

Monthly Message: Social and Emotional Development

When kindergarten readiness skills are described, it's easy to imagine children singing the Alphabet Song or naming shapes around the house. These academic skills are only part of being kindergarten ready. One domain of readiness that can be overshadowed is social and emotional development. This domain lays the foundation for learning and it is linked with good academic performance in school. It is built from the quality of all relationships in a child's life. The adult-child relationship is foundational in the early years. As a child grows, relationships with peers and even the child's own view of himself or herself affects their social and emotional development.

Through nurturing activities caring adults do naturally, like feeding a hungry baby and hugging a child, positive attachments are developed. Children have a hard-coded need to experience security and love. When a parent responds to an infant's cries consistently, trust is built. The baby learns that his or her needs will be taken care of. This trust between parent and child helps children trust other adults in their lives like teachers. Supportive adult relationships are necessary for optimal development. If a child experiences chronic neglect or abuse early in life, this toxic stress actually changes the structure of the developing brain. This can lead to developmental delays that affect learning and lead to health issues in adulthood.

During the preschool years, peer to peer interactions and self-talk gain importance. Self-talk is a child's inner voice. Children tend to become what they hear and believe. If Tommy hears "You are so messy and always breaking things," then Tommy may see himself as a clumsy person and act that out. But if he hears "Tommy, you are doing such a great job gently putting your toys away," those positive words promote confidence and pride. Listening to songs with an "I can do it" message are a great way to help children develop a positive inner voice. Words are powerful during these developmental years.

Skills like bouncing back from being teased or sitting still in a group to listen to a story are all examples of healthy social and emotional development. They involve the ability to manage feelings and impulses which are needed to grow and learn. In the first years of life, children use sounds and actions to communicate, such as crying or hitting. Like any other skill, handling emotions well has to be taught. By naming feelings, you are teaching words to express emotions in appropriate ways.

If Emma crosses her arms, tenses her brow and pouts her lips when grandma says no to watching a movie before bed, her grandmother could say "You are mad because you want to watch a movie and I said no. I get mad sometimes too when I don't get what I want. How about we read a book together instead?" This interaction not only connects words with feelings and actions, but it shows that Emma's feelings matter. It also gives her a chance to make a choice her grandmother is comfortable with. It's important to remember that children share many of the same emotions adults do; anger, frustration, worry, and fear. Feeling these emotions is not wrong. If Emma knows that hitting is not ok when she is mad, but it is okay to feel mad and she can take a deep breath to calm down, then she is showing signs of self-regulation which she will need throughout life.

"I like sharing my toys with my friend Grace"

Examples of Social and Emotional Skills Include:

- Displays self-control
- Expresses feelings with words
- Listens and pays attention
- Pride in accomplishments
- Has a positive self image
- Asks for help when needed
- Shows affection to familiar people
- Aware of other people's feelings



Skill Building with Infants and Toddlers

- Respond to your child's needs. You can't spoil a baby with too many hugs and kisses. Infants may use crying to signal hunger or a wet diaper, but they sometimes use it because they want to be held. Feeling close to you is a need.
- Engage in back and forth interactions. When you respond to your child's coo's or roll a ball back and forth with your toddler, you are teaching communication skills. Try to make eye contact whenever possible.
- Don't sneak away. It can be tempting to leave your child when he or she is distracted to avoid a tantrum. In the long run, the best approach is to give a quick, upbeat goodbye and reassure your child that you will return. This way he or she learns when you leave, you will come back.
- Praise good behavior and effort. Children feel proud of their accomplishments when it earns them positive attention. Encouraging good behavior consistently helps him or her develop self-esteem and reduces challenging behavior.

Skill Building with Pre-Kindergarteners

- Take time to talk about feelings, including your own, every day. Spend time reflecting on what happened during the day and how it made you feel. Ex. "This morning I got stuck in traffic on the way to work which made me frustrated."
- Teach your child how to ask for help. This helps your child learn that it's okay to ask for help.
- Identify feelings. You can use characters from books or movies to point out feelings. The movie "Inside Out" or reading the book Llama Llama Mad at Mama by Anna Dewdney may be fun ways you could help your child spot emotions.
- Teach your child appropriate ways to manage feelings. Some families create a safe place in the home, like a corner of a room with pillows or a stuffed animal, for children to calm down during a tantrum. You could teach your child to pause and take three big breaths when strong feelings rise.
- Create routines. Children feel safe when they know what to expect. Develop a consistent routine throughout the day. Some families may choose to create a visual schedule that shows the order things happen. For example, a morning routine can be displayed using a picture of a toothbrush, a plate of food, and clothing.
- Let your child problem solve. If your child's block tower keeps falling or he or she gets into an argument with a peer on the playground, resist stepping in and fix the problem. Pause to give your child space to continue in a challenging task or to work out social issues. Step in if he or she asks for help or if things do not go well.
- Set a good example. Your child looks up to you to model acceptable behavior. Be sure to display the traits you want your child to have. Apologizing when you make a mistake, speaking kindly about others, saying please and thank you, or not yelling when you are angry teaches your child how to behave and relate with others.
- Make time for play. Arrange time for your child to play with other similar aged children. Encourage pretend play, using puppets or stuffed animals, as a way to act out emotions or teach appropriate behavior.

The Center for Disease Control offers a milestones chart featuring social and emotional indicators for children ages 2 months to 5 years. Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/>