

Tips on Promoting Your Child's Social-Emotional Development in the Early Years

Relationships are the way babies come to know the world and their place in it. They provide the loving context necessary to comfort, protect, encourage, and offer a buffer against stressful times. It is through relationships that young children develop social emotional wellness, which includes the ability to form satisfying relationships with others, play, communicate, learn, face challenges, and experience emotions. In addition, nurturing relationships are crucial for the development of trust, empathy, compassion, generosity, and conscience.

Social-emotional wellness is often known as infant mental health by early childhood professionals. In a nutshell, it is the developing capacity to experience and regulate emotions, form secure relationships, and explore and learn—all in the context of the child's family, community and cultural background.

To learn more, browse our tips on promoting children's healthy social-emotional development from birth to three.

Provide your child with responsive care.

Elaine is feeding her 8-month-old daughter Jessica some cereal. Jessica grabs the spoon out of her hand and proceeds to feed herself. Elaine almost grabs the spoon back, but instead, waits to see what will happen next. Jessica's try at feeding herself is a little slow, and very messy, but she manages to get a few spoonfuls into her mouth. Elaine sees that Jessica is really involved in trying to feed herself, and also notices that Jessica is not actually getting too much food in her mouth. Her solution? She gets another spoon, and offers Jessica cereal herself to supplement her daughter's efforts.

What Elaine did might seem simple, but it can be pretty hard. It takes time to slow down, and carefully look at, or observe, what your child is doing, in order to learn what the behavior might mean. In this case, Jessica was saying, "Hey, I want to try to feed myself with a spoon! I can do it!" Elaine had to be willing and able to take the time, put up with some mess, and find a way to respond to Jessica's needs both for food (nutrition for her body) and for a chance to try something new (nutrition for her mind).

How often do you observe what your child is doing? Sounds like a silly question with the answer being, "I watch him all the time!" However, we often are with our children without really observing them. Observing involves looking at what your child is doing, listening to what he is saying, and learning about your child's individual way of approaching the world (is he a jump in and "let's go" child or a sit back and "take it slow" child; is he a "high reactor" who lets you know how he feels when he feels it or a "low reactor" who's pretty laid back, etc.). Taking time to really sit and observe what children do can tell us a lot. It provides us with clues about what makes our child tick. Those clues allow us to make better educated guesses about why they behave as they do, and help us as parents and caregivers to respond in a way that is productive and supports their development. When children feel responded to and understood, they develop confidence and good self-esteem.

Be affectionate and nurturing.

Sonya scoops little Jacob out of the tub. "You smell so good! What a pretty baby you are!" she says as she wraps him in a soft, warm towel and gives him a hug. Jacob squeals with delight and then snuggles down into mom's arms. Bath time is so much fun—where else can you splash and play each day in a big puddle with toys and all of the attention focused on you?! Jacob loves his time in the tub where he has a ball playing and where mom takes care of keeping him safe and getting him clean. He knows he is safe and special to this person he trusts so much.

The sight of a cute baby makes us want to coo, gurgle, and entertain to get that wonderful baby smile. Feelings of affection can be a little harder to come by during prolonged crying spells or tantrums—but fortunately, most of us can find our feelings of love and desire to nurture little ones even during trying times. Touching, holding, comforting, rocking, singing and talking to babies are things that may seem to be the natural way to play with a baby or to comfort a distressed young child. These interactions are more than meets the eye—they also provide precisely the stimulation their growing brains need. Loving touches and encouraging words send messages to your baby that he is somebody special. And when he feels he is loved for who he is, he learns how to love others that way, too.

Help your child learn to resolve conflict in a healthy, appropriate way.

Teddy and Brian, both 2-year-olds, love the book area of their day-care. Teddy picks up a big book about dinosaurs. When Brian sees this neat book, he can't help himself—he wants it, too! So he grabs it from Teddy. Uh-oh, a battle is now underway with "Mine", "No! Mine!" and a few tears. Miss Kelly steps over to help the boys. "Brian, I know you like the dinosaur book and you are sad, but Teddy was playing with it. It's not nice to grab it from him and make him cry. How about if we look at it together? I'll hold the book, Teddy can turn the page, and you can make the "Roar" sound when we get to the big dino page!"

Around this age, toddlers are developing an awareness of "self" and sharing can be especially hard. They know what they want when they want it, but their brains are not yet fully capable of understanding another person's feelings or point of view. In addition, self-control is also just beginning to develop. Though toddlers can understand what you mean when you say not to take something from others, they have a hard time keeping themselves from acting on their impulses. Think how hard it can be for you, as a mature adult, to stop yourself from eating that chocolate chip cookie you are craving when you have decided to go on a diet.

Adults' impulse control gets tested from time to time; for toddlers the test occurs many times a day. The ability to exercise greater self-control comes with time, brain maturation, practice, and with the help of caring adults. By helping very young children name their feelings, and letting them see and practice ways to control their impulses, they learn over time how to do it themselves. This helps them learn how to resolve conflicts on their own.

Here are some ways you can help them control their urges and resolve conflicts

Five-month-old Jeremy is laying on his tummy playing on the floor at home. He reaches across the blanket he's on for the squeaky duck toy. It is just out of his reach. His dad begins to pick it up and give it to him, but realizing Jeremy isn't fussing, he decides to wait a second. Jeremy is determined to get that duck! He stretches his hand again and this time barely touches it. His dad gives the duck just enough of a nudge to provide Jeremy a little help. One more reach...Got it! Jeremy grabs the duck toy and happily begins squeaking it himself.

Jeremy's dad just practiced a concept many child development specialists call "scaffolding." Scaffolding happens when you follow your child's lead and provide just enough support to challenge him to the next level without overwhelming him with frustration. Jeremy's dad could have handed the toy to his son, but he stopped, looked, and thought about what Jeremy was doing. Jeremy was trying out his big and small muscles and seeing what he could do. He was also learning about what he would need to do to get something he wanted. Jeremy's dad realized he could let Jeremy explore the situation a little and then provide just enough help to let him experience the success of using his new skills of reaching and grabbing. Helping babies learn in this way lets them explore what they are capable of doing and also lets them know you are there to support their efforts.

Help your child experience the joy found in the "give-and-take" of relationships.

"Hey there happy girl!" Glenn says as he smiles at 3-month-old Kelly. Kelly looks intently up at her Dad and smiles. Dad makes a funny face and smiles, then Kelly let's out a gurgley laugh. Dad laughs at her as they continue to play funny face games back and forth.

Kelly is taking in a lot from what looks like a very simple, playful interaction: "Hey, here's Daddy! It makes me feel so good when he plays with me. When he smiles at me, it makes me want to smile, too. I can tell he really thinks I am fun."

Kelly is learning that others care for her, like being with her, and understand her needs. She's also beginning to understand that her actions affect other people's feelings and actions. In this case, what she does makes them happy. She also can get another person to keep playing a fun game with her. In time, as she has the opportunity to experience satisfying relationships, she'll learn that she feels good when she makes others feel good. This will help her build healthy relationships and a positive sense of self as she grows. Learning about the give-and-take of relationships will help her get ready a little later to play with other children and to share. Sharing, though, will not be easy for her until she is older—around 3 years old or so. She is also learning to recognize her own feelings and to care about others' feelings.

Help your child feel safe.

Jayson, 18 months old, was on a walk with his father when he became frightened of a neighbor's dog barking from behind a fence. "Hey buddy, what's wrong? Is Champy making too much noise?" Jayson turned and ran a few steps back to his father who scooped him up in a hug. "Champy startled me, too. I guess he must be feeling a little grumpy today."

Jayson is learning that when he feels uncertain and fearful, he can count on other people—like his Dad—to be there to support him. His father's sensitive response contributes to Jayson's growing sense of security and trust.

Show your child that she is part of a larger network of love and relationships.

It's been a rough day. The dishwasher flooded, a paper is due for tomorrow's class, and Lisa is operating on just 2 hours of sleep. Her 2-month-old, Dina, has been colicky and had a hard time getting and staying asleep last night. "I feel like I'm gonna snap—I just can't do this," she says on the phone to her friend Callie. "I've been there," says Callie, "I want you to lay down and rest when you put Dina down for her nap. I'll come over this afternoon and watch the baby while you work on your paper."

While Callie may think she is just helping her friend through a bad day, she's actually doing a lot to help Dina as well. We all feel like we are at our wit's end now and then. Caring for children can be incredibly joyful and rewarding but also very stressful. It's important to have other people and places we can count on for support, whether physical, emotional, or financial. When support and encouragement is given to those caring for a child, they are better able to be a responsive and nurturing parent to their little one.

Nurture your child's respect for differences.

Shelly is almost three years old and is at the park with her mom. She looks over at another toddler, Briana, who is coming towards the sandbox. Briana has spina bifida and uses leg braces to help her walk. "What's that?" Shelly says loudly. "Her legs are funny!" Shelly's mom winces with embarrassment, "Shelly, that's not very polite!" Briana's mom is used to both comments and stares by old and young alike. At first, they really hurt her, but then she began to have a better appreciation for the curiosity of others—especially a child her daughter's age. It was an opportunity to educate and to tell about her wonderful daughter. "This is Briana. She has some special braces to help her walk. Briana's favorite color is pink so she decided to get pink ones. She also loves beanie babies. Do you have a favorite color?" Shelly is quickly captivated by a new friend who loves pink and beanie babies like she does, "I have pink pajamas!" Shelly's mom gets past her embarrassment and joins in the conversation, and the moms guide them for a few minutes as they talk about other things they both like to do. Both girls begin to play in the sand—no longer focusing on the braces or their moms!

Situations like this can be difficult for all involved. Young children are not inhibited by the rules of social etiquette and naturally voice their curiosity about the differences in skin color, size and weight, and physical ability that they observe. Adults play a significant role in helping them appreciate the differences and enjoy the similarities. They also learn about respect for others when it is modeled to them by the adults in their lives. They can grow to realize that every person is unique and deserving of respect.

Promote an appreciation for your own, and others', culture.

Judy is new to the play group in her neighborhood. She brings in one-year old Andres and sits him on her lap as she interacts with him in Spanish and listens as the other moms begin talking about life with their toddlers. She notices the children playing on the floor. One of the toddlers is eating a snack as he sits by himself. A mother brings up how hard it has been to get her daughter to fall asleep on her own. Judy thinks about how she was raised—how her family placed a high value on helping children and not necessarily making them do things on their own so fast—like sleep or eat. Judy begins to think about how and what she teaches her son at home and how things might be different when he begins child care. She knew that she might face issues around the two languages, but now these other thoughts make her realize culture affects so much more. She wonders how her son will adjust to the differences he will face between care both at home and away.

Parents' culture strongly influences the way a family gives love and nurturance, as well as copes. Culture also affects social-emotional development in many other ways—and both are reflected in a child's daily routines during their first years of life. Since these values and beliefs affect the most basic aspects of child care, including holding, bathing, feeding, sleeping, dressing, diapering, and toileting, it is worthwhile to discuss these beliefs with your child's caregivers. Cultural differences also affect decisions about when children should be able to begin self-help skills, how children should express their feelings, and how and when adults should talk to babies and toddlers. Having a child may make parents reflect about their own values and beliefs for the first time. You and your child's caregivers can learn about one another's beliefs on these issues, and can decide together how to proceed, taking into account your own hopes and wishes for your child, your child's needs, information on development, and your caregivers' input.

- Provide lots of guidance and initiate sharing and turn-taking games.
- Understand that toddlers are less willing to be compliant when they are tired or not feeling well.
- Use distraction or redirection to calm or avoid disputes.
- Model positive social and sharing behavior in your everyday interactions with children and parents.