

FACT SHEET



SECTION ON

PEDIATRICS

AMERICAN PHYSICAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION

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American
Physical Therapy
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The Science of Healing. The Art of Caring

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

What is Socialization?

Socialization is the process by which children learn the rules of the culture in which they live. It is an interactive process that allows children to develop the social–emotional skills needed to participate in present and future roles in society. The challenge for parents, teachers, and physical therapists of children with disabilities is to provide nurturing opportunities while accommodating physical and/or cognitive limitations.

What are some specific strategies that support social–emotional development?

Infants:

- *Create a safe environment.* Babies learn through their relationships with primary caregivers, usually parents. By providing a loving, nurturing environment, you can help your baby feel safe exploring the world.
- *Talk to your baby.* Vary the pitch and tone of your voice. Be sure to hold your baby facing you so that he/she can look at your eyes and face. If your baby makes sounds, immediately make sounds back so he/she can practice taking turns and learn that others are responsive to vocalizations.
- *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.
- *Provide the appropriate amount of sensory stimulation.* Don’t over-stimulate your baby with too much sensory input (touch, sound, sight, taste, and movement) at one time. To start, try providing only one type of sensation at the time. If you are rubbing your baby’s back, be quiet and let your baby focus on that sensation before you begin to talk. Be sure to watch for cues that your baby may be feeling overwhelmed. Some common stress signals that will let you know that it may be time to take a break include:

- o Looking away
- o Quivering lip/compressed lip
- o Holding up hand as if to say, “stop”
- o Hiccups
- o Yawns
- o Bringing hands to eyes, ears, or back of head

If your baby exhibits any of these signs, wait quietly to give your baby a chance to reorganize and prepare for more interaction.

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What are some specific strategies that support social–emotional development? (Continued)

- *Comfort and support your baby during difficult times.* Help your baby deal with strong emotions. Although you may not be able to make everything perfect for your baby all of the time, simply being there to provide comfort and support allows your infant to develop a sense that it is okay to feel strong emotions and that he/she is not alone.

Toddlers:

- *Use routines and simple games to help your toddler understand the world.* Routines like saying “hello” and “goodbye” or “please” and “thank you” help your child learn what is expected by others. Games like hide-and-seek or finger plays like the “itsy bitsy spider” provide fun opportunities to interact with others.
- *Provide opportunities for your toddler to make choices.* For example, let your child pick between milk and juice during meal times. Making choices help your child to be independent and to learn that he/she can affect the world around him.
- *Help your child learn emotion words to identify feelings.* If your child cries when a toy is too challenging, you could say, “Tommy, you’re frustrated because that toy is really hard to play with—let’s do it together.” Learning to express feelings is a huge step in learning to deal with them. The “terrible twos” can be a tough time for toddlers who are beginning to learn that their wants are not always first priority. Again, help your child identify emotions and provide support as he/she works through them.
- *Reinforce attempts to try new things or attempt difficult tasks.* Providing positive feedback quickly after the attempt makes your child feel good about the experience.
- *Encourage your child to play and to explore the environment.* Your child may show interest in other children. He/she may watch other children but play beside them rather than with them. Some fun places for your child to practice interacting with others include:
 - o Story time at the library
 - o “Mommy/Daddy and me” groups
 - o Local community parks
 - o The grocery store

Children:

- *Continue to provide opportunities for your child to make choices.* Making decisions gives children a growing sense of independence. Let your child choose which clothes to wear. Try to respect the decision!
- *Play games with more complicated rules.* Some examples are Simon Says, Mother May I, and simple board games. Playing by the rules will help your child learn to deal with the ups and downs of everyday life.
- *Provide opportunities for your child to interact with other children.* Peer support can be a huge motivator for children. Playing with peers allows children to practice what they have learned and to negotiate for what they want. Older peers/siblings can model appropriate behavior. Some fun activities for groups of children include:
 - o Supervised play dates
 - o Story time at the library
 - o Playing at the community playground
 - o Recreational sports
 - o Day camps
- *Help your child expand his or her vocabulary for expressing feelings and getting needs met.* Help your child learn to look at things from someone else’s perspective. You might say, “Kiara, look—Tommy’s crying because you took his toy and that made him sad. Let’s give him his toy back.”
- *Stay in close contact with teachers.* Teachers will help reinforce proper social skills and facilitate social interactions. Be sure to ask your child’s teacher if there are skills that your child may need to practice.



Does Childcare Help or Hurt the Social Development Process?

Quality childcare can promote a child's social skills by providing structured, organized daily routines and opportunities to practice social skills. The quality of the childcare facility is crucial. Some important criteria to consider when choosing a childcare facility are:

- How much training does the staff receive?
- How many adult staff members are present?
- Is the environment safe, comfortable, and stimulating?
- Do the children seem relaxed and happy? What about the caregivers?
- Are caregivers involved in playing with children or are they somewhat removed?
- Do caregivers provide supportive and positive interactions?
- Are children offered choices during the day?

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; however, there are a few things you may want to consider:

- Infants with special needs sometimes become overstimulated more easily than other infants. You may have to watch for stress cues more carefully.
- Your child may take more time to respond to incoming information. Be patient, and give your child time to process what is happening. If you ask a question, wait as your child develops an answer rather than asking the question repeatedly. Give your child a chance to roll the dice or spin the spinner on his/her own rather than jumping in to help.
- Your child may have physical challenges that prevent access to opportunities to practice social skills. You may need to find ways to adapt the environment so that your child can participate too.

Involvement in the community is very important for children with disabilities:

- Your child may need more practice with social skills than other children and may need more direct support to learn a new skill. It is very important that your child gets a lot of practice interacting with other children in a variety of situations.

- Oftentimes children with special needs interact more with adults than children their own age.
- Involvement of children with disabilities in sports has been shown to improve self-esteem.
- Research findings related to Special Olympic Unified Sports participants, including able-bodied athletes and athletes with disabilities, found that friendship activities increased for all participants.
- Students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive settings tend to have more friends than similar students in special schools.

What Can a Physical Therapist Do to Support My Child in the Area of Social–Emotional Development?

- Provide training and/or equipment (eg, walkers, crutches, wheelchairs) that will allow your child to be mobile, to explore the environment independently, and to initiate social interaction.
- Provide assistive technology that will help your child interact with specific aspects of the environment (eg, switch activated toys, communication devices, environmental controls).
- Teach you and your child about positions that will make activities easier for your child.
- Provide recommendations for modifying the environment to promote accessibility (eg, adding a ramp, widening a doorway, adding grab bars in a bathroom).
- Provide opportunities for group interaction in a very controlled environment with lots of support to help your child learn specific skills. These groups are often organized with speech–language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and educators so that all areas of development can be incorporated. Groups can be a great place for your children to practice interacting with other children in a non-threatening environment.
- Provide information about local community activities that are appropriate and receptive to a child with special needs (eg, library, horseback riding, sports).
- Advocate, educate, and consult with community organizations and governments about ways to can include children with special needs.
- Help you find professionals in your community who can assist you if you are having trouble with social development issues (eg, psychologist, counselor, or social worker).

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Web Sites

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Zero to Three. <http://www.zerotothree.org>. (This Web site provides information about healthy development for child ages 0-3.)

National Association for the Education of Young Children. <http://www.naeyc.org>. (This Web site provides a variety of information about the education of young children.)

For More Information:

If you have additional questions, would like to order additional copies of this fact sheet, or would like to join the Section on Pediatrics, please contact the Executive Office of the Section on Pediatrics of the American Physical Therapy Association at: APTA Section on Pediatrics, 1111 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, 800/999-2782, ext 3254, Fax: 703/706-8575. Or visit the Section's Web site at www.pediatricapta.org.

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