

A Guide for Families: Strategies to Support Social-Emotional Development

From infancy through adulthood, social-emotional skills are intertwined with every aspect of our daily lives. These skills enable us to communicate our needs, wants, and ideas; build relationships; communicate emotions; and handle conflict effectively.



To assist families in understanding the importance of social-emotional development, Trying Together created a family guide. Continue reading to explore the meaning of social emotional development and strategies caregivers can use at home to support their child's development.

What is Social-Emotional Development?

Social-Emotional Development is the process of learning mental and behavioral patterns that impact a person's ability to work through social and emotional situations. These patterns can be broken down into individual skills such as:

- building and maintaining positive relationships;
- working productively in a team;
- recognizing, coping with, and empathizing with emotions;
- resolving conflicts with others; and
- building confidence in oneself and others.

In addition to the skills listed above, there are several others. To view lists of social-emotional skills, view the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Developmental Milestones resource](#)¹.

¹ bit.ly/cdc-milestones-list



Strategies for Caregivers

To assist caregivers in supporting social-emotional development, Trying Together curated a list of at-home strategies. If you find yourself struggling with your own social-emotional responses as a caregiver, these strategies can also guide you in further developing your own toolkit and modeling these strategies for your child.

- Children naturally practice social-emotional skills during play. Provide your child with opportunities to play independently, with caregivers, and with children (if possible). Include different types of play, such as nature play, imaginative play, cooperative play, and more.
- When your child is experiencing a big emotion, avoid saying things such as: "calm down" or "don't be sad/mad." This teaches children that certain emotions are "bad" and should not be expressed or shared. Instead, help them recognize, name, and work through what they are feeling. Here are a few examples:
 - "When Mya took your toy, you started crying. It must have been hard for her to take that toy from you. How are you feeling? Did you feel sad?"
 - "I see that Juan stepped on your favorite shirt. It doesn't feel nice when someone steps on something you like, huh? How did you feel when that happened?"
 - Explore different **emotion/feeling words**² together so your child can better identify and express what they are feeling.
- No matter what age your child is (infant, baby, toddler, school-age), have back and forth (serve and return) interactions with them. Here are some examples:
 - Make eye contact with your child and show them different facial expressions.
 - If a baby coos at you, reciprocate that interaction with your own sound, a smile, or whatever feels right in the moment.
 - If a toddler shows you something, pay attention and ask questions about it.

When are Social-Emotional Skills Developed?

Because social-emotional skills are introduced in early childhood, a child's early relationships and experiences play influential roles in determining which social-emotional patterns they develop. While these patterns can be difficult to break, individuals continue to develop and fine-tune their social-emotional skills throughout adulthood.

If a child regularly screams during difficult situations, they may develop a long-term pattern of responding to tense situations with an outburst of anger. While caregivers should not demand their child to withhold their natural emotional responses, caregivers can teach their children strategies that can help them express and cope with their emotions effectively. In addition to teaching strategies, caregivers should strive to create a safe, nurturing environment in which children feel safe in expressing their thoughts and emotions.



- If your child is having a hard time writing letters or adding numbers, empathize with what your child may be feeling (anger, frustration, sadness, shame), help them recognize those emotions, and help them practice the task at hand.
- Model the social-emotional skills you would like your child to develop. If you would like your child to share with others, make sure they see you sharing with others. If you would like them to wait for their turn, show them situations where you are waiting patiently (in a grocery store, to use the restroom, etc.)
- Talk through situations where you are practicing a social-emotional skill in front of your child. Think of it as narrating the situation and the thoughts you have about sharing your favorite snack, resolving a conflict, etc.
- Create a safe space in your home where your child can go to relax. While children should feel safe to come to you with their emotions, they also need a place to go to process their emotions alone. Add their favorite items in their safe space. Children should never be forced to go to their safe space.
- Practice self-soothing mindfulness techniques with your child. Tell them that it is okay to take a pause to process their feelings and help them practice this skill. They can take a few deep breaths, drink some water, count to five, or hug a stuffed animal. See this [Mindfulness Guide](#)³ from the New York Times for more mindfulness ideas.
- Do not solve all of your child's problems. To develop independence and self-confidence, children need to work through their challenges independently (reaching a toy that is too far away, resolving a conflict, etc.). If the situation is unsafe, step in. But if it involves lower levels of risk, give your child a chance to solve the issue.
- Help children share their ideas and opinions. One way to encourage respect and shared decision making is by introducing the concept of voting. If a decision needs to be made about a shared experience (play, snack, etc.), have children share their ideas and vote to decide the outcome. Ideas that do not win can be incorporated during the next play session.
- Praising children for their effort rather than the outcome builds their self-confidence, persistence, and resiliency to challenges or failure. By doing so, you communicate that their effort matters and that, regardless of the outcome, you are proud of them.

Resources

If you are interested in learning more about social-emotional development and other early childhood topics, consider utilizing the resources listed below.

Developmentally Appropriate Parenting Series

Developmentally Appropriate Parenting⁴ is a family resource content series developed by Trying Together as an effort to empower caregivers to create high-quality experiences at the earliest stages of their child's life.

ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE⁵ works to ensure that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life. Visit their website⁶ to access their online resources to learn more about **empathy development**, self-esteem, **developing social-emotional skills**, and more.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children

The **National Association for the Education of Young Children** (NAEYC) works to promote high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age eight, by connecting early childhood practice, policy, and research. Their website includes resources on **building social-emotional skills at home**, working through **challenging behaviors**, and more.

Fred Rogers Productions

In the television series "**Mister Rogers' Neighborhood**," Fred Rogers explores several social-emotional skills such as empathy, imagination, self-esteem, and self-control. Watch recordings of the episodes on the **Fred Rogers Productions' website**⁷.

4 tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

5 zerotothree.org

6 bit.ly/naeyc-social-emotional

7 misterrogers.org/watch

To learn more, visit: tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

