

The Daily Parent

A NEWSLETTER FOR WORKING PARENTS

SOCIAL COMPETENCY:

Fostering Your Child's Lifelong Success

Studies have shown that the single best predictor of *how a child will adjust to life as an adult is – how well they get along with others.* It's not the I.Q. score, or grades in school, or how a child behaves in school. Social skills are the single best predictor of adult success.



Along with children's social developmental, other key developmental growth (social, physical, emotional, language, cognitive) is occurring at the same time. All of these developmental areas are connected and affect one another in some way. For example, as children's language skills increase, so does their ability to

express their feelings and to play more cooperatively with others.

Learning social skills begins at birth. We are born social, with the need to interact. It starts out with children bonding with their parents, then broadens to children playing with siblings and friends, and eventually going to school and becoming part of the larger community. Social competency involves the ability to have positive relationships with people, engage well with others, and it also involves the ability to emotionally handle the "ups" and "downs" in life. Social skills are learned and take time to mature. Social competency grows and changes over a person's lifetime.

What Are Positive Social Skills

Most parents would agree that they want their children to be happy, liked by others and to get along well with others. Being able to feel good about themselves, having positive relationships and being part of different groups involves several developmental skills. All of these qualities are a part of social development and parents will see their children go through different stages and become skillful in how they engage with other people throughout their growth.

How a child behaves in different situations will vary. There are several influences on child's behavior, such as cultural background, family patterns, a child's personality or

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temperament, and specific events going on in a child's life. To decide how socially-skilled a child is, you need to observe overall patterns of the child's interactions with and reactions to others overtime. You also should know what is going on in a child's life that may also affect their behavior. This observation and assessment needs to happen overtime, and in various situations, not just one observation.

As with all major areas of developmental growth in children, there are typical skills and patterns children show in their social development. With social and emotional skills, sometimes the milestones are harder to detect because a lot of the development is inward (self-awareness, self-regulation). Yet, there are still some visible signs to look for, as your child behaves with others, reacts to people and situations, and handles frustration and changes.

So, what do parents look for or use to determine if their child is developing healthy social skills? When you are looking at your child's social development, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Does my child show compassion? Empathy?
- ▶ Does my child cooperate with others?
- ▶ Does my child voice his needs and stand up for himself?
- ▶ Does my child show an interest in what is going on around her?
- ▶ Does my child pick up on social cues?
- ▶ Does my child know how to become part of a group?
- ▶ Is my child able to problem-solve as part of a group?
- ▶ Does my child have a sense of independence?
- ▶ How does my child handle conflict, rejection or other 'negative' feedback?

- ▶ Is my child responsible?
- ▶ Does my child show self-control?
- ▶ Is my child able to soothe himself and calm himself down?

All of these qualities and behaviors are needed to maintain healthy and positive social skills and help children manage their world.

Any difficulties in social skill development is often not seen until children reach school-age. Developing friendships and being accepted by their peers is very important during the school-age years.

Promoting Children's Social Skills

Children's social competency is essential to their successful adjustment as adults. With this knowledge, in what way can parents and caregivers support and encourage children's social development? Parents provide a great deal of guidance in children developing positive social skills. Caregivers who spend a great deal of time with children are also very influential in the social development of the children in their care.

Children learn to connect to others first through their parents and providers; this is the beginning of enjoying the company of others and the lifelong path of developing social competency.

Here are some specific suggestions to engage and foster children's social skills:

- ▶ **Talk to and engage** your baby in the "give and take" of conversations
- ▶ **Participate in pretend play** with your young children, making suggestions on what to do next to encourage cooperation

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Typical Social Behaviors/Social Skills by Age Groups

Infants	Toddlers	Preschoolers	School-Age Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Responds positively to caregiver's touch and voice ▶ Smiles and shows pleasure in exchanges ▶ Plays peek-a-boo and likes interactive engagement with others ▶ Responds to language ▶ Shows different emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Imitates adult behavior in their play ▶ Wants to be helpful - cleaning up, putting things away ▶ Shows affection for parents and other close people ▶ Shows assertiveness in saying no ▶ Displays aggressive feelings and behaviors ▶ Watches other children in their play ▶ Participates in small group activities - i.e., singing or dancing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Starts being able to share toys ▶ Wants to play with other children, can join in play ▶ Has friendships with other children ▶ Is concerned about the feelings of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Has a core group of friends and is able to join in play fairly easily ▶ Is able to pick up on social cues from others (i.e., smiles, waves) ▶ Can cooperate well in a group ▶ Can accept loss ▶ Listens to others, pays attention ▶ Can ask for help, make an apology, take responsibility

- ▶ **Work on projects** with your child, such as planting flowers, making jewelry, making a photo collage
- ▶ **Encourage your child to play** with other children in the neighborhood if there are no siblings to play with, set up play dates with other parents
- ▶ **Model social skills** when you are engaging with others
- ▶ **Include your child in social gatherings** with other people (picnics, family gatherings, neighborhood socials)
- ▶ **Have your child in small group activities** with other young children (classes, library reading times, playgroups)
- ▶ **Give suggestions to your older child** on how to approach other children, to join children's activities, have good social manners
- ▶ **Observe your child's interaction with other children and adults.** See how your child is accepted by other children and if your child has any difficulties with friends. Note whether your child has at least two good friends.

- ▶ **Talk to your child care provider or your child's teacher** to get feedback on how your child does socially in their program or school.
- ▶ **Note any difficulties your child has socially.** Help your child by practicing social interactions, providing opportunities to be with other children of various ages, and with any specific issues that may be of importance to you and your child in relation to his social skills.

These suggestions and more are what parents most likely do naturally. If you suspect your child may be having extra difficulties with 'fitting in' or getting along with other children, ask your child's doctor about it. Most likely your child will go through "ups" and "downs" in her friendships. You'll learn when it is important for you to help your child to get through difficult social situations, and when it is better to step back and allow him to figure out works and what doesn't for him.

You are your child's best role model and coach. As you become more aware of

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your child's social skills and abilities, you will be better able to foster the strong ones and increase the skills that need more attention. Because social skills are ever-changing, the ways you support your child in her social competency will change as well.

For More Information

- ▶ **TeachersandFamilies.com**, *Development of Social Skills in Young Children: Guidelines for Parents*, www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/socialskills5.cfm, web article for parents on promoting social skills in early childhood development.
- ▶ **BabyCenter.Com**, *Developmental milestones: Socialization*, www.babycenter.com, www.babycenter.com/O_developmental-milestones-socialization_6576.bc, article takes you month by month through the typical socialization milestones during baby's first year.

- ▶ **PBS Parents**, Child Development Tracker - Social Emotional Development, http://www.pbs.org/parents/childdevelopment/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=46. On this interactive parent website, parents can use a child development tracker which lists all the major developmental domains, including social development. By clicking on the social-emotional development link parents can track a child's social-emotional growth year by year. From age one through early school age. With each age there are supporting activities to help your child's social-emotional development.

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