

Supporting Children's Development: 3-5 year olds

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Summary: A review of social development during early childhood, including its impact on children's overall development, characteristics of preschoolers' social development, and ways to support and guide young children's social development. Suggestions for special situations are also outlined (i.e., children who may be having difficulty making friends, the shy child, children who are aggressive, and what to do when your child is being bullied).

What is social development? Social development refers to the development of skills leading to successful relationships with others, and the understanding of social situations. Social development includes:

- learning how to get along with others (e.g., how to share and take turns, how to be agreeable and friendly toward others, how to compromise and negotiate, how to enter a group, how to play cooperatively with others, how to listen to others)
- having concern about and showing helpful behavior toward others
- learning how to "read" others' emotional expressions and intentions
- learning to respect the rights of others
- using thinking skills and language to resolve conflicts (instead of hitting, biting, yelling)
- learning basic communication skills (e.g., using kind words, how to stand up for one's self, how to ask for something or get help, the importance of establishing eye contact when you talk to someone, etc.)
- learning how to wait

Is social development important?

Children's social development is very important to a child's overall development and well-being. Social development has been linked in research not only with the capacity to develop friendships, but also to emotional and mental health, self-esteem, school readiness, academic competence, and adult success and adjustment.

How do children develop socially?

While children come into the world biologically wired to want to be in relationships with others, specific social skills and the understanding of

social situations take a long time to develop. Although biological maturation is partly responsible for the changes with age in social development, the *experiences children have from early on in life* seem to be especially important (see below: "How to support and guide young children's social development").

What is typical of children's social development from 3-5 years?

1. The ability to play cooperatively with peers develops gradually over the preschool years. There is a developmental progression in how young children play with peers. Toddlers often just watch others, play by themselves, or imitate what they see another child doing without interacting with him/her. By 3-4 years, children often engage in "**interactive**" play with others where they talk and play with common materials (i.e., playing with blocks). Finally, the most complex level of play, "**cooperative**" play, typically emerges toward the end of the preschool period (ages 4-5 years). It is in this stage where children can work cooperatively toward one particular goal (i.e., building a fire station)--there is an overall organization to this play, and each child may have an assigned role in order for the goal to be accomplished. (Three- to five-year olds also often just watch others, play by themselves, or imitate what they see others doing).

2. They are fairly egocentric. Preschoolers' thinking is largely egocentric: they have a difficult time seeing things from another person's perspective. For example, they have a hard time understanding what someone else feels, seeing how their behavior may affect others, and thinking about others' intentions. Although these capabilities are starting to develop in 3-5 year old, they are much improved in older children.

The egocentrism of early childhood has a number of implications: a) why young children are very possessive of their toys, b) why "sharing" is a rather meaningless concept to young children, c) why young children have difficulty taking turns, d) why there is often a lot of conflict between young children during play, and e) why organized games and sports with rules don't work well at this age.

3. They lack experience and knowledge of appropriate ways to solve conflicts. Young children typically lack both communication skills as well as problem-solving skills. In addition, their egocentrism makes it hard for them

to understand others' intentions and feelings. (The majority of conflicts at this age revolve around space and materials).

4. Children will often resort to physical means (e.g., biting, hitting, kicking, and other forms of aggression) when they become frustrated, overwhelmed, or lack the language and/or social skills to resolve a conflict situation with another child.

5. Young children often do not know what is expected in different social situations. Learning what is appropriate social behavior in various social situations takes a great deal of time, repetition, and patience. Children may say and do things that adults consider inappropriate simply because they lack the knowledge and experience (e.g., commenting out loud on another's physical qualities such as "Look how fat that man is!").

6. Young children are great imitators. Children learn a great deal from observing others' behavior, and will often imitate both appropriate and inappropriate ways of interacting with others.

7. Young children can benefit greatly from the vigilant, gentle, supportive guidance of adults in social situations.

How to support and guide young children's social development:

1. Develop a warm, loving, responsive, close emotional relationship with your child. Research has shown that children who have warm, loving, affectionate relations with their parents (i.e., a "secure attachment"):

- are more likely to develop superior social skills
- have less conflict in play with peers
- are less likely to engage in aggressive, destructive behavior
- are more likely to develop the capacity for having intimate, close, friendly, and trusting relations with others
- are more likely to be leaders
- are less likely to show attention-seeking behaviors
- are more likely to show empathy toward others

It is in this first relationship with the parents that very young children learn the "basics" of social relationships with others: what close relationships are like, and how worthy of love and attention they are, how to engage another

person, how to take turns communicating with others, and how to attend to other's feelings.

How to build a close, emotional relationship?

- be sensitively-attuned to your child (i.e., recognize and responsive to very young children's emotions, states, and needs; understand your child's own "rhythm"; be emotionally in sync with your child)
- provide your child with lots of warm, sensitive, responsive caregiving
- give your child lots of loving attention
- comfort infants and young children when they cry, are hurt, are having a meltdown, or are upset by something
- listen to what the child is saying (both verbally or nonverbally), and respond in a way that is supportive and not harsh
- be affectionate, hold and cuddle child; provide lots of loving physical contact
- make child feel that she is special; be interested in her daily activities
- don't overstimulate your child: protect her from being overwhelmed and overtired

2. Use positive guidance strategies, not harsh discipline. The methods parents use to discipline and guide their child's behavior affects children's social development. Positive guidance strategies (e.g., explaining to children why something isn't okay instead of using harsh punishment like hitting or spanking a child) have been found in research to be related to better social development in children.

What are some "positive guidance strategies"?

- explain to a child why what they did wasn't ok to do (e.g., "When you throw the ball in the house, I am afraid something will get broken. How about throwing the ball in the backyard?")
- explain rules and limits to child (e.g., "Andy, Susie is using the blocks now. You can use them when she is finished.")
- redirect the child's behavior (child is playing in the water in the toilet or sink: "I can see that you are wanting to play water. Let's take a little dishpan of water out onto the patio for you to play in!")
- do an (unpleasant) activity with the child ("Sulima, we need to pick up the toys in your room. How about we go in there together—let's make a game out of it!")

- give closed choices (e.g., "Maria, do you want to get into the bath now or in 5 minutes?")
- use "when-thens" (e.g., "When you eat your vegetables, then you can have ice cream.")
- state limits in a positive way: (e.g., "Marcos, the water needs to stay in the bathtub. When it gets on the floor, people can slip and hurt themselves.")

By contrast, hitting and/or spanking children has been found in research to be related to:

- higher rates of aggression and conflict with peers
- lower rates of sympathy, empathy, and helping behavior toward others
- the development of a poor parent-child relationship
- lowered self-confidence and self-esteem
- higher rates of behavior problems
- delayed language skills
- lowered I.Q.
- lessened ability to develop meaningful relationships as adults (e.g., Lopez et al., 2001; Riak, 2007)

3. Respond to your child's emotions and feelings. Children's feelings are very important. When parents recognize, acknowledge, and respond in a comforting way to a child's feelings (e.g., "Maria, I see that you are very angry/scared/upset"), she feels valued, understood, develops a good self-esteem, and will be more empathic towards others. When children's feelings are ignored, they feel angry, unimportant, grow up unable to know what they feel inside, and are less likely to be sensitive to others' feelings.

4. Create a positive emotional climate at home. Parents have a tremendous influence on their child's emotional experience, which can impact what they bring to their peer relationships. Children who are well-liked by their peers tend to come from homes where there are more "positive", happy emotions in the family and where they have more fun in their families.

5. Consider HOW you talk to your child. Children take what they experience in their family relationships to their social interactions outside the home:

- talk kindly and respectfully to your child (vs. being demeaning, critical, or sarcastic)

- involve children in conversation and discussion, explaining reasons for things (e.g., "Jason, when you run inside I'm afraid you will run into something and hurt yourself. Where do you think you could run safely?") as opposed to simply giving them "directives" (e.g., "Stop running!")

6. Spend time playing with your child. When parents spend time playing with their child, children learn very important skills in how to play with others. According to Parke (1993), young children learn how to play, how to initiate play, how to express their feelings, how to read others' emotional expression and social signals through their interactive play with their parents. These skills carry over to their successful play with peers.

Also, do regular floortime* with your child. "Floortime" is where parents spend at least $\frac{1}{2}$ hour per day playing on the floor (or wherever) with their child. The key here is that the child is the leader in play; the parent is the follower. The parent tunes into whatever interests the child. This activity helps parents to build a close, emotional relationship with their child and helps meet their child's basic developmental need for parent's time and attention.

7. Model kind, helpful behavior. Be kind, helpful, and respectful toward your child and others. Children will imitate how others treat them and what they observe others doing (especially their parents).

8. Have conversations/discussions with your child about:

- what works and what doesn't work re: developing friendly relations with others
- why it is good to help others
- how it makes others feel when they share their things with them
- how their behavior affects others and makes others feel
- the importance of using their words to express their needs to other children as well as adults
- upcoming social situations (e.g., a wedding, going to church, going to another child's birthday party)—explain what will be happening there (especially if child hasn't been there before) and discuss what the appropriate behavior for that setting (e.g., "When we go to church we must be very quiet and not use our loud voices").

9. Help children identify their own as well as others' feelings. The ability to identify others' emotional expressions and one's own emotions has been found to be related to successful social relationships. You can help your child identify others' emotional expressions: talk about people's facial expressions you see when you are out and about with your child; look at pictures of faces in magazines or books; discuss what they think the person might be feeling and why. Help your child identify their own emotions by reflecting their feelings, e.g., "You look like you're very angry" or "You seem sad".

10. Help children take the perspective of the other: a) being aware of how others feel, b) seeing things from another person's perspective, and c) understanding the effect of their behavior on others:

- child: "Why is that boy crying?" dad: "I think she might be feeling sad because her mom just left."
- "How would you feel if ..."
- "When you say unkind things to her, she feels sad."
- "He didn't like it when you took the blocks from him—see, he's crying."
- "When you pushed Gina off the swing, she fell and hurt her knee. That's why she's angry and doesn't want to play with you."

11. Give children clear rules about how to get what they want or need, and about the use of toys and materials. Children need to know what the rules are about how they can get what they want or need (e.g., "use your words to ask other child or adult"), and for use of toys and materials (e.g., "whoever had the toy first gets to use it until they are finished").

12. Provide active "social coaching". Children whose parents are active guides when they are playing with others are more likely to learn appropriate social behavior (compared to children whose parents are uninvolved). So... hover nearby when children are playing with one another, and intervene when needed to help them have a positive and successful play experience. Model ways to negotiate and resolve conflicts (see #13 below). Provide suggestions for supporting the children's play and/or resolving conflicts if needed. When you are alone with your child, discuss and role play how to say something or resolve a difficult situation for your child. Make up games to teach problem-solving and what to do in various play and social situations.

13. Use child-child conflicts as opportunities to teach problem-solving and negotiation skills. Young children will have conflicts with other children—these are usually over space or materials. These conflicts present good opportunities to begin teaching children problem-solving and negotiation skills. Here are suggested steps to follow:

1. **Always step in immediately if children are in danger of hurting themselves, others, or materials;** if one child grabs something or is being aggressive towards another child; if one child is being hurtful or insensitive toward another child; or if the children seem unable to resolve a problem themselves.
2. Get down on their eye level. Use active (also called “reflective”) listening: “It looks like there’s a problem here. Can you tell me what happened?”
3. Have each child take turns “using their words” to explain what the problem is. Sum up and repeat back to the children what you hear each child saying: “It sounds like Susanna was playing with the ball, and that you, Jared, wanted to play with it too. Jared, you then took it from her and that made her hit you. Is that right?”
4. Remind children of “rules” for use of materials: “Jared, kids can use toys until they are finished. It is not okay to just take something from someone. Can you think of how you might ask her if you could play too?”
“Susanna, it is not okay to hit someone—that hurts them. Use your words: say, “Jared, stop that—I’m using the ball.”
5. Brainstorm on solutions with the children; you can also volunteer suggestions yourself (e.g., Susanna can tell Jared when she is finished, they might suggest that they play together, you can help Jared find something else to do until Susanna is finished, you can help Jared find another ball to play with, etc.)
6. Select the solution that both children are satisfied with and implement it. Stay nearby to help the children follow through.

Simply removing an object that children are fighting over or just telling them to stop fighting doesn't teach them anything about resolving conflicts and negotiating. These are important lifelong skills to learn, and the earlier they learn them, the better off they will be.

14. Provide opportunities for child-child interaction. Children need opportunities to play with children to grow socially, so take an active role in planning opportunities for your child to play with other children. Hover nearby to provide social coaching and supervision during these play dates. Get to know other parents.

15. Hold family meetings. Family meetings are regularly scheduled time when the entire family gets together to discuss a problem or issue that involves them all. No one is allowed to interrupt or be rude to another; everyone gets to contribute their own ideas. Identify the problem or issue, then brainstorm with everyone on ways to resolve it. Choose the best solution and try it out. (If it doesn't work, choose another possible solution). This is a wonderful learning opportunity for children to be able to observe and participate in group discussion, negotiation, and problem-solving process. It teaches them invaluable skills that they can then use in their future interactions and conflicts with others.

16. Negotiate with your child whenever possible. Life is about negotiation and compromise! Getting along with others requires good negotiation skills, and there's no better place for children to learn this than at home. So when you can, negotiate!

parent: "Julian, you need to take a bath now."

child: "Ah mom, I'm playing with my trucks. How about in a little while?"

parent: "Okay; I'll remind you in a few minutes."

17. Help your child learn to take turns. Practice turn-taking with child; make up games where you each take turns. When you go to the grocery store, talk with your child (and show them) about how adults have to take turns too-- when they wait in line to buy their groceries, when they go to the bank, when they go to the library, etc. Have your child think of places where they have to wait in line (i.e., "take turns") as well. Discuss why it's a good thing to do.

18. Read children's books with social themes. There are many excellent children's books with such themes as helping, sharing, taking turns, using kind words, etc. Here are a few of our favorites:

Understand and Care by Cheri J. Meiners, M.Ed.

Share and Take Turns by Cheri J. Meiners, M.Ed. - (discusses sharing as a

positive choice and how it makes others feel good)

How Kind! by Mary Murphey

Hands Are Not for Hitting by Martine Agassi, Ph.D

19. Be patient with children's developing social skills. It takes a very long time to learn appropriate social skills and to understand the many social situations that children find themselves in. Young children needs lots of on-going support, patience, and guidance from their parents!

20. Don't force young children to share. Sharing is an abstract concept that requires perspective-taking, which young children aren't very good at. Instead, talk about and practice taking turns, and discuss how good it makes others feel when you let them use something of yours. Also, let them observe you sharing with others, and make up sharing games to play. Praise children when they do let others use their things. Don't expect perfection.

21. Emphasize cooperation, not competition. Make up cooperative games to play, or have children engage in a cooperative activity with you and/or other children. Talk with your child about how it's important to help one another. Give young children manageable household chores (e.g., putting napkins on the table at dinnertime, putting their dirty clothes in the hamper, helping you empty the wastebaskets, etc.).

22. Praise your child's helpful, kind behavior toward others. Catch a child being helpful or kind towards another child, e.g., "Jaime, I really liked the way you helped Trina find her blanket. That was a really kind and helpful thing to do." Children usually only hear from parents what they have done something wrong. Turn it around and "catch" your child doing something kind or helpful!

23. Let your child know that their kindness and helpfulness toward others is important to you. Our children will value what we value. Let your child know that their behavior toward others matters to you.

24. Help children find ways to be helpful and giving toward others. Find ways for your young child to help others. Have them do something simple to help a sick family member or friend; take them along with you when you deliver meals to or help out an elderly person; have them pick out or make

small birthday or holiday gifts - any of these activities will also allow them to experience the good feelings that come from helping or giving to others. Emphasize the sense of community and why it's a good thing to help out and give to others.

25. Teach your child respect for others by being respectful of your child, and by helping to protect their personal belongings and privacy.

Special Situations:

For a child who's having difficulty making friends: Invite one child over to your home (get to know the parent first). Have a couple of fail-proof activities for the children ready such as building toys, playdoh, painting, etc. Hover nearby to provide social coaching as needed. (Having just one child over at a time is better than having several over because functioning in a group is much more difficult).

Another suggestion is to arrange a play date with a slightly older child who may have more developed social skills and can provide a role model for your child.

If you don't know many young children, think about joining some type of group that your child might be interested in: tumble tots, Mommy and Me class, dance, preschool - there will be other parents with children your child's age there.

For a child who is having problems getting along with others, observe with this child other groups of children playing (e.g., at their preschool or at a park). While watching the children, discuss what the children are doing, how they enter play groups, how they play in a group, etc. Suggest things to say in specific situations. In doing so you will be increasing this child's understanding of these types of social situations and giving them useful skills to help them succeed with others.

The shy child: Some children are just naturally shy and may be more hesitant to initiate contact with others. These children need extra adult support and patience. Get to know parents of other children; invite a child over to your home. (Your shy child will feel more comfortable in his/her own home). Have activities ready for the children. Research shows that the

more parents can support their shy child (i.e., give them the time and patience they need to adjust to new situations), the better the developmental outcome for the child.

When a child is being aggressive toward others: Most conflicts between young children are over materials and space, so make sure that children have enough of each. Always stop a child from hurting another child. Then, try to find the underlying cause of a child's aggression: is the child angry because he/she is being bullied? Did someone take something from him/her? Does she/he want something but doesn't know how to get it? Are the child's basic needs (for parents' time, attention, love, respect)? Prevention and active guidance by the adult can go a long way to diminishing aggressive behavior.

Some suggestions:

- explain to child that it is not okay to hit/hurt another child
- use active listening ("You look very angry. Let's talk about what made you so angry...")
- use positive guidance strategies, not harsh discipline/punishment
- reduce frustrations for the child
- teach the child successful ways of getting what they want
- make sure the child's basic needs for parental love, time, and attention are being met
- avoid letting young children watch violent TV shows or movies with aggressive models
- use floortime with child
- encourage this child to use their words, not their bodies, when they get angry. Role play what to say in the future when the child finds themselves in a similar situations

When a child is being bullied by another child. Never allow a child to be bullied by another. Children cannot--and should not be expected to--protect themselves from other; this is the adult's job. If this is occurring at a preschool, discuss this immediately with child's teacher so the teacher can be more watchful and intervene. Also, teach your child to say loudly when they are being hurt by another, "Stop that--that hurts" and to go tell the teacher immediately when it occurs again. If the teacher isn't responsive or helpful, parents should go to the director of the program. If the offender is a neighborhood child or relative, you can: 1) speak to the parent to gain their assistance with this problem, 2) be very vigilant when your child is around

this child and intervene when needed, or 3) reconsider who your child spends time playing with.

* forthcoming handout

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