

From 6 to 9 months: Plays simple games; responds to own name; enjoys a daily routine; may get upset when separated from a familiar person(s); unsure of strangers; may need a security toy or blanket.

From 9 to 12 months: Able to be happy, angry and sad; shows feelings by smiling, crying, pointing; enjoys special relationship with parents and caregivers; curious about playthings; imitates others; enjoys books; trusts that needs will be met.

From 12 to 18 months: Safe and secure in loving relationships; curious about people; explores with enthusiasm; bold and confident; responds to changes in daily routine, vocabulary of 'mum', 'dad', and additional words and some two-word sentences by 18 months.

From 18 to 24 months: Laughs out loud, loving towards others, plays alongside other children, enthusiastic, protests and says

'No'; curious and likes to explore people places and things, enjoys books, stories and songs.

From 24 to 30 months: Uses words to communicate; playful with others; may be shy in unfamiliar places; likes people; uses pretend play; smiles and laughs; enjoys lots of different books.

From 30 to 36 months: Able to play independently; easily separates from primary caregivers in familiar places; begins to share with others without difficulty; shows feelings for others; expresses many feelings (sad, happy frightened, angry); enjoys books and games.

General signs for concern

Given that developmental stages differ in every child, there are some typical signs to look for if you are concerned about the rate of your child's social- emotional development. These signs include: Babies: Prolonged crying; difficult to comfort; resists being held; failing to thrive; eats or sleeps too much or too little; rarely seeks or makes eye contact (or typically avoids eye contact with parents); rarely coos, babbles or vocalises; appears unresponsive to efforts to interact or engage; has limited ability to regulate (manage) emotions.

Toddlers and pre-schoolers: Not apprehensive about strangers; excessively irritable or fearful; fails to explore his or her environment; lacks interest or curiosity about people or playthings; inappropriate or limited ability to express feelings; shows little preference for or excessive dependence on parents or other primary caregivers; often appears sad and withdrawn; inappropriate sexual behaviour; inappropriate impulsive or aggressive behaviour; excessive fears that do not respond to reassurance; frequent night terrors; extreme and frequent

tantrums; significant language delay; unusual need for order or cleanliness.

As a general guide, though, seek help if you notice your baby:

- doesn't consistently respond to sounds
- doesn't seem to see things, has white or cloudy pupils, or there's something about his eyes that bothers you
- doesn't look at you
- isn't interested in what's going on around her
- doesn't move or use both arms and/or legs
- has an unusual cry (for example, a high-pitched squeal)
- is persistently crying for more than about three hours every day (babies cry on average for about two hours a day, peaking between 6-8 weeks), especially after 3-4 months
- can't hold his head up by the time he's reached 3-4 months
- isn't sitting well by 10 months
- doesn't want to bear her own weight by 12 months

By three months, your baby has developed some impressive capabilities.

- He's curious about the world.
- He has strong feelings and attachments.
- He needs some boundaries.
- Best of all, when he smiles at you, it's not just wind – it actually means something!

What your toddler might be doing

Below is a guide to some of the important milestones for children aged 1-3.

By 12 months, toddlers can:

- pull up to standing position
- get into a sitting position
- cruise (move from place to place, always holding on)
- clap hands (play pat-a-cake) and wave bye-bye
- indicate wants in ways other than crying

²Social-Emotional Development in Young Children: A guide produced by the Michigan Department of Community Health.

- respond to their own names most of the time
- look where you point when you say, 'Look at the...'
- say dada and mama appropriately
- say at least one word
- point to things they want
- babble with changes in tone and pitch of voice
- take turns 'talking' with you

By 18 months, toddlers can:

- use two words (by 16½ months)
- drink from a cup
- point to body parts
- point to interesting objects to 'share' them with you
- bring things to show you
- point to objects so you will name them

By 2 years, toddlers can:

- take off an article of clothing
- 'feed' a doll
- build a tower of four cubes
- identify two items in a picture by pointing (by 23½ months)

By 2½ years, toddlers can:

- use 50 words or more
- combine words (by about 25 months)
- follow a two-step command without gestures (by 25 months)
- use pronouns like I, me and mine
- use at least 50 words and understand even more
- combine words (by about 25 months) like 'Daddy go' or 'All gone'
- follow a two-step command without gestures (by 25 months)

By 3 years, toddlers can:

- identify four pictures by naming
- wash and dry hands (just more than three years of age)
- identify a friend by naming
- throw a ball overhand
- speak and be understood half the time
- carry on a conversation of two or three sentences
- use prepositions (by, to, in, on top of)

Encouraging your child's social-emotional development

Help develop an emotional vocabulary

Talk about feelings, introduce a vocabulary (sad, angry, disappointed, happy) and over time build on this vocabulary so that your child has words at his or her disposal to use to describe feelings.

Focus on positives

Give appropriate praise for the things your child does well. Where there are shortfalls, talk about how things can be improved and help your child to set goals for achieving better results, or for appropriate behaviour.

Ask your child how they feel

Let your child know that their feelings matter and that you care about how they're feeling. Try not to dismiss their feelings with a quick "you'll be OK" or "that was bound to happen" or "never mind, you'll feel better tomorrow". Let them know they've been heard.

Role model ways to manage emotions

Small children rely on parents and carers to show them how. So by remaining calm, keeping things in perspective and using positive self-talk, children pick up on ways to approach conflict and problem solving, and manage some of the more negative emotions such as disappointment, hurt, sadness and anger.

Teach strategies for resilience and perseverance

The ability to stick at a task, persevere when the going gets tough and generally hang in there and achieve a goal, are skills that can be learned. Help your children to persevere, see the positives in getting to the end of a project, or mastering a skill, so that they can experience feelings of success and achievement.

Provide a quiet area

Often children need removing from a situation or conflict with a sibling, and a family quiet area gives everyone space to breathe and think things through.

The quiet area can be inside or outside, and as big or small as your home circumstances allow (it might even be a chair with a few books provided), as long as whoever is spending time in the quiet corner is left to themselves and not interrupted.

Allow children to experience natural consequences

Young children are not renowned for appropriate behaviour or rational decisions, but learning from mistakes, inappropriate behaviour or impulsive decisions is important for young children's healthy development.

Encourage decision making and choices

If given the chance to make choices, children have opportunities to solve problems. Encourage your child also to verbalise their preferences and within reason, take on board their wishes.

Encourage team work

Team family is a great way to share the load. Even very small children can be responsible for certain tasks around the home (for example, putting the place mats away after a meal). By giving children responsibility for something, we help to give them some ownership for the running of the household, and the pleasure that comes from a job well done.

Always praise effort, always give constructive criticism about how things might be done better, and never humiliate a child who has tried their hardest, but still managed to spill the dog food all over the kitchen floor.