

The Importance of Social and Emotional Development in Early Childhood



When we think of child development, many times we think in terms of physical or cognitive development. We tend to focus on physical milestones or more academic-type achievements. However, a child's social and emotional skills are just as important. We cannot expect these skills to develop without the nurture and support of parents and caregivers. Along with opportunities to work on their letters and numbers, children need to be provided with opportunities for social and emotional growth.



Although they are different, social and emotional areas of development are typically linked together. Social and emotional development in early childhood centers around building skills in self-awareness, emotion knowledge, emotion regulation, empathy, and interacting with others in positive ways. These skills have been identified as key factors in positive outcomes later in life. In a study entitled "Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness" published in *The American Journal of Public Health* in 2015, Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley found that healthy social and emotional development was linked to high school graduation rates, completion of college degrees, stable employment, and less criminal behaviors. We all want the children we care for to succeed in life. Therefore, we need to provide more opportunities for children to practice and grow these skills.

Social and Emotional Skills at Various Ages

There are a wide range of expectations for social and emotional development during the early childhood years. One of the best ways to promote social and emotional growth at any age is to model positive behavior and interactions. In addition, there are many other age-appropriate strategies.

Infants

One of the most important things we can do for the infants in our care is to encourage healthy attachment behavior. Babies need lots of affection and reassurance. Contrary to a popular belief, it is impossible to "spoil" a baby. Talking to infants, making eye contact, and paying attention to what they are interested in are all ways to show them that they are special. Routine care times provide great opportunities to bond with infants. Talking to them during diaper changes, cuddling while feeding them a bottle, and singing while rocking them to sleep are simple, but meaningful, ways to bond with the infants in your care. Also, the infant stage is a good time to begin to work on social skills by encouraging parallel play or singing songs/finger plays with more than one baby. They may not play together, but they will enjoy the interactions.

"Children are provided with many opportunities to work on their letters and numbers; they should be afforded the same amount of opportunities for social and emotional growth."

Toddlers

Even the youngest toddlers are beginning to develop self-help skills. These skills can be reinforced with praise and repetition. It can be tempting at times to complete a task for a toddler but there is much to be learned in the “process”. Patience is crucial! Provide opportunities for toddlers to play in groups, but be sure to stay close by to help with conflict resolution. It is important for us, as caregivers, to be sensitive to the difficult nature of turn-taking and learning to share. To limit frustration and conflict, think about your space. Take note of popular materials and try to have duplicates. Be sure to have ample space in each interest area. Toddlers are dealing with many big emotions that are hard for them to understand. Many responses, such as tantrums, are typical and part of the growth process.

Preschoolers

By the ages of 3 and 4 years, a child’s social and emotional skills are truly blossoming. There are so many ways to promote social and emotional development throughout the day. Think about your interest areas. Is your environment set up to encourage positive interactions between the children? Be sure to have space for multiple children to engage in each interest area. Provide opportunities for children to play or work together. Some examples may include large sets of blocks or floor puzzles. These are items that naturally encourage children to work together. The dramatic play area is a great space to observe interactions between children. Try to rotate different themes in your dramatic play area. This may help spark the interest of children who may not be interested in the “tried and true” housekeeping theme. Keep in mind that, at this age, children will still need help with navigating conflict. Give children the chance to work out disagreements but offer support and suggestions if needed. Be sure to let children know that it is okay to experience negative emotions. We all feel angry, sad, or jealous at times, and working through these emotions helps children develop coping skills. And remember to praise them when you see them practicing these newly developing skills!





Tips for Parents

As with any aspect of child development, it helps if parents and caregivers are on the same page with supporting the child's social and emotional growth. This would be a great topic for an educational parent event! Below are some tips for promoting social and emotional development at home.

- **Interactive reading-** When reading with children, parents should encourage them to ask questions, talk about the pictures, express how characters in the book felt, or share how they felt about the book.
- **Family culture-** Encourage parents to talk to their children about their family culture. This includes holidays, family traditions, and values.
- **Validate feelings-** Encourage parents to talk to their children about their feelings. When children share something that happened during their day ask, "how did you feel about that?" Remember, we want children to know that it is normal to feel sad or mad.
- **Make time for conversations-** Encourage parents to provide opportunities for children to talk to them without distractions. Turn off the TV during mealtimes or use car rides as an opportunity to talk about the day. In today's world, it is easy to get caught up in technology and other distractions, but it's important to be intentional about making time for meaningful conversation.

Social and Emotional Resources

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning- CSEFEL.vanderbilt.edu
- The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations- challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu
- Zero to Three- zerotothree.org

"School readiness" includes more than academic skills. The skills mentioned above provide children with the foundation for learning. We want to send our children to kindergarten equipped to work cooperatively with their peers and with an understanding of their emotions. We, as early childhood professionals, have the opportunity to set our children up for success. Many of these skills or strategies may seem small in the day to day business of the classroom, but these are truly tools that the children will build on for the rest of their lives.