



Social Development in Young Children

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Among the most significant issues young children face in their early years is **social development**.

Social development is related to “interpersonal intelligence,” or a person’s knowledge and skills in developing relationships with other people and how to be successful in them. How important is it?

What is Social Development?

The challenge of fostering social development in young children essentially refers to a central issue: *How do we raise young children to become people who care for themselves and others?* Happy and stable relationships with others are an essential building block of a healthy life.

Social development refers to **the development of a child’s ability to achieve goals in interacting with others (such as making a friend) and also create and sustain positive relationships with others.** Consider how positive social relationships relate to having a “good life.” For example:

- Happiness most often comes from interacting with other people and building positive relationships.
- Career success depends just as much or more on being able to cooperate and get along with others (interpersonal skills) as it does on technical skills.

Positive social relationships also are important to one’s life experience in many other ways.

A lack of positive social development, not a lack of academic achievement, generally is associated with behaviors such as bullying, aggression or meanness in relationships, or isolation from peers among young children. Positive social development is necessary to prevent child difficulties, such as feeling rejected, isolation, depression, lack of achievement or delinquency.

What do we learn about social development from a learning activity such as “Who Do You Remember?” (see next page). Think of those individuals who make the most difference in our personal lives. Consider for a moment the mother, father, teacher, coach, pastor, friend – the people who pass closely through our lives.

Few of us remember the headliners of yesterday. These may be people who are accomplished in their fields. But the applause dies. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and awards are buried with their owners.

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Who Do You Remember? – A Learning Activity

Who are the people we remember most? Who makes the most difference in our personal lives? First, consider the people in this world who make headlines or have great accomplishments. Who are they? Can you list some of their names? List the last four in each category given below:

Miss America Winners

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Nobel Peace Prize Winners

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Academy Award Winners (Best Actor/Actress)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Now, consider the people in this world who you have known or respected. Who are they? Can you list some of their names? List four in each category given below.

My Influential Teachers

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Friends When I Was in Need

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

People You Love

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

The people who make a difference in your life, and in the lives of children, are not the ones with the most money, the most fame or the most awards – they are the ones who care. They are the individuals you know personally and who work to make a positive difference through caring and support. Social development is largely concerned with assisting children to develop into such individuals.

The Importance of Social Development

People generally believe children benefit from learning the three primary “R’s” of education – reading, writing, and arithmetic (math). But what about the fourth “R” – relationships?

Diane McClellan and Lillian Katz, in an article on young children’s social development, suggest the risks associated with social development challenges include poor mental health, becoming a school dropout, poor school achievement and employment difficulty. They also suggest that given the lifelong consequences, “*relationships* should be counted as the *first* of the four R’s of education.”

An increasing body of scientific evidence suggests children ought to achieve minimal social competence by about the age of 6 if they are to avoid an increased likelihood of being at risk in later years. Peer relationships contribute greatly to our social and cognitive development, and thus to our successful functioning as adults.

A leading researcher on relationships among children has written:

Indeed, the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, not school grades and not classroom behavior, but rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously “at risk.”
(emphasis added)

Parents and other adults need to give significant attention to the social development of young children and provide the guidance needed to assist in developing positive relationship skills.

Understanding Social Development

Some of the specific characteristics of social competence are important to understand. Social development, or social competence, is made up of a number of related concepts. These include both **self skills** and **interaction skills**.

Self Skills in Social Development

Each individual needs to develop a set of personal skills that enables him or her to manage how he or she interacts with others. These self skills include:

- **Self-confidence** – positive feeling about oneself
- **Coping ability** – ability to manage feelings of stress or anger
- **Self-control of impulses and behavior** – ability to manage one’s responses to a social situation

Interaction Skills in Social Development

Relating to others is central to social development, so needed skills also include elements that facilitate interacting with others. Interaction skills include:

- **Social expectations** – understanding rules and expectations for interacting with others socially, such as rules for sharing, greeting others, cooperation, etc.
- **Social awareness** – ability to identify and care for your own feelings as well as for the feelings of others, and express them appropriately in a social context
- **Planning and decision making** – ability to encounter problems, think about solutions and make decisions about how to act

Key Skills in Social Development

Social development, or social competence, includes both **self skills** and **interaction skills**. Specific social skills associated with each of these domains are listed below:

Self Skills

- ✓ Self-confidence
- ✓ Coping ability
- ✓ Self-control of impulses and behavior

Interaction Skills

- ✓ Social expectations
- ✓ Social awareness
- ✓ Planning and decision making
- ✓ Social interaction
- ✓ Conflict resolution

- **Social interaction** – ability to interact with others (greet, talk, play, avoid, cooperate, etc.) in both one-on-one and group social situations
- **Conflict resolution** – ability to negotiate differences with others and resolve concerns

Self and interaction skills provide the specific foundation a young child needs to learn how to manage relationships in a caring and successful manner.

Social Development Through the Years

Social development begins when a child is young; therefore, having a parent or caregiver assess how the child is progressing in acquiring social skills and social competence during the child's early years is helpful. In the early years, children tend to move from observation to practice to competence in their social abilities.

Through the years, a child's social development becomes more sophisticated and complex. Parents should understand the limits of a child's abilities in resolving conflict or resisting peer pressure at a young age and provide sufficient guidance and feedback to assist children in overcoming social challenges. A profile of a child's social development in various areas at different ages is highlighted in "Social Development Through the Years" (see page 4).

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Social Development Through the Years

Infants and Toddlers (Birth to Age 2)	Preschoolers (Ages 3 to 5)	School Age Children (Ages 6 to 11)
<i>Planning and Decision Making – Observation</i>	<i>Planning and Decision Making – Practice</i>	<i>Planning and Decision Making – Competence</i>
Care and safety of children is handled by parents. Developing mobility and independence allows for some simple choices by kids.	Children learn to identify choices, select options, and solve basic problems. Make plans as they engage in play or other interactions.	Skills such as planning and conscious decision making become more active. Choices and plans should be developmentally appropriate.
<i>Interpersonal – Observation</i>	<i>Interpersonal – Interactions</i>	<i>Interpersonal – Competence</i>
Children experience and observe a variety of interactions with others. Children are prone to express feelings. Adults model positive interactions and responsiveness to feelings.	Social interaction with others becomes more common, both children and adults. Children share a variety of emotions and can discuss feelings. Children learn cooperation, give and take, and empathy.	Children learn to make friends, understand social expectations, and respond to adults. Children learn to manage feelings appropriately and respond with empathy to others.
<i>Cultural – Observation</i>	<i>Cultural – Interactions</i>	<i>Cultural – Competence</i>
Children observe comfort with persons of diverse backgrounds as modeled by adults.	Children receive exposure to persons of diverse backgrounds. Gain increased knowledge of others.	Children develop knowledge of and comfort with other people of diverse backgrounds.
<i>Resistance – Observation</i>	<i>Resistance – Practice</i>	<i>Resistance – Competence</i>
Children learn to express needs and demands. They observe parental resistance to theirs or other demands, and other resistance skills.	Children learn to resist inappropriate or unsafe activities, especially if pressured by adults or children.	Children develop capacity to avoid negative situations, withstand peer pressure, and make good choices about potential problems.
<i>Peaceful Conflict Resolution – Observation</i>	<i>Peaceful Conflict Resolution – Practice</i>	<i>Peaceful Conflict Resolution – Competence</i>
Parents model healthy stress management and nonviolent conflict resolution.	Children experience conflict and learn to practice healthy, nonviolent approaches.	Children respond to conflictual situations without violence with guidance.

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