

# Social and emotional development

A guide for Parents, Carers and Educators



Social and  
emotional  
development  
and learning.

Social and emotional development – A guide for Parents, Carers and Educators

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By being responsive, predictable and calm, you give your child the perfect environment to learn social and emotional skills.



All behaviour is an attempt to communicate something.



Teach children to recognise and label their emotions.

## Social and emotional development and learning

From birth to 6 years, a child's **social** and **emotional** development is rapid and intense. It is during this period that we can provide caring relationships and guidance to help our children acquire the early skills and understanding to recognise and manage their emotions. We can help them develop the social skills they need to make friends, to solve their problems and to understand the feelings of others. Just like learning to talk, walk and read, this learning takes time.

There are things that we can do  
that will help a great deal.

# Be responsive, predictable and calm.

Loving relationships, and the way we respond to their cries, smiles and gestures provide babies and small children with a sense of comfort and safety.

**Babies are learning who they are by how they are treated.**



We are **responsive** to their needs by feeding them when they are hungry and comforting them when they are distressed. Babies also need us to smile and laugh with them and respond to their attempts to communicate.

Children rely on us to be **predictable** in the ways we respond to them, and the routines we establish that help them to feel secure. Providing routines for when we eat, sleep, play and bath all contribute to a comforting sense of wellbeing and safety for babies and children.

It isn't easy to be **calm** when you've missed sleep or when your child is grumpy, distressed or just really demanding for your attention. Recognising when you are feeling stressed will help you to avoid saying something you wish you hadn't! Even very young babies can sense when you are anxious or agitated, and they will likely respond by becoming agitated themselves. Finding and then practising the things that help you to regain calm (such as slow breathing, counting, calming music) is essential. And this will also be really helpful when you begin to teach your children to recognise and start to regulate their own feelings and behaviour.





# Teach your child to recognise and label emotions

When they are very young, we can begin to teach children the words to match how they are feeling, and to recognise what those feelings look like. This is the first step in them being able to manage their emotions and to show empathy to others. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Teaching children about their emotions can be fun and is one of the ways to prevent them using challenging behaviour.



## Things that help

Simply state/acknowledge how your child is feeling. "You look really excited! I see your eyes are big and your mouth is open."

State how others are feeling. "Gee, that little boy is really mad. I see he is crying and making fists with his hands. I wonder why?"

State how you are feeling. "I am really frustrated that the lawn mower is broken. I think I'm going to take a break."

Read stories about emotions.



## Use positive language

As children begin to make choices and experiment with doing things for themselves, we can find ourselves frequently saying things like “don’t”, “stop” and “no”. Swapping what *not* to do with *what* to do is a powerful way to improve the tone of our conversations.

It also gives children far more information about what is expected of them. What might seem obvious to us is not necessarily so for children. “Please keep your feet on the floor” tells the child exactly what is expected. By telling your child exactly what he can do and when, you make it easier for him to do it, and make it more likely to be done. Grizzling and tantrums occur less often when we focus on using positive language.

## Things that help

Try saying “do” instead of “don’t”.  
Tell your child what she can do. Swap “Don’t cut that!” with “Scissors are for cutting paper or playdough. Which one do you want to cut?”

Offer a choice. When you provide your child with a choice of things that he can do, wear or play, he is more likely to choose one of the options you have offered because it makes him feel like he is in control. This also works for you as a parent because you choose the choices.

Tell your child “when”. When your child asks to do something, rather than saying no, acknowledge her wish and tell her when she might be able to do it. This answer feels more like a “yes” to a child.

Use “first-then” language. Another way to tell a child when he can do something in a positive way is to use a “first-then” statement. For example, if he wants to watch TV but you would like him to pick up his toys, you could say “First, pick up your toys and then you can watch TV.”

Give your child time to think. They are still learning language and how to use it, and so may take more seconds or even minutes to process what you are asking and then to respond.

Aim for a ratio of 5-1 positive to corrective interactions with your child. It’s tricky to do but a powerful way to keep your relationship happy and peaceful!

# Understand that all behaviour is an attempt to communicate a message.


Along the way to becoming socially successful, children will do things that challenge us like throwing tantrums, refusing to do as we ask or even hitting out. These kinds of behaviours are to be expected from children as they learn to deal with the strong emotions attached to disappointment, frustration, anger and even excitement.

If we **understand** that all behaviour is an attempt to communicate something, it is easier to respond calmly. We can then gradually **teach** children how to communicate their wants, needs and emotions more helpfully.

Children will use certain behaviour repeatedly **if it works** for them. They either: 1) get something, such as attention, a toy or a nap, or, 2) get out of doing something, such as going to bed, eating a new food or getting buckled in the car seat.







“We can help them develop the social skills they need to make friends, to solve their problems and to understand the feelings of others.”





**Observe.** Watch carefully. What is happening when your child uses the behaviour? What happens before the behaviour starts? What happens after?



**List.** Have a guess about what your child is trying to get, or avoid doing, by using the behaviour. The more you watch your child, the easier it will be to have a guess about why the behaviour is occurring.



**Track.** Keep track of when the behaviour occurs. Do you always see the behaviours just before nap or meal time? Perhaps your child is tired or hungry and you can change your routine to fit better with her tiredness or hunger?



**Teach.** Once you have an understanding of why your child chooses to use a behaviour that you find challenging, you can teach him a new way to behave in that situation. For example, if the child uses whining or shouting to get your attention, you could teach her to tap your arm and wait. Remember though, whatever you teach your child to do instead of what they are currently doing **MUST** work every time. If the new way doesn't work, the old way will resurface! And, as with all learning, practice is important.

# Getting ready for school



Starting school is a huge transition for children. It's an exciting time, but can be daunting, for them and for us. For some children, it will be their first prolonged period away from a parent/carer, it may be the first time some have had to be part of a group of peers and for all, there will be the challenge of learning what the expectations of this new environment are, and how they can meet these.

We can help our children to get ready for the social demands of school in the same way we help them get ready to read, count and create by teaching, playing, giving opportunities for practice and celebrating their successes. Some things that can help get ready socially are;

## Helping them to say goodbye

This can be a big one for some children. Preparing for what will happen, including where and when we will be saying goodbye, will help. It's important that your child knows that you will be back when school finishes, and that you remain calm and smiley during the goodbye time. It might be an idea to practise by arranging play dates (where you leave) before school begins. Some children take a little longer to get used to being away from mum/dad. Patience and practice will help.

## Teaching and practising waiting

Learning to wait can be a struggle. Again, if we introduce the idea of waiting, use the words when good waiting is required and then reinforce with words like "Wow, you waited so well just now" the requirement to wait will be much easier for children.

## Teach and practise sharing and taking turns

It can be very difficult to share and take turns, particularly if you are being asked to share a game that you are really enjoying. Children who have been taught how, and given lots of practice with each other, will find school an easier place to be and will also find it much easier to make friends.

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