



Building Blocks for Young Children

CCCC
Community
Coordinated
Child Care



Building Social Skills



The class of 4 year olds bolts for the playground, eager to escape the classroom and run outside. Lisa lags behind, shying away from the swings and her classmates, preferring to observe from a bench under the tree.

Social skills allow children to interact with other children and adults, make friends and act appropriately in different situations. It should not be confused with simple politeness and manners. Shy children often have trouble joining in with their peers. There is nothing more painful for a child than to be lonely, watching from the sidelines, unable to take that first step toward participation and friendship. The inability to make friends and feel comfortable with peers can weaken a child's self-esteem.

Parents and teachers can help to build social skills in young children in a variety of ways. They can make sure that children have the opportunity to be with other children their own age. For children in child care or nursery school, classmates become their "first friends." Young children who remain at home prior to school can meet other children in the neighborhood, at religious functions or at community-sponsored programs, such as story time at the library.

The different components of social skills include:



Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand another person's feelings. Young children are often very compassionate by nature and want to reach out to their peers who may be lonely, sad or hurt. When a preschooler falls and scrapes a knee, children often rush to help. Even when a child may hurt another's feelings—"You can't play with my truck!" they are quick to make amends when told by an adult another child feels badly.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the ability to say what we want without aggression. Young children may grab toys from another child or push to the front of the line. They need to be taught how to use positive communication behaviors and appropriate ways to have what they want. Since a young child's vocabulary is still developing, he may need to be given the words to use to express exactly what he wants.

Problem-Solving Skills

Even young children must learn how to compromise, solve problems and resolve conflicts. When two children want the same toy, they must learn how to share or take turns. Problem-solving skills help build self-esteem and allow children to develop strong relationships.

Self-Expression

Children need to be understood, conveying their thoughts and feelings easily. Those thoughts must also be accepted by adults. They must also be able to understand their own emotions and explain how they feel to others. The ability to express how one feels is key to developing friends and solving conflicts.

10 Ways to Develop Social Skills in Young Children

1. Encourage your child to play with other children. Invite a neighbor, classmate or cousin over to play for a couple of hours. Keep the visit short and don't leave the children on their own. Be available to help children get started with a game.
 2. Play games with your child so he learns how to share and take turns.
 3. Teach your child the words he needs to express himself. "Can I play with the puzzle now?" Remind your child to "use his words" to express what he wants to reduce whining, crying and aggressive behaviors.
 4. Teach compromise to a preschooler by modeling it regularly. "We'll play hide and seek now and later we can play Candyland." "Since we bought grapes last week for you, today we'll buy peaches for Louis."
 5. Preschoolers who hit or use unacceptable language may do so because they see adults around them acting aggressively. It is important for parents and caregivers to behave appropriately if they expect the children around them to behave.
 6. Your preschooler's anger may get out of control because he cannot verbalize what he wants or needs. If another child grabs a toy from Maria, she needs to be taught the words to say, "I am playing with the doll now; please give it back to me," instead of hitting or grabbing the toy.
 7. Give your child extra time to speak, allowing him time to collect his thoughts and think about what he can say.
 8. Do not give in to a child who whines or acts aggressively to get what he wants. Negative behavior is often a call for attention. Do not react to every negative behavior with attention, yelling, and intense emotions, which only rewards your child with a sense of power, attention and involvement.
 9. Compliment your child when he does the right thing and acts appropriately.
 10. Use distraction to help your child move away from the situation that is causing a problem.
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Simple Scenarios Involving Social Skills

Three-year-old Kelly goes food shopping with her Dad every Tuesday night immediately after child care. The store is crowded at 6:30 and both Dad and Kelly are tired, hungry and eager to get home. Without fail, Kelly will ask to buy a special treat and cry until she gets her way. Dad usually gives in to Kelly's demands to quiet her down and get out of the store.

First, Dad should find a better time to go food shopping with Kelly or find someone to care for her while he shops alone. It is not fair to Kelly to expect her to behave while she is overtired and hungry. Secondly, Kelly is being rewarded for negative behavior. She is learning that when she cries she will get her way. At three, Kelly can be told prior to entering the store that only the items on the shopping list will be purchased. Dad will not give into to her cries despite the stress of the situation. If she leaves the store without her treat, she will eventually learn that whining and crying will not get her what she wants.



Four-year-old Timmy is shy in class, waiting for his classmates to ask him to join them. He stays by his teacher, waiting for direction, and rarely initiates play.

Teacher: Timmy, in five minutes all the children will be able to play with any toy they want in the classroom. What would you like to play with?

Timmy: I want to play with the blocks.

Teacher: Good. Is there anyone you want to build with?

Timmy: I want to build a house with Sarah and Pete.

Teacher: I will ask Sarah and Pete to join us. When they come over, ask them "Will you build a house with me?" Okay?

Teacher: Sarah and Pete please come over here a minute. Timmy, ask Sarah and Pete your question.

Timmy: Will you build a house with me with the blocks?

Once Timmy understands that his classmates will respond to him, he will begin to interact with peers more often.

Four-year-old Samuel is very timid and walks away from all confrontation with his peers. Melissa teases Sam when they play outside and often excludes him from games. Sam's feelings are hurt each time, but he feels powerless to do anything.

Sam's mother knows that Melissa hurts her son, but she wants Samuel to stand up for himself. She teaches Sam to say, "Melissa, you are not being nice to me. You are hurting my feelings. The other kids want me to play and I want to play, so I am going to play."

Signs of Atypical Behavior

All young children need to develop the skills to make friends and act appropriately in various situations at different times. It is normal for preschoolers to have a “melt down” if they are overtired, frustrated and put into a situation beyond their control. All preschoolers have to learn to share and part of learning involves making mistakes.

But for some children, a friendship or even basic interaction with other children, is extremely difficult. A child’s prolonged difficulty in social situations or an inability to simply speak to or have fun with other children may be a sign of a developmental problem or special need. A child who bangs his head in frustration, who cowers in fear, or who acts aggressively in most situations to get what he wants, is a child who may need to be evaluated by a professional.

Children who exhibit these behaviors on a regular, extended basis may need to be evaluated. Often the difference in typical and atypical behaviors in young children is a matter of frequency, duration and intensity. How often does the negative behavior occur, once a week, or once an hour? Does the negative behavior last for a minute or two or most of the day? When the negative behavior occurs how bad is it? Does the child just push aggressively or does the child hit to injure someone else?

Parents should speak regularly with their child’s teacher or child care provider to see if the behaviors exist in the classroom and if so, how the child’s behavior is addressed. Concrete strategies to address challenging behavior at home or school may work in the other environment. Often a “Doing Great” chart hung on the refrigerator which targets the three most important behaviors a child needs to improve, is the most effective way to motivate a child to correct negative behaviors. The targeted behaviors should be put in positive terms (saying what you want in good ways rather than yelling) and rated everyday for success. Small rewards and consequences can be tied to the behavior improvement chart. If the behavior continues to raise concerns, parents should discuss it with their doctor and ask if a developmental assessment is necessary.

If you need additional information on typical development, or have concerns that your child may have special developmental needs, you can contact Union County Special Child Health Services at 908-889-0950 for an evaluation and consultation.

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