

A Guide for Families: Supporting Social-Emotional Development Through Play

As the caregiver of a young child, you may have heard of physical skills such as crawling and running; cognitive skills such as long-term memory and pattern recognition; and academic skills such as reading and subtraction. However, have you heard of social-emotional skills?



Social-emotional skills act as the backbone for conversations, relationships, and a person's ability to work through emotions in a healthy, productive way. To succeed in school, the workplace, and their personal lives, children need to develop social-emotional skills. Without them, children are more likely to experience difficulties maintaining relationships, self-regulating their emotions, and demonstrating self-control throughout their lifetimes.

Children's early experiences with their loved ones have a big influence on what skills they develop. Because of this, caregivers must consider what social-emotional

skills or patterns they are modeling or practicing themselves. Children develop skills and patterns based on what they were taught or exposed to in early childhood. While these patterns can change over time (in childhood and adulthood), the earlier a child practices these skills, the better.

To help caregivers better understand social-emotional development, Trying Together created this family guide. In it, Trying Together explores social-emotional skills and at-home activities caregivers can use to support their child's development.

Social-Emotional Skills

Examples of social-emotional skills include, but are not limited to, the following:

- building positive relationships with other children and adults;
- being able to recognize non-verbal cues and maintain eye contact;
- displaying confidence in themselves and others;
- displaying respect for other people's feelings, ideas, and opinions;
- displaying self-control and patience;
- listening and paying attention to others;
- recognizing their own and other people's emotions;
- sharing toys or materials with other children; and
- working together with other children or adults.

By practicing these skills, young children will develop a toolkit of social emotional skills that will help them navigate interpersonal (with others) and intrapersonal (with self) situations. For information about social-emotional developmental milestones by age, visit the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) website¹](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/earlychildhood/developmental-milestones).

At-Home Activities

- A simple game of peekaboo provides a chance for children to make eye contact and exchange facial expressions with their caregiver. Try out different facial expressions each time you reappear to see how your baby responds.
- Read at least one picture book per day with your child. While reading, bring characters (and their emotions) to life by changing your voice pitch, tone, speed, or volume and facial expressions. If your child can read, ask them to read out the character's lines themselves. If they cannot, ask them to mimic the emotion or repeat a line.

- While reading, pause before you flip the page and ask your child what they noticed about the characters, what they think about what is happening, how they would feel, what they would do, or what they think is going to happen next. Make up your own questions as you go!
- Let your child express themselves through art. Give them a piece of paper, a canvas, or any type of artistic material and let their imagination run free. When they are done creating, ask them what it is, what inspired them to create it, and how they felt during the process. If you have multiple children, have them work on a piece of art together.
- If your child is experiencing big emotions, show them [yoga poses²](https://www.kid-yoga.com/poses) they can do to practice their breathing and move their bodies.
- Try activities like this printable [Emotional Sorting Game³](https://www.sort-emotions.com) or have them make [Plastic Egg Faces⁴](https://www.egg-faces.com) to help your child learn about different emotion and feeling words. Puppets can be used as a tool for children to explore or express their emotions.
- Schedule a playdate at your house to help your child practice sharing, teamwork, creativity, and independence. If multiple children live in your household, that works too. Gather items like clothes, child-safe dishes, books, and more and let the children determine how they will use them. Card and board games can be used as well.
- Create a safe space in your home where your child can go to relax alone. Ask your child what items, colors, smells, tastes, or materials make them feel better. Walk around the house, help them collect the things they mentioned, and spend time together creating their new safe space. Take time each month to ask these questions and redesign. Children should never be forced to go to their safe space.

1 [bit.ly/cdc-milestones-list](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/earlychildhood/developmental-milestones)

2 [bit.ly/kid-yoga-poses](https://www.kid-yoga.com/poses)

3 [bit.ly/sort-emotions](https://www.sort-emotions.com)

4 [bit.ly/egg-faces](https://www.egg-faces.com)

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 Parenting⁵ 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.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children

The **National Association for the Education of Young Children**⁶ (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.

Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative

The Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative is a group of organizations dedicated to advancing the importance of play in the lives of children, families, and communities in the Pittsburgh region. **Read their blog**⁷ to learn about playful activities for children of all ages.

Fred Rogers Center

The Fred Rogers Center works to extend the legacy of Fred Rogers to today's generation of children and the adults who love and care for them. Visit their website (**fredrogerscenter.org**) to access resources on simple interactions, child wellness, and digital learning.

5 tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

6 naeyc.org

7 bit.ly/playful-blog

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

