



# Keys to Assisting Social Development in Young Children

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How can you make a difference and enhance a child's **social development**? Parents and other adults can influence children directly through personal intervention and assistance, or indirectly through their examples and the environment they create.

## Patterns of Parental Influence

Parental or adult influences on children's social development can be divided into **direct** and **indirect** patterns of influence. Direct influence is associated with a parent's or caregiver's personal intervention or guidance of a young child's social attitudes, reactions and behaviors. Indirect influence is associated with a parent's or caregiver's example and the environment he or she creates for children to understand and observe social interactions.

Parents and other adults influence children in both direct and indirect ways. For example, a mother might help a child join a group of children playing a game together, which is an example of direct influence. A teacher might spend a minute counseling a particular student and other students observe this and see they can approach the teacher with concerns, which is an example of indirect influence. Adults should work to be aware of the things they do to both directly and indirectly help children in understanding relationships with others and developing social skills that will help them in such relationships.

## Parents as Social Managers

Parents and other adults can influence a young child's social development directly as "social managers." This means actively giving children opportunities to interact with others and often guiding their interactions as appropriate. In this manner, parents and caregivers directly manage a child's social interactions or opportunities to teach skills and assist in building relationships.

## Provide Positive Social Opportunities

One of the most important things parents and caregivers can do is **provide opportunities for positive interaction with other children**. Providing such opportunities in a "controlled environment" is good. Those opportunities may be in your home, a one-on-one play session, a play group or other setting because they allow adults to both see and support children as they build relationships. Parents and caregivers can help children learn social skills and facilitate social interactions by:

- Finding playmates for their children

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- Setting play dates for their children
- Enrolling children in organized social activities, such as swimming, soccer, preschool, 4-H clubs, etc.
- Helping children gain entry to a social situation by making introductions, participating in a game with other children, etc.
- Encouraging children to practice appropriate social interaction, such as sharing toys, asking for favors, saying “please” and “thank you,” etc.
- Arranging and organizing a play group that meets regularly, providing your home or yard for a play environment, giving some supervision to the play
- With older children, children can be “coached” on their interpersonal relationships in private and with follow-up.
- Coaching and supervision may inhibit social development if done harshly – for example, if the parent is overly involved (poor boundaries) or uses physical force or aggressive verbal communication to intervene.

## Parents as Social Examples

Parents and caregivers can influence a young child’s social development indirectly with social examples. Parents and other adults often are unconscious teachers of young children. Young children may sift through and discard the information parents or other adults consciously try to teach them. But the pattern a parent or caregiver demonstrates in how to treat others tends to leave a more powerful and lasting impression.

## Teach Conflict Resolution

Parents and caregivers can **model positive conflict resolution for children**. If possible, parents and other adults should use disputes as an opportunity to teach and demonstrate peaceful ways of negotiating and compromising to children. Parents and caregivers can:

- Step in to help children negotiate differences with others and mediate for them as needed when they are not getting along with others.
- Model effective conflict resolution and encourage appropriate behavior. Be a positive example of working through conflict or differences with others.
- Practice “parental coaching,” which involves varying levels of supervision based on a child’s age and needs, and intervening as needed when social situations become too challenging for a young child to manage.
- Supervision of social interactions should become less intense and less obvious as children grow older, taking place more from a distance.

## Practice Positive Discipline

The **discipline style of parents or caregivers** can have a large influence on children’s social skills. Children seem to learn how to interact with others from the model their parents use with them. Discipline styles can be particularly important. Research has suggested three differing styles are important: **permissive, power assertive** and **inductive**.

- **Permissive discipline style** – It is characterized by a tendency to indulge children’s desires, some indifference to children’s needs and difficulty in setting appropriate limits. This style may be associated with more aggressive, impulsive and nonconforming social behavior in children. For example, parents who do not set or reinforce limits with children may

find these children do not learn to control their impulses (e.g., taking something that is not theirs) or actions (destructive behavior). If consequences are not enforced, then children may be less likely to think about the social effects of their behavior (or misbehavior). In social relationships with peers, they may believe they can get what they want just by taking it. Their paradigm for social relationships may become one of entitlement. They have not developed from an impulsive, self-centered view of the world to a view that considers the thoughts and feelings of others.

- **Power assertive discipline style (authoritarian)** – It is characterized by giving orders to children without direction or explanation, or use of tactics such as threats, belittlement or physical punishment to control child behavior. This may result in aggressive, impulsive social behavior or shy, withdrawn social behavior. Neither of these patterns is helpful. Children who withdraw may think they are powerless. Aggressive children, on the other hand, may believe acting aggressively brings results since they have seen parents do this. The message they get is social relationships are about who is bigger and has more power, not about feelings or reciprocation.
- **Inductive discipline style (authoritative)** – It is characterized by reasoning with children, explanation of cause and effect, clear explanations of limits and consequences, negotiation, and solicitation of ideas and feedback from the child. Children raised with this style tend to have better communication skills, greater self-control and more positive interactions with others. They tend to think about the consequences of their social behavior. They are better able to negotiate conflicts and are more easily accepted among peers.

## Keep a Positive Home Environment

The family environment, especially the quality of a marital relationship or marital discord, has a strong relation to children's social behavior. Maintaining a harmonious family environment allows children to learn social skills without undue stress or high levels of conflict. Family members should model appropriate interaction and conflict resolution for children rather than displaying great conflict. Other things parents or caregivers can do in the home environment to facilitate social development include:

- Provide structured activities for family interaction in a positive way, such as playing games, etc.
- Give children regular assignments for which they are responsible and that help them practice good behavior and effort (doing chores, etc.).
- Be sensitive to times of transition or crisis that can upset children, such as divorce, separation, financial stress, death, etc.

## Other Practical Strategies for Positive Social Development

Parents and other adults have a variety of additional strategies they can use to enhance a young child's social development. Consider some of the following:

- Meet regularly (every two to three months) with a child's preschool or school teacher. Ask the teacher to provide you with feedback on your child's social behavior and experience with peers in the classroom setting. Make this a specific point of discussion each time you interact with a child's teacher.

- Focus on the child's typical (routine patterns during the course of three to four weeks' behavior and functioning, rather than on selected incidents that may be positive or negative.
- Monitor the quality of a child's friendships and peer interactions. Talk to the child about how he or she feels about friendships or interactions with others.
- Pay attention to the temperament of the child in social situations (shy vs. outgoing, etc.). Adapt as needed.
- Be aware of the ability of the child to deal with and resolve conflicts. Some children may need more assistance than others, depending on age and maturity.

### A Child's Social Development – Ideas for Action

So how can you make a difference and enhance a young child's social development? Planning some specific strategies can help in assisting a young child socially. List three to four ideas you can try to assist a child's social development in the following categories:

#### Provide Positive Social Opportunities

- *(Example – Arrange for a friend's 4-year-old son to come over for two hours to play with your son, and do projects with them that they enjoy).*

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#### Teach Conflict Resolution

- *(Example – Sit down with two young children who are arguing about a toy. Talk to each separately while the other waits, then assist them to apologize and take turns with the toy).*

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#### Practice Positive Discipline

- *(Example – If a young child gets a snack he or she should not have right before dinner, explain firmly that the child must wait and negotiate a different time he or she might have the snack).*

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#### A Positive Home Environment and Other Strategies

- *(Example – Work with a child to write "thank you" notes after going to a birthday party or similar event to which he or she was invited, teaching the child to express appreciation to others).*

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## Conclusion

Parents and others who care for children are the most powerful people in a young child's life. Trying to alter poor patterns of how to treat others that have been imprinted on children's minds and hearts in their early years by showing them the good example of others is a challenging proposition. Resolve to begin early and give young children the best start possible in their social relationships through love, attention and a positive example.

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