

Social-Emotional Development: An Introduction

“Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development.” - National Research Council, 2000

Think back over the past couple of days. What are some emotions that you recall feeling? Do you recall feeling happy, sad, angry, fearful or upset in response to receiving news or having a conversation or argument? Now consider how your feelings at the time might have affected some of your social interactions or relationships with others.

Emotions affect who we are and they influence our behaviors, actions and interactions with others. Think about times you were happy. How did those feelings affect your behavior and, in turn, your interactions? Consider times when you were sad, angry, or upset. How did *those* feelings influence your behaviors and interactions?

Labeling, identifying, and managing emotions are essential skills for our meaningful and successful participation in life experiences, both in our professional and personal lives. Difficulty managing emotions can cause frustration and disappointment, and can strongly influence our relationships with others and our overall quality of life.

Consider all the different people you have relationships with. At home, your relationships might include your spouse, parents, children or other family members, and friends. You also have relationships with the people you see at work: other staff members, families, and children in your program. There's also the person who delivers your mail, your doctor, and your neighbors. How important are your relationships to your daily life and well-being? What would it be like without those relationships?

Without relationships, it would be difficult to achieve a sense of belonging or acceptance or to feel like you are part of a community. Relationships are at the foundation of social-emotional health. Young children have spent the first years of their lives creating deep bonds with their families and key people in their lives, and are ready to begin developing strong relationships and bonds with their peers, teachers, and other individuals.

What is Social-Emotional Development?

The word “develop” originally meant “to unfold,” which can offer an understanding and a visual idea of what happens during a child’s earliest years. Developmental changes are rapid during the first years of life. New skills constantly emerge for young children, changing the ways they relate to the world and their interactions with the people around them. Highlighted below are 5 key components of social and emotional development. It is important to recognize that young children are just beginning to establish these competences. We should not expect infants or toddlers to have advanced self-awareness or decision-making skills, but rather know that young children are on a path, with guidance from their families and caregivers, to acquiring these skills.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional development (also called social-emotional learning) consists of the following five core components:

1. Self-awareness:

Self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and possessing a

well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism. Examples of questions someone who is self-aware may ask are:

- What are my thoughts and feelings?
- What causes those thoughts and feelings?
- How can I express my thoughts and feelings respectfully?

We can see evidence of self-awareness when young children state they are “sad,” “scared,” or “happy,” or when they express autonomy in wanting to do things for themselves. For example, when a young child wants to pour his or her own milk, and says “I do it!” this displays some understanding of their capabilities.

2. Self-management:

Self-management is the ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals. Examples of questions someone who has good self-management may ask are:

- What different responses can I have to an event?
- How can I respond to an event as constructively as possible?

When a young child reaches for a caregiver when he or she is upset, this is a sign of self-management. The child seeks an important person to help him or her calm down. We can also see self-management in young children every time they ask to be next with a toy instead of taking it out of a peer’s hand.

3. Social awareness:

Social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school and community resources and supports. Examples of questions someone who has good social awareness may ask are:

- How can I better understand other people’s thoughts and feelings?
- How can I better understand why people feel and think the way they do?

Anytime an infant looks concerned when another child is upset, or a toddler reaches out to comfort a friend who is sad, or labels characters’ emotions in books, these actions demonstrate the beginning of empathy and social awareness.

4. Relationship skills:

Relationship skills are the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed. Examples of questions someone who has good relationships skills may ask are:

- How can I adjust my actions so that my interactions with different people turn out well?
- How can I communicate my expectations to other people?
- How can I communicate with other people to understand and manage their expectations of me?

For young children, when they show interest in being with others, whether this involves back-and-forth communication exchanges with a adults, or exchanging smiles or giggles with other children, these are relationship skills. We can also see early cooperation skills when young children take turns going down the slide, or passing a ball back-and-forth.

5. Responsible decision-making:

Responsible decision-making is the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others. Examples of questions someone who is a responsible decision-maker may ask are:

- What consequences will my actions have on myself and others?
- How do my choices align with my values?
- How can I solve problems effectively?

When a young child wants to climb and moves to the classroom climber instead of pulling him or herself up on the snack table, he or she has displayed some early responsible decision-making.

Social-Emotional Development of Children

According to Zero to Three, “within the context of one’s family, community and cultural background, social and emotional health is the child’s developing capacity to form secure relationships, experience and regulate emotions, and explore and learn.” There is growing evidence that children’s social-emotional development is associated with better outcomes at home, at school, and in the community. Social-emotional development refers to how children learn to express their feelings, develop relationships, and practice social skills.

Children begin developing social-emotional skills at birth. Infants begin turning their heads toward their caregivers’ voices, looking toward their caregivers and cooing, and crying to let their family members and early childhood professionals know they need something. Their emotional signals, such as smiling, crying, or demonstrating interest and attention, strongly influence the behaviors of others. Similarly, the emotional reactions of others affect children’s social behaviors. As children mature and develop, their social-emotional skills become less centered on having their own needs met by their family members and early childhood professionals and more centered on participating in routines and enjoying experiences with friends, family members, and early childhood professionals.

The early childhood years are a critical time for the formation of positive feelings toward oneself, others, and the larger world. When children are encouraged, nurtured and accepted by adults and peers, they are more likely to be well adjusted. On the contrary, children who are neglected, rejected or abused are at risk for social and mental health challenges.

Children develop social-emotional skills in the context of their relationships with their primary caregivers and within their families and cultures. Consider how diverse our society is. You can imagine that this diversity is also expressed in the ways families from different cultures teach children to manage emotions, socialize and engage with others. For example, in some cultures, children are taught to avoid eye contact. For other cultures, eye contact is an essential component of social interaction. Culture also affects parenting practices and how individuals are taught to deal with emotions, including handling stress and coping with adversity.

Family priorities affect social-emotional competence. For example, some families might place a high value on talking about emotions and expressing them as they occur, whereas other families may value doing the opposite. As an early childhood teacher, you must be sensitive and respectful of

individual differences in social-emotional development when engaging with children in your class and their families.

What Does Social-Emotional Development Look Like in Infants and Toddlers?

Social interactions start early. Research shows that infants recognize and prefer the smell, touch, and sounds of their own mother. Infants also display connections with others and interest in relationships by imitating caregivers' facial expressions. Through imitation, infants show their awareness of important family members and early childhood professionals.

Rewarding early social experiences helps support the next level of social development. For example, secure relationships with trusted adults, who provide a sense of safety and a base for the toddler's exploration and discoveries, support toddlers' exploration of new objects and places. When encountering something unfamiliar, the toddler can look to a trusted adult and depend on the adult's emotions for guidance about how to respond. The adult's reaction influences the toddler's feelings about the situation and provides information about how to move forward.

Within the context of trusting relationships, infants and toddlers also begin to develop self-regulation and initiative skills. When infants' and toddlers' needs are consistently met with help from adult family members and early childhood professionals, they learn they are cared about and loved.

Adult Social-Emotional Well-Being Impacts Infant-Toddler Social-Emotional Development

Relationships are central to infant and toddler development. Early interactions with family and early childhood professionals have lasting influences on development throughout life. Infants and toddlers are not just affected by their own relationships with adults, they are affected by the relationships adults have with one another.

Mothers and fathers, along with other adult family members in the home, play a critical role in their children's development, and each relationship has an influence on the infant's and toddler's development. Infants and toddlers also form relationships with those who care for them on a consistent basis outside of the home. Infants' and toddlers' approaches to forming relationships with early childhood professionals work in similar ways to relationship development with families. For example:

- Infants and toddlers show specific relationship behaviors to caregivers when they feel stressed.
- Infants and toddlers need caregivers to respond to them in a responsive and sensitive manner.
- Infants and toddlers learn how to trust others and regulate their emotions in the context of their relationships with caregivers.

Therefore, infants' and toddlers' social-emotional development is dependent upon the social-emotional well-being of his or her family and early childhood professionals. Adults who have positive relationships and life experiences are often better prepared to be responsive and emotionally available to an infant or toddler. When adults are emotionally available, they can more easily recognize infants' or toddlers' cues and respond appropriately to children's needs. This level of responsiveness helps support a young child's healthy development, including social-emotional development.

What Does Social-Emotional Development Look Like in Preschoolers?

During the preschool years, children learn to take turns, share toys and materials, play near each other, talk with peers, and talk about their feelings and the feelings of others. They also begin to follow classroom and home routines independently. Children learn social skills from watching others interact and through conversations with adults and peers. As an early childhood professional, you can

play a significant role in promoting children's social-emotional skills if you engage them early on in meaningful experiences with peers and other adults in your classroom and program.

The following are examples of social-emotional skills preschool children engage in daily:

- Singing along with peers during circle, center or book time
- Holding hands while walking down the hall during transitions
- Hugging a friend who is sad
- Sharing a snack with a friend, sibling or caregiver
- Taking turns while building a tower with blocks with a friend
- Passing out silverware to all children while preparing for lunch
- Making statements such as "I made this all by myself!" when accomplishing tasks
- Giving a friend a toy or object that he or she has asked for
- Telling a teacher he or she misses Mom or Dad
- Getting ready for bath time when Mom says it is time to take a bath
- Talking on the phone with a family member who lives far away
- Telling a family member or teacher that he or she is sad about something
- Roleplaying experiences such as going grocery shopping, visiting the doctor, or family roles
- Waiting in line for a turn at the drinking fountain
- Putting a stuffed animal down for a nap and telling peers to "be quiet, because my pet is taking a nap"
- Completing a difficult puzzle

Social-Emotional Growth and Young Children's Development

Social-emotional development affects young children's growth later in life, and therefore it is closely linked to the development of other skills. Social-emotional skills are central to children's physical well-being, self-expression, learning, and development of relationships. Consider the following:

- Learning to read involves regulating emotions and activity levels and requires the child to sit and attend to a task
- Learning to walk, swim, run or ride a bike involves regulating activity level, attending to adult directions, focusing on muscle control, and controlling impulses.
- Learning to communicate involves using socially appropriate strategies for interaction.
- Learning self-help skills involves following directions, controlling emotions to complete challenging tasks, and knowing when and how to ask for help.
- Being successful in school involves understanding classroom expectations and participating in large- and small-group activities with peers.

Research supports that success in school is strongly linked to early positive social-emotional development, making it critical to foster social-emotional learning during the early childhood years.

What Does Social-Emotional Development Look Like In Young School-Age Children?

Young school-age children are working hard to develop their social-emotional skills. They are learning the importance of expressing and managing their feelings. They will begin to understand their varied

emotions, how to handle them, and how they apply to different experiences and situations. Young school-age children are also learning the value in positive healthy relationships. They are learning how to make and keep friends and how to develop relationships with mentors, teachers and other adults in their lives. For young school-age children, strong emphasis is put on cultivating common social skills.

Young School-Age Social Skills

Social skills pertain to the way we interact and communicate with others. They might also be called “social rules,” because many times, these skills are unspoken rules we use when interacting with others. When children develop common social skills, they are more likely to experience success in school and later in life. The list below will provide you with common social skills:

Self-Management

- Following instructions
- Accepting Criticism
- Accepting "No" for an answer
- Asking for help
- Asking for permission
- Staying on task and ignoring distractions
- Making a good choice
- Solving problems

Social Interactions

- Greeting others
- Seeking another’s attention
- Disagreeing appropriately
- Apologizing
- Giving and accepting compliments
- Having a conversation
- Sharing with others
- Working with others
- Using appropriate voice tone
- Accepting others
- Showing respect
- Showing appreciation

Emotions Management

- Avoiding a fight or conflict
- Using an anger control strategy
- Solving problems
- Accepting failures
- Coping with the pressures of others’ expectations

Supporting the Social- Emotional Development of Young Children

Young children need the support of nurturing and responsive adults to develop socially and emotionally. Below are ways you can promote social-emotional development in the infants- toddlers, preschool age children, and young school age children:

Infants- toddler-

- Be affectionate and nurturing.
- Gently hold, rock and cuddle infants and toddlers often.
- Share smiles with infants and toddlers during daily routines, such as feeding and eating.

- Use facial expressions, gestures and words to attentively respond to infants' and toddlers' attempts to communicate.
- Offer opportunities for communication and help guide infants and toddlers through social situations—young children enjoy watching others learn to socialize through experiences that are supported by caring adults.
- Offer infants and toddlers opportunities to watch you as a kind and caring person.
- Help infants and toddlers learn words to describe and express their emotions.
- Help infants and toddlers feel safe and secure.

Preschool Age Children

- Plan meaningful, fun experiences for the children while acknowledging their individual differences and backgrounds.
- Embed opportunities for social-emotional learning throughout the day and provide children with multiple opportunities to express themselves in various ways.
- Acknowledge, validate and respond to children's needs, emotions and concerns.
- Be sensitive to children's unique life circumstances that may influence their social-emotional development.
- Arrange your environment in ways that promote children's social interactions and relationship building with peers and adults in the room.
- Use natural classroom events and relationships and interactions with peers and adults as opportunities to talk with children about emotions.
- Acknowledge that, like in any other area of development, individual differences exist in children's social-emotional development.
- Reach out to the families of children to learn about their preferred methods of interaction with their children.

Young School Age Children

- Model social skills, relationship building techniques, and treating others with respect.
- Plan activities and experiences that help children develop their social skills, feeling of empathy, respect for others, and sense of achievement.
- Create a learning environment that acts as a community and allows children to feel that they belong to a group.
- Use supervision strategies, positive interactions, modeling and social-emotional teaching strategies to prevent and address bullying.

As an early childhood professional, you are a positive role model for children. Children will look to you for cues on how to interact with others. Therefore, you should:

- Always maintain a positive and respectful demeanor when interacting with children and adults.
- Express your emotions in a positive way. Stay calm when under pressure and keep your emotions regulated.
- Be aware of your body language and keep it positive.
- Communicate regularly with all children and staff in your program.

In their brief article, Believe, Watch, Act! Promoting Prosocial Behavior in Infants and Toddlers, authors Gillespie & Hunter present a familiar scenario: a young toddler shows interest in a learning material already in use by another classmate. Our typical reaction may be to intervene to promote fairness, but the authors suggest that when teachers reorient their beliefs, their actions can promote lasting, positive, prosocial effects. Consider this example: Toddler teacher Javier brings flexible wristbands into his classroom, making sure each toddler has four to store in a box. Kayla carefully puts her hand through each wristband, pushes them up her forearm, and, after she has all four on her arm, looks around for more. Seeing Saad's wristbands on the table, Kayla grabs them. Many teachers at this point might comment: "Stop Kayla! You can't take that from Saad. You have

your own wristbands.” However, as a result, Kayla may be reluctant to try out her new ideas, and Saad may determine that Kayla is not fun to play with. So what if Javier embraced the belief that children are naturally curious and want to connect with each other? In a more prosocial environment, Javier might intervene to promote Kayla’s engagement and interpret her excitement to Saad with a comment like, “Saad, let’s watch Kayla and see what she’s doing. It looks to me like she is trying to fill her arm with wristbands.” With this small but targeted shift in intention, the children are more likely to interact favorably to each other and take an interest in this shared, interesting goal. It may not always work, and it may be a challenge to figure out how to make it work, but a key first step is to understand how young children develop, and to positively interpret their behavior. Think about the ways your understanding of social-emotional development impacts your interactions.

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