

# S is for **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING**

## Building Positive and Supportive Relationships With Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

Social and emotional development and learning begin at birth and accelerate rapidly throughout the preschool years, where young children learn many social and emotional skills and have repeated opportunities to engage in interactions with adults and other children. When infants and young children experience repeated positive exchanges during everyday routines, they begin to develop the foundational skills needed for future healthy relationships with peers, caregivers, and other adults (see the 3R's of Early Learning: Relationships, Repetition, Routines). Over time, infants and young children learn how to communicate, regulate their emotions, and engage in positive social interactions. Research shows fostering infants' and young children's social and emotional skills is essential for future success and overall well-being.

## Strategies for Supporting Social and Emotional Development and Learning

Here are four effective strategies for supporting social and emotional development and learning for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

### **Strategy 1: Build nurturing and responsive relationships.**

Supportive relationships are characterized by warmth, closeness, and interest in others. With infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, supportive relationships include speaking to them in positive tones, using words and gestures they understand, and being responsive to the child's needs. For example, if the infant is nearing naptime, pick them up and talk to them in a soft and positive tone as they are rocked to sleep. These back-and-forth exchanges between the caregiver and child are the beginning of early social and emotional development and learning.

### **Strategy 2: Help children recognize, understand, and manage their emotions.**

All infants, toddlers, and preschoolers experience emotions. Infants and young toddlers express them by smiling, crying, laughing, and other behaviors, such as turning away or kicking their arms or legs. Observing infants' and young toddlers' emotional cues is important given they are not yet using words. Older toddlers and preschoolers should be supported to use language to express their feelings and learn strategies to identify positive (e.g., happy, excited) and negative (e.g., sad, mad) feelings in themselves and others. When caregivers show appropriate responses to feelings and emotions, it helps children regulate them. Caregivers can also model and share their own emotions. For example, if you are tired at the end of the day, say, "It was a long day! I am so tired. I am going to rest on the couch." Talking about the child's feelings or expressing your feelings in age-appropriate ways helps children learn to recognize, understand, and manage their own feelings and emotions.

## Strategy 3:

### **Share what to expect during daily routines and activities.**

Sharing with toddlers and preschoolers what to expect during daily routines and activities will help them learn what to do in those situations and promote their use of appropriate social and emotional skills. For example, when taking a preschooler to story time at the library, say, "We are going to the library to listen to a story. We will sit with all the other children and their parents and use our listening ears and quiet voices. Can you show me what that looks like?" When children understand the expectations and positively engage in routines and activities, they benefit from embedded learning opportunities (i.e., developmentally appropriate, intentional learning opportunities within activities or routines).

## Strategy 4:

### **Help children learn how to cooperate and get along with others.**

A caregiver's or practitioner's involvement with an infant's, toddler's, or preschooler's playtime builds their relationship and allows the caregiver or practitioner to target specific social learning opportunities. For example, if a preschooler is having trouble sharing with a sibling, act out the problem with the child using two dolls. You may act out your doll saying, "It's my turn to play with the ball." Then, wait for the preschooler to act out their doll's response. Playtime is a great opportunity for children to learn and practice social and emotional skills in a familiar context.

## What We Are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators are helping families and practitioners learn effective ways to support young children's social and emotional development and learning.

## Supporting Social and Emotional Development and Learning (0-12 mos)

### **Strategy 1: Build nurturing and responsive relationships.**

- Speak to infants using positive and encouraging tones (e.g., when you greet the infant in the morning, say, “Oh, you are waking up! Good morning!”).
- Spend time face-to-face with infants, holding them, talking to them, and repeating and modeling their sounds and facial expressions.

### **Strategy 2: Help children recognize, understand, and manage their feelings and emotions.**

- Smile often. Infants begin to imitate behaviors by 6 months, so when you smile and laugh while playing with an infant, eventually the infant will also smile and laugh in response.
- Exaggerate your facial expressions when communicating with the infant. For example, use a big smile when saying, “I see you grabbing your toes!” and use a frown when saying, “You are crying. Are you wet?”
- Label different emotions on people’s faces in books during shared reading. For example, if the book shows an infant yawning, make a sleepy face and say, “Baby yawning. Sleepy.”

### **Strategy 3: Share what to expect during daily routines and activities.**

- Engage in predictable social routines with the infant (e.g., before diaper changing, play a quick game of peek-a-boo. You can also gently rub their feet before lifting them out of the crib). These exchanges will help them learn what to expect during those routines.
- Establish transitions between daily routines for older infants. For example, when it is time to eat, walk over to the high chair, smile, look at the older infant and say, “It’s time to eat!”

### **Strategy 4: Help children learn how to cooperate and get along with others.**

- Begin modeling how to engage in back-and-forth interactions. For example, if an infant looks toward a rattle, pick up the rattle, shake it, and say, “rattle.” Then wait for the infant to respond.
- Practice taking turns through different play activities. For example, once the infant can sit up, roll a ball back and forth with them while talking about taking turns. Say, “You rolled the ball to me, thank you! Now it’s my turn to roll the ball to you.”