

Growing together in relationships



Early childhood is when children begin developing their social and emotional skills which influence children's mental health and wellbeing, now and in the future. Children learn these skills through their important relationships including families, caregivers, peers and early childhood staff.

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



Children develop social and emotional skills through their relationships with their parents and caregivers. Children who experience warm, responsive and trusting relationships are better able to manage their feelings and cope with the ups and downs of life.

Warm, responsive and trusting relationships are built from many positive interactions over time. These occur when the caregiver is 'in tune' with the child's signals and needs, and responds in a warm and positive way: for example, when a caregiver understands that their baby is irritable after a busy day with visitors and responds by soothing and calming them before bedtime. Being 'in tune' means that caregivers are able to understand the meaning behind their child's behaviour. Over time the child can trust that their needs will be heard and met by their responsive caregiver. However, it is not always possible to be 'in tune' with children one hundred per cent of the time, especially when faced with competing demands, such as work and family life. What matters is that as caregivers we are warm and responsive in interactions with children and are able to help children manage their feelings by being calm and in control most of the time.

What early childhood services might be doing

Staff in early childhood services will be using many of the same strategies to develop positive relationships with children and foster the development of their social and emotional skills. They can also support relationships between home and child by:

- ✦ helping children maintain a sense of connection with their families whilst at the service, (e.g., using photographs and items from home)
- ✦ being with children and acknowledging their feelings when they separate from their parents or carers and arranging strategies with children and their families to ease separations (e.g., setting up a 'goodbye' routine)
- ✦ sharing information and ideas about the child's experiences at the service with the child's family
- ✦ inviting parents to share family stories and building them into the child's experiences at the service
- ✦ helping children learn how to get along with others (e.g., encouraging children to join in group experiences)
- ✦ arranging opportunities for children to play together, and supporting their relationship-building efforts.

Warm, responsive and trusting relationships help children to understand how positive relationships work and what to expect from them. Children learn social and emotional skills and are motivated to go on to create their own positive relationships with others as they grow and develop.



Supporting social and emotional development through relationships

Relationships are strengthened and social and emotional skills developed through repeated experiences of 'give and take', for example, when a baby's coos and babbles are imitated by a caregiver with similar sounds and noises. Having conversations with children as they get older about these 'give and take' interactions helps children to develop their social and emotional skills further. 'Give and take' becomes sharing, cooperating and taking turns and developing friendships with other children. This helps children to understand the feelings of others and how to think things through before acting.

Growing together in relationships is continued on the next page





What parents and carers can do

Taking time

Take time to really get to know your child through playing with them, observing their patterns and preferences and sharing everyday conversations with them. Being aware of your child's needs, likes, and interests can help you to be more responsive and 'in tune' and also appreciate what is special about them. For example:

- ▶ being aware of how your baby communicates when they are tired, such as by yawning, tugging their ear, becoming irritable or less involved in play, means you can help them to get the rest they need
- ▶ recognising when your child is happy and enjoying themselves means that you are able to give them more space and time to do the things they like and be sensitive not to intervene too early or try to control your child's experiences.

Tuning in

Understanding the meaning behind your child's behaviour will help you to respond appropriately with encouragement, comfort and support (e.g., snuggling together and quietly reading a book to allow an irritable child to have some rest). Whilst it is not possible to understand your child perfectly all of the time, snuggling and having cosy moments together provides security and comfort that are important for your child's mental health and wellbeing.



Being there

- ▶ Encouraging and supporting your child to try out new things for themselves and knowing when to encourage and not step in too soon will help to build their confidence and independence.
- ▶ Having conversations with your child to help build relationship skills, such as negotiation and compromise (e.g., deciding together what to have for lunch).

Sharing experiences

- ▶ Joining in with children's experiences, celebrating their achievements and sharing joy helps them to know that they are special to you and builds their confidence in forming relationships with others.
- ▶ Providing 'teamwork' experiences where each family member has a role and can share jobs, such as preparing dinner or tidying up, helps children to cooperate and develop a sense of independence.

Parents and carers do lots of these things everyday which helps their children to learn important life skills and also strengthens their emotional bonds with their children.



Suzie's story



Suzie, aged three, had just started child care and was having a hard time saying goodbye to her mum Vesna in the mornings. Alexia, one of the childcare staff, met Suzie and Vesna in the morning and suggested that they choose a family photo to bring in so that Suzie could have a reminder of Mum and Dad when she missed them during the day. At home, Suzie picked a photo from the family album and put it in her backpack, Vesna also picked a photo and put it in her bag. "When I miss you during the day I will look at your photo to feel better" said Vesna. "Me too" said Suzie. The next morning at child care, Vesna noticed Suzie starting to get upset. "Mummy has to go now, I am going to miss you, but remember we both have our photos to look at to make us feel better until I come back in the afternoon." Alexia noticed what was happening and came over to Vesna and Suzie, "Can I please have a look at your photo?" she asked. Suzie excitedly took the photo out of her bag to show Alexia. "Ooh how happy you all look together! Let's make a pretty frame for your photo."



The following websites may also be of interest:

www.kidscount.com.au – see 'Responding to Children' and

<http://raisingchildren.net.au> – see 'Connecting and communicating' under the babies', toddlers' and preschoolers' tabs.

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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