

# Parent Connections

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## Emotional Development Activities for Infants

*Eliza Martinez, Demand Media*

Based on your cues and reaction to your baby's emotions, she learns how to express negative feelings as well as positive ones. Activities to promote emotional development are usually something that you do anyway, so don't worry about blocking out specific emotional development time.

### Make Faces

Infants spend a lot of time examining the faces of people around them. Your baby's eyesight isn't perfect yet, so get close to her face and show her how different emotions look, and label them as you go. Try smiling and telling her how happy she makes you. As your baby gets a little older, prop her up in front of a mirror and make faces at your reflections together. If she cries, tell her that the baby in the mirror is sad. If her eyes widen and she waves her arms, talk about how excited she is to help her learn to read other people's emotions based on facial expressions.

### Make Time to Cuddle

Spend time each day cuddling your baby. Wrap up in blankets and snuggle. Read books while you cuddle or simply rock her and sing to her. This fosters trust and affection between the two of you, which spurs emotional development at the same time.



## It Starts with One Book . . .

The concept is simple; the rewards are priceless. Read a book (any book) to your baby, toddler, or preschooler. The goal is to have read 1,000 books (yes, you can repeat books) before your precious one starts kindergarten.

It may sound hard, but if you read just 1 book a night, you will have read about 365 books in a year. That is 730 books in two years and 1,095 books in three years. If you consider that most children start kindergarten at around 5 years of age, you have more time than you think, but it's time to get started!

The key is perseverance. Make it exciting. When your child reaches a milestone, give him/her a small reward (stickers, a backpack, a new book).

The Central Arkansas Library System and the 1,000 Books Foundation has partnered to encourage parents to read to their children to prepare them for kindergarten. Any child from birth until he or she enters kindergarten can participate in the 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten program. Participants can download the reading log sheets or visit a branch to pick them up. Pick up a sticker each time your child reads 100 books. When you have read 1000 books, the library will give your child a free book for your home library! For more information, visit: <http://www.cals.lib.ar.us/1000-books/>

# Helping Your Child Develop Social and Emotional Skills for Success!

#

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Social and emotional skills are the foundation for learning good behavior and for learning in school. Children are not born with social and emotional skills any more than they are born with the skills needed to tie shoes or do algebra. These skills must be taught beginning in the early months and years. But, what exactly are social-emotional (SE) skills and what are things parents do to teach them?

**Social Skills** - These are the skills we need to be able to get along with others. To play together. To work together.

**Emotional skills** - These are the skills we need to be able to understand our own feelings. To be able to express our feelings appropriately. To understand that others have feelings too.

## Some Examples of Social-Emotional (SE) Skills:

- |                                      |                               |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ✓ Recognize and name feelings        | ✓ Pay attention               |
| ✓ Calm down                          | ✓ Follow rules and directions |
| ✓ Show kindness                      | ✓ Focus on a task             |
| ✓ Take turns listening and talking   | ✓ Share, take turns           |
| ✓ Solve problems                     | ✓ Ask for help, offer to help |
| ✓ Negotiate; cooperate               | ✓ Show empathy and compassion |
| ✓ Self-control                       | ✓ Make good choices           |
| ✓ Invite a friend to join play group | ✓ Be able to say 'no' nicely  |
| ✓ Play games with rules              |                               |

SE skills develop slowly, over time. They are best taught by the special grown-ups in in a child's life, especially parents. And here's the good news! Some of the best times to teach these skills are during daily routines and play time.

Unfortunately, children with delays in SE skills are sometimes labeled as 'disruptive' or 'behavior problems.' They may be punished for not having SE skills. Or they may be quiet, withdrawn, or anxious and adults don't notice they are missing out on opportunities to practice social-emotional skills. Either way, children need guidance to develop these skills. Here are some ways parents can teach social-emotional skills:

**Infants:** Did you notice that naming feelings and calming down are the 1<sup>st</sup> two skills on the list above? Infants, of course cannot do these things on their own. How do parents teach babies SE skills? Some things you probably already do are a good place to start:

- Respond quickly and soothingly to crying or signs of distress.

## It's Okay to Make Mistakes

How many times have you said, "I won't do that again!" That's actually a good thing, because it means you have learned something from your mistake. What comes next is the important part. What will you do differently the next time? When we make mistakes, we take a few minutes and think about what we could do differently next time to have a different outcome.

This is particularly significant with children. Imagine that you are a child and every time you make a mistake—spill something, get your shirt dirty, make a mark on the table, drop a plate, get water on the floor in the bathroom, leave toothpaste in the sink—you get in trouble and are told you are "always making a mess" or "always breaking something" or "always the last one done" and so on. How does that make you feel?

On the other hand, imagine that when you make mistakes as suggested above in the second bullet, that your parent takes that incident and helps you to figure out what you can do differently the next time. How does that make you feel? Better, I hope. You are actually learning things that all children need to learn.

- Crying is how babies communicate. Do not buy into the old myth "Picking up a crying infant will spoil her." Affection and attention is *not* how children are spoiled. Babies left crying will be slower to development many of the SE skills.
- Try to figure out what is causing the upset. Be patient. Keep trying. Sometimes it is hard to figure out what the problem is.
- Talk to your baby while you work to help her calm down. "You have a clean diaper and full tummy. I wonder if you are bored. Let's find something to look at."

While it may not seem like you are 'teaching' your baby, these are actually the first steps of teaching skills such as calming down, self-control, naming emotions, kindness, and empathy to others.

**Toddlers** love to explore! They can climb to the counter top, but do not yet have the SE skill of following rules. It is hard for them to resist the urge to explore things that parents consider 'off-limits,' like those pretty breakable items on the coffee table.

How do parents teach at this stage? One thing is to provide plenty of time and safe places for play. Play one-on-one with your child allowing him to make up the game. Gently guide him in each of the social-emotional skills (Not all at the same time!) while playing with you or with peers. Set limits firmly, but give the child the opportunity to try again. "Stop pushing. If you want a turn on the trike say, 'My turn.' I'll help you get a turn."

As Fred Rogers said, "Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning." It's true!

Toddlers are usually still self-centered. This is normal. They are not developmentally ready to share, take turns, or do other SE skills on their own. They need your guidance. Point out when someone else shares. Give your child a choice of sharing with a sibling or friend. Forcing these issues causes hurt feelings rather than teaches the skill. Instead, model and support the development of turn skills like turn taking and sharing -- "I'm sharing half of my banana with you." Praise any effort.

Tantrums are also normal too! Deal with a tantrum, by staying calm and controlling your emotions. That is half the battle! We grownups have to practice SE skills too!



## Parent Question of the Quarter:

**Q: My 2-year-old daughter's preschool teacher tells me that she actively participates during the planned activities but often seems unhappy during free playtime. What should I do?**



**A:** For many children, preschool poses some social challenges. There are separations from parents, negotiations over toys, conflicts to resolve, teachers and other children to get along with—it's a lot to manage.

The teachers seem to see your daughter as thriving on structured experiences. Is this similar to how she behaves at home or in other social situations? When you watch her play with other children, does she also seem to prefer to play on her own or does she play more with peers?

Sometimes the noise, activity level, and demands of being with other kids in a group can be quite overwhelming. Since most 2-year-olds don't have the language skills to share these complex emotions, they try to control the situation through their behavior. They may cry or act out (hitting, biting, etc.), choose to play alone, or even fall asleep! Some take on an adult, disciplinarian role to try and control their peers' behavior.

There are many ways to help your child cope with—and ultimately enjoy—playing with friends at school. Talk with your daughter's teacher about what she has tried so far to help her play more interactively with other children. See if she can help your daughter engage with others, such as approaching another child or two and asking if she can join their play, or by helping her get involved with other kids in more open-ended activities (e.g., playing with clay or at the sand table) that have no set rules.

Another good idea is to ask the teacher if there are one or two children whom she thinks may be a good “fit” for your daughter, who have similar interests and temperament. If so, maybe she can create opportunities for them to play one on one so that your preschooler can have a positive social experience in the classroom.

Consider also spending part of the morning volunteering in your daughter's classroom so that you can see how she interacts with other children. Peer interactions and group play are pretty tricky at 2 1/2 and you want to make sure your daughter is getting the kind of support she needs in building these skills.

To support her at home, you might consider inviting a friend or two from school to your house to play. This allows your daughter to “practice” social skills in a safe, supportive environment before playing together at school. As in other areas of development, social skills develop at different rates and in different ways for young children. Giving your daughter the time to grow at her own speed, while offering her opportunities to enjoy time with peers, helps her build her first friendships.