

FACT SHEET

Promoting Social-Emotional Development: An Introduction for Families and Caregivers

INTRODUCTION

What is Social-Emotional Development?

Social-emotional development is the process by which children learn to experience, regulate, and express emotions, form close and secure relationships, explore the environment and learn.¹ A child's social-emotional skills are predictive of academic and career achievement and are learned through their relationships with their caregivers, including parents and teachers.

WHAT ARE SOME SPECIFIC STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Infants

- *Provide responsive and predictable care.* Learning your infant's communication cues/signs of frustration and responding according to his/her needs allows your baby to develop trust.
- *Narrate activities.* Talk about what you are doing during normal routines such as changing diapers or bathing. These routines are the basis for early learning.
- *Joint attention.* When your infant shows interest in an object, join him/her in exploring. Your support of your baby's interests teaches your baby that his/her opinions are valued.
- *Play games.* Playing simple games like "peek-a-boo" and "so big" with your baby fosters a predictable play sequence. Build in repetition to increase familiarity and promote anticipation

Toddlers

- *Help your child learn to identify and express emotions.* For example, if your child cries in frustration when playing with a toy, you could say, "That toy is hard to play with and you are frustrated. Let's do it together".
- *Provide opportunities for your toddler to make choices.* For example, let your child choose between milk and juice during meal times. Making decisions allows your child to develop independence and to affect the world around him/her.
- *Reinforce attempts to try new or difficult tasks.* Support a sense of competence by providing just enough help for your child to accomplish the task and provide positive feedback after each attempt.
- *Encourage interactions with peers.* Your child may show interest in other children and play beside them rather than with them. Some fun opportunities for interaction with others include story time at the library, mommy/daddy and me playgroups, or play at the park.

Children

- *Play games with more complicated rules.* Games like Simon Says, Mother May I, and simple board games allow children to practice dealing with emotions that come with the ups and downs in everyday life.
- *Use books to explore emotions.* Reading and talking about books allow your child to explore the emotions of others and to take on a different perspective.

- *Provide prompts during social interactions.* Prompts will help your child learn to focus on emotional cues in others and act accordingly. For example, you might say, “Look, your friend is frowning because you took the toy away. How do you think your friend is feeling? What could you do to help her feel better?”
- *Provide positive feedback after social interactions.* Feedback reinforces developing skills. For example, “you were so kind to notice that the new student was sitting alone and to invite him to come play with you.”
- *Stay in close contact with teachers.* Teachers can facilitate social interactions between children and can identify skills that your child may need to practice.

IF MY CHILD HAS SPECIAL NEEDS, HOW DOES THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS CHANGE?

The overall process for children with special needs is the same as for other children. Some of the strategies may need to be modified for your child. Consider the following:

- *Limit sensory inputs (touch, sound, sight, taste, or movement).* Infants with special needs may become over-stimulated more easily than other infants. You may need to limit sensory input to one type of sensation at the time. If you are rubbing your baby’s back, you may want to stay quiet. Some common stress signals that may warn of over-stimulation and signal that your infant needs a break include:
 - Looking away
 - Quivering or compressed lips
 - Holding up hand as if to say, “stop”
 - Hiccups
 - Yawns
 - Bringing hands to face
- *Be patient.* Children with special needs may need more time to respond to incoming information. If you ask a question or tell your child to do something, be patient and give your child a chance to respond. Do not ask questions or give instructions repeatedly.
- *Provide opportunities to be with other children.* Children with special needs often interact more with adults than children their own age. Help your child and the children around him/her learn about your child’s differences and how to help your child participate.
- *Allow for many repetitions.* Children with special needs may need more repetitions for learning. Allow your child plenty of opportunities to practice social skills.
- *Be creative to foster inclusion.* Your child may have physical challenges that prevent access to opportunities to practice social skills. You may need to creatively adapt the environment in order for your child to participate.

WHAT CAN PHYSICAL THERAPY DO TO SUPPORT MY CHILD IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

A physical therapist can be a great resource to you and your child and may provide training and support with the following:

- *Positioning.* Teach you and your child about positions that will make activities easier for your child.
- *Equipment and assistive technology.* Provide equipment that allows your child to explore the environment independently, initiate social interactions, and affect the environment. Equipment may include walkers, crutches, wheelchairs, switch activated toys, communication devices, or environmental controls.
- *Environmental modifications.* Recommend adaptations to the environment to promote accessibility. For example, adding a ramp, widening a doorway, or adding grab bars in the bathroom.

- *Referrals*. Help you find other professionals who can support social emotional development including psychologists, counselors, behavior analysts, and social workers.
- *Advocacy*. Advocate and consult with community organizations and governments about ways to include children with special needs in all aspects of community life.

REFERENCES

1. Zeanah C. *Handbook of infant mental health. 4th edition*. New York: Guildford Press; 2019.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Brown W, Odom S, Conroy M. An intervention hierarchy for promoting young children's peer interactions in natural environments. *Top Early Child Special Educ.* 2001;21(3):162-175.
- Duckworth A and Seligman M. Self-discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic performance of adolescents. *Psychologic Sci.* 2005;16:939-944.
- Durlak J, Weisberg R, Dymnicki A, Taylor R, Schellinger K. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Dev* 2011; 82(1):405-432.
- Hyso M. *The Emotional Development of Young Children: Building an Emotion-Centered Curriculum, 2nd ed*. New York, Teachers College Press; 2004.
- Rhem R, Bradley J. Social interactions of children who are medically fragile and developmentally delayed. *J Pediatr Nurs.* 2006;21(4):299-307.
- Saenz C. *Friendships of Children with Disabilities* [dissertation]. Chicago: Department of Special Education, Northeastern Illinois University; 2003.
- Schore A. Parent-infant communication and the neurobiology of emotional development. Paper presented at: Head Start National Research Conference; June 2000; Washington, DC.
- Shonkoff J, Phillips D, eds. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 2000.

WEBSITES

- Child Development Institute. [Helping your Child with Socialization](http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/parenting/socialization.shtml). Available at: <http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/parenting/socialization.shtml>
- [Zero to Three](http://www.zerotothree.org). This website provides information about healthy development for child ages 0-3. Available at: www.zerotothree.org
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children](https://www.naeyc.org/). This website provides a variety of information about the education of young children. Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/>

CHILDREN'S BOOKS FOR TEACHING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Can You Be a Friend? Nita Everly

I Can Do It Myself. Emily Per Kingsley

My Many Colored Days. Dr. Seuss

Sharing: How Kindness Grows. Fran Shaw

When I'm Feeling Sad. Trace Moroney

© 2019 by the APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy, 1020 N Fairfax St, Suite 400, Alexandria, VA 22314-1488, www.pediatricapta.org.

Developed by expert contributors Caryn Barman, PT, DPT, Board-Certified Pediatric Clinical Specialist. Special thanks to Judith Riley, PT for her contributions to the previous version of this fact sheet. Supported by the Fact Sheet Committee of APTA Pediatrics.

The APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy provides access to these member-produced fact sheets and resources for informational purposes only. They are not intended to represent the position of APTA Pediatrics or of the American Physical Therapy Association.