

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 (1-3 years)

Strategy 1: Build nurturing and responsive relationships.

- Speak with toddlers using positive, encouraging tones (e.g., “Oops, did your toy drop? Look, here it is!”).
- Show toddlers you are interested in what they say or do by looking at them, listening, and responding (e.g., “Did you say ‘blue’? You are pointing to the blue truck. Do you want to play with it?”).
- Spend time with toddlers engaged in activities or routines they select and enjoy. Follow their lead as you engage in back-and-forth exchanges (e.g., take turns playing hide-and-seek with favorite toys).

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

- Be responsive to the toddler’s emotions by describing what they are feeling and support them in regulating their emotions. For example, if they threw a toy and began crying, say, “You seem angry. Let me help you pick up the toy and we can take a break.”
- Explain your feelings and how you manage them. For example, when you are feeling tired, say, “I’m feeling tired right now. Would you like to cuddle with me on the chair?”
- Encourage toddlers to reflect on their own emotions and other’s emotions during shared book reading (e.g., “The elephant in the story seems happy and excited. Show me what you look like when you are happy. Here is how I look when I feel happy [give a big smile]”).

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

- Give older toddlers clear expectations before beginning a routine. For example, when walking into a store, say, “We need to use an inside voice here, like we do at home.”
- Provide positive praise and encouragement for following an expectation within the routine (e.g., “You did such a good job using your inside voice in the grocery store!”).
- Describe new routines and their expectations before they happen. For example, if you are taking an older toddler to an unfamiliar place, explain what will occur so they know what to expect (e.g., “We are going to the doctor today so she can make sure your ear is okay. She will look in your ear, so it will be important to sit still. Daddy will be right there with you.”).

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

- Teach cooperative skills during everyday routines, such as dressing. For example, ask the toddler to raise their foot so you can put their sock on.
- Model how to take turns and share toys. Ask the toddler to share and praise them when they respond appropriately. For example, say, “Can I please have a turn with the blue train?” Wait for the toddler to hand you the train, then say, “Thank you so much for sharing your train with me! Here, I am done. You can have it back.”