

About social development

Social development involves learning the values, knowledge and skills that enable children to relate to others effectively and to contribute in positive ways to family, school and the community. This kind of learning is passed on to children directly by those who care for and teach them, as well as indirectly through social relationships within the family or with friends, and through children's participation in the culture around them. Through their relationships with others and their growing awareness of social values and expectations, children build a sense of who they are and of the social roles available to them. As children develop socially, they both respond to the influences around them and play an active part in shaping their relationships.

Influences on children's social development

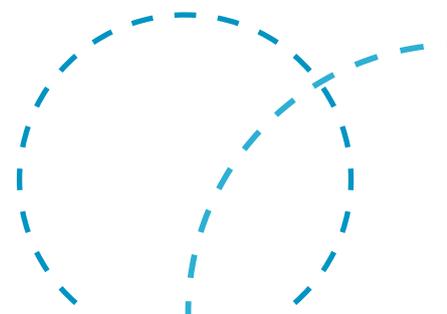
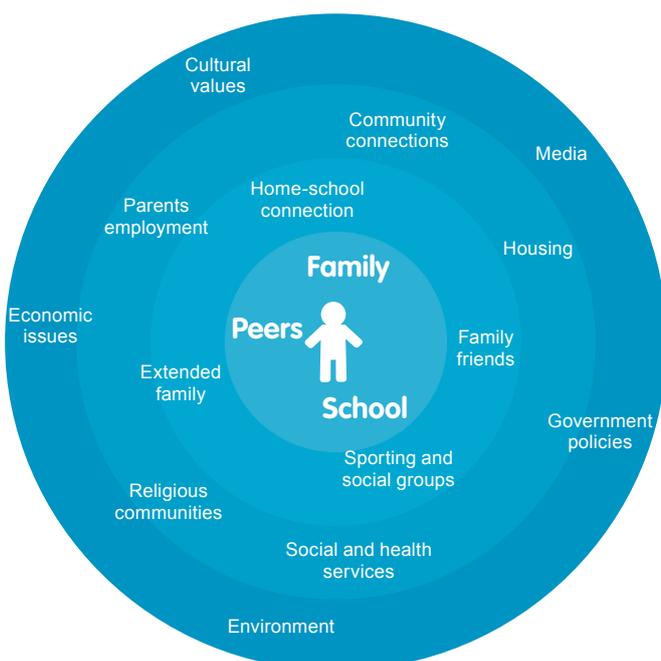
While parents and carers are clearly the first and most important influences on children's social development, there are many other influential aspects of the social environment. Examples of the many influences on children's development are shown in the diagram below.

The people and settings that are most closely involved with the child – family, school and peers – are shown at the centre of the diagram. Through their daily contact with parents, carers, family members, school staff, as well as with their peers, children learn about the social world and about the rules, practices and values that support it. By actively participating in these relationships, children also affect the ways that adults and their peers relate to them.

In addition, children's development is influenced by wider networks of social support (represented in the diagram's central circles), including extended family, friends and any community, cultural or religious groups a child may be part of. These networks provide opportunities for children to develop their social awareness and skills as they relate with different people and experience a range of roles and expectations.

As shown in the outer circle in the diagram, children's lives are also shaped by the broader social circumstances that impact on their families and communities, such as access to social and health services, parents' employment and income, or their ability to balance work and family time. In particular, children's sense of social connection is often influenced by community attitudes and by cultural values, including those they encounter in the media.

Through their relationships and connections with others, children build a sense of who they are and where they fit in the social world. Coming to an understanding about self and others is therefore a central goal of children's social development.



Developmental trends in children's self-concept

The ideas, beliefs and knowledge that children have about who they are, what they can do and where they fit in society help to shape their understanding of themselves. Children base their self-concepts on feedback they receive from others as well as their own judgments. The kinds of things that primary school children take into account in developing their self-concepts include how well they are able to succeed with schoolwork and other activities, how they look, and how they get on with family and peers. Developmental patterns in the ways children typically describe themselves are related to their developing capacities for thinking and for understanding and managing their emotions and behaviour. As shown in the following table, preschool children often have very high opinions of their abilities. During primary school, children become much more aware of how their abilities and achievements compare with those of others.

Typical developmental changes in children's self-concepts

Developmental stage	What children might say about themselves	What it shows
Preschool	"I am four years old. I live with my Mum and Dad and my little sister. I love to play football. I can kick the ball really far. Watch me!"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describes physical appearance, family context and favourite activity• Has high opinion of own abilities and wants to show you
Primary school	"I am pretty good at maths because I get good marks. But I'm not so good at English, not like Sophie. Kids like to play with me because I'm happy most of the time and I'm kind."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compares self with others• Determines own ability level by ranking performance against that of peers• Able to make a (more) realistic assessment of own abilities
Secondary school	"I'm pretty talkative and funny with my friends. I'm an extrovert. At home I can be pretty moody. I get annoyed with my parents because they always seem to be on my back. But, I guess, where would I be without them?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to reflect on and evaluate own qualities• Understands and accepts that personal characteristics can be changeable and inconsistent• Is able to integrate them into a coherent sense of self

It is very important for children's strengths and efforts to be recognised in order to support the development of a positive self-concept and to motivate children to be positively engaged in learning and in their relationships. Poor self-concept can be a significant contributing factor to children's emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Culture and self-concept

Having a strong cultural identity enhances children's self-concept and promotes a sense of connectedness and belonging. Children's cultural identity is nurtured when they learn about their own cultural traditions and when those around them show respect for their cultural values. Teaching children to respect and appreciate variations and differences between cultures is therefore very important for all children's social development.

Children from minority cultural groups can encounter differences between the rules and expectations required at school and those they are used to at home. When the differences are not acknowledged, or when the cultural traditions children identify with are ignored or minimised, it can negatively affect children's cultural identity development and sense of belonging.

Children from minority cultures may be subjected to stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity, religion, gender, appearance, social class or sexuality. Discrimination and bullying can have serious effects on children's mental health and wellbeing as well as their social development. By contrast, overcoming discrimination has been found to have positive effects on self-concept. It is very important for parents, carers and school staff to encourage and support children to take positive action against discrimination and bullying by speaking up and reporting incidents.

Learning social values

Children's ability to understand others and take their needs and views into account develops over time. Young children are naturally self-focussed. They often play beside, rather than with, other children and tend to think that everyone sees things the same way that they do. In early primary school children learn that others may see things differently from them. Then, as their thinking skills develop, children are more able to understand another person's point of view and, finally, to appreciate multiple ways of looking at the same event or situation.

Teaching children how to put themselves in someone else's shoes helps them to relate better to others and manage conflict more effectively. It promotes caring, respect and fairness. Research shows that children who have learned to value others are more likely to include and appreciate children who are different from them or who are viewed negatively by others.

Research into moral development has highlighted how social behaviour reflects the attitudes people hold about social conventions and about themselves. Learning to take account of others' feelings, perspectives and expectations contributes to children's understanding of social values, and to the values and ethics they choose for themselves. Using an example where children have broken the window of a neighbour's car playing a game, the following table shows how children use different moral reasoning to decide what to do and say.

Example	Kind of moral thinking
Ella says: "I dare you." Tao says: "Let's go before anyone sees us." Ella says: "We don't know anything about it."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thinking is focussed on impact on self• Decisions about right and wrong are based on avoiding punishment or on personal gain
Harry says: "We're in trouble now." Tao says: "They told me to do it."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasises responsibility and what others think• Decisions are based on gaining approval from others and/or on meeting laws and social obligations
Harry says: "It wasn't his fault. It was that stupid game."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasises understanding the particular circumstances and coming to a fair outcome• Decisions are based on principles of justice and compassion

Children learn to make ethical judgments through having practice in putting themselves in others' shoes and through being encouraged to reflect on issues that involve social and moral values. Families and schools can work together to help children understand and learn to act on values like respect, responsibility, caring for others, honesty, cooperation and acceptance of people's differences.

Key points for supporting children's social development

Children's earliest and most extensive learning about social relationships occurs in the family. Parents and carers can support positive social development when they model respect and consideration and encourage children to be similarly respectful in all their relationships.

- Provide care and support by tuning into children's needs. Show you are willing to listen and take children's feelings into consideration.
- Help children to develop social skills by providing coaching and teaching them to think through and solve the day-to-day social difficulties they encounter. Supervise and support children's social activities without taking over.
- Ask questions that encourage children to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Questions like, "How would you feel if...?" help children learn skills for perspective-taking. Asking questions in a supportive way helps children to think through situations and encourages them to take others' feelings and perspectives into account.
- Discuss moral issues with children and encourage them to state their opinions and reasons.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

