

From Feelings to Friendships: Nurturing Healthy Social–Emotional Development in the Early Years

Healthy social–emotional development is the ability to form satisfying relationships with others, face and master challenges, and experience and handle a full range of emotions. It is through relationships that young children develop these skills and attributes. Starting from birth, babies are learning who they are by how they are treated. Loving relationships give young children a sense of comfort, safety, and confidence. Strong early relationships with parents and caregivers teach young children how to form friendships, communicate emotions, and deal with challenges. These relationships also help children develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a sense of right and wrong. Your bond with your child matters not just in first few years, but across your child’s entire life.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Show lots of love and affection.** Nurturing touch, comforting, rocking, singing, and talking to your baby all send the message that she is special and loved. While it’s easy to be affectionate when babies are cute and cuddly, it’s also important to remain loving and as calm as possible when babies are difficult, fussy, or crying a lot. When you support your baby even at her most difficult times, you let her know she can trust and rely on you. This makes her feel safe and makes it more likely she will learn to calm herself as she grows.
- **Tune in to your baby’s individual needs.** What are his likes and dislikes? How does he react to new situations and experiences? What interests and engages him? Upsets him? How is he calmed and comforted? Tuning in to his cues and responding to his unique needs makes your child feel loved and understood.
- **Be a safe “home base” for your child.** Watch how she crawls or walks away, then looks or comes back to check in with you. She wants to be sure you are still there, which makes her feel safe and confident to venture out and explore.
- **Establish routines.** Try to maintain consistent daily routines as much as possible. For example, in the evening, a routine might be: feeding, diaper change, books, lullabies, then bedtime. Knowing what to expect helps babies feel safe, confident, and in control of their world.
- **Build self-confidence.** Toddlers develop confidence when they solve problems—like how to get the shapes into the right spaces in the shape-sorter. When your child faces a challenge, avoid solving the problem for him. Instead, give him just enough help so that he can master it on his own. You might model how to hold a shape over a space in a shape-sorter to see if it might fit, then hand the shape to your child and encourage him to test out the different spaces until he finds the correct one.
- **Encourage persistence and grit.** Research shows that a critical factor for success in all areas of development is the ability to muscle through challenges. Encourage your child to discover her own solutions, versus solving problems for her. For example, if she is having trouble getting the ball out from under a chair, help her think about ways to retrieve it. Coach your child to persist when she confronts challenges and encourage her efforts. When parents focus too much on “getting it right,” children learn to fear failure; but failure is a key part of learning.

continued on next page ►

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- **Help your child cope with frustration and disappointment.** These are emotions we all experience as we go through daily life, so it is a gift to your child to help him manage these feelings. It is a totally normal reaction for a toddler to have a tantrum because you have said “no” to lollipops before dinner. To help him learn to cope, let him know that you see he is disappointed, but your family rule is no sweet snacks before dinner. Then, don’t react to the tantrum (your attention—even your negative attention—just fuels it.) Once you have set an age-appropriate rule, avoid giving in as this just teaches your child that tantrums are a good strategy for getting what he wants. The less you react, the more quickly he is likely to recover. When your child has calmed, suggest another activity or fun task that he can do with you, such as helping to drop vegetables into the salad bowl.
- **Teach social skills through everyday play and interaction.** Children need practice to learn how to share, take turns, and resolve conflicts. So play lots of turn-taking games (like rolling a ball back and forth or taking turns stacking blocks). Build cooperation into daily routines. You can put the plates on the table and your child can place the napkins. Offer regular opportunities to play with peers, where your child will have a chance to practice waiting and sharing: “You want to play with the train but Jason is using it right now. Grabbing it is not a choice. Jason will play with it for 5 minutes and then it will be your turn. We can read a book or color with crayons while you wait.”
- **Focus on feelings.** Label feelings: “You were angry that we had to leave the park. It’s okay to be angry. You love the playground. But it’s time to go.” Validating and responding to your child’s feelings lets him know you understand what he is going through. It also calmly teaches your child all feelings are okay, and you will help him handle them. “You are feeling sad that Carly got the cupcake with the butterfly on it that you wanted. You can choose the blue cupcake or the green one.” Teaching children the words for emotions is important because, over time, it enables them to talk about their feelings instead of acting them out.
- **Help your child express his feelings in age-appropriate ways.** Give your child acceptable ways to share strong feelings. For example, toddlers can rip paper, stomp their feet, or throw a foam ball when they are very mad. Help your little one understand there are many healthy ways to express feelings.
- **Use natural consequences to teach about rules and limits and to encourage cooperation.** Natural consequences help children understand the cause and effect involved in a rule, request, or limit. For example, the natural consequence of throwing a toy truck is having it put away for a little while. Natural consequences can also be positive. Remind your child, “If you cooperate with getting your jacket on, then we’ll have more time at the park.” Strategies like this help children learn the rules and to make good choices over time.