

Social and emotional development

Social and emotional development in the early years

Birth to school age is the period of greatest growth and development. The early childhood years are not only a time for taking first steps or for saying first words. They are also when, through their relationships with others, children are building expectations about their world and the people in it and are developing their first:

- ▶ **sense of self** including feeling good about themselves and what they can do
- ▶ **social skills** to get along in life with others
- ▶ **emotional skills** such as recognising, expressing and managing a wide range of feelings.

These first skills are very important as they form the foundations for children's ongoing development and affect their mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

Further information about developing children's social and emotional skills is available in the other KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 2 resource sheets, including *Growing together in relationships*, *It's good to be me!*, *Getting along*, *Feelings matter*, and *Further resources*.

Supporting children's social and emotional development

Babies are born communicators and are capable of experiencing and expressing a wide range of emotions. Through their many positive interactions with caregivers, they learn to feel good about themselves and to enjoy relating with others. They also learn how to manage a range of feelings and to communicate effectively to get their needs met.

As babies grow into toddlers and later preschoolers, they can manage more things by themselves but still need guidance and support from their caregivers. Toddlers want to please adults and also to be themselves. They do this by imitating others and build their self confidence by 'helping' during everyday experiences such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping. They also adapt their behaviour according to their caregivers' responses and are learning ways to cope with conflict and to solve problems through their relationships with significant adults in their lives.

Preschoolers develop their social and emotional skills through a wide network of social relationships including other adults and children. Supported by their increased language, thinking and planning capabilities, preschoolers are more able to wait for things they want, to negotiate solutions to everyday problems and make decisions for themselves and with others.

Children's social and emotional skills are developing all the time. Skills may develop differently for different children. Children benefit from having many learning and practice opportunities.

Early Childhood Australia's *Everyday Learning Series* are booklets that offer everyday ways to support children's growth and development for parents and carers. Available from: http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/everyday_learning_series/about_everyday_learning.html

What early childhood services might be doing

Early childhood services can assist children in their social and emotional development in a number of ways, including;

- ✦ building relationships with families so that children feel safe, secure, and comfortable with early childhood staff
- ✦ getting to know each child
- ✦ being warm and responsive with children
- ✦ arranging developmentally appropriate experiences that promote social and emotional development (e.g., helping toddlers to begin taking turns and sharing)
- ✦ having conversations and storytelling with children about emotions and social situations
- ✦ talking with children about events, their feelings and the feelings of others and how they relate to behaviours.

Families can support children's developing social and emotional skills by:

- ▶ being affectionate and warm
- ▶ providing security for children by being consistent and predictable
- ▶ having frequent face-to-face interactions, including making eye contact, smiling and laughing together
- ▶ responding to your child's signals and preferences (e.g., knowing when to stop playing when your baby turns away signalling they have had enough for now)
- ▶ talking with children about what is happening and what will happen next
- ▶ being comforting and helping children to manage their feelings
- ▶ encouraging children to explore, play and try new things
- ▶ using social and emotional skills yourself and showing children how they work (e.g., by talking with children about your own mistakes, saying sorry and trying to make things better for the child you show them that these are a part of life and can be learning opportunities for everyone)
- ▶ describing and labelling emotions (e.g., 'I enjoyed doing the puzzle together with you. It was fun!' or 'Are you feeling sad today because your friend is not here?')
- ▶ storytelling, playing games, singing, dancing, and imaginary play
- ▶ supporting children to make choices and solve problems as appropriate for their developmental level (e.g., 'Do you want to wear your red dress or your blue dress?')
- ▶ providing opportunities for interactions with others (e.g., going to play groups with other children, inviting a child to your home for a play, going to the park where there are other children playing).

Articles on a range of issues relevant to children's development are available at: <http://raisingchildren.net.au> and www.kidscount.com.au

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. KidsMatter Early Childhood welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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