

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 (3-5 years)

Strategy 1: Build nurturing and responsive relationships.

- Speak with preschoolers using positive tones and words and acknowledge their feelings (e.g., “I know you feel sad that we are leaving the playground. Let’s have your favorite snack when we get home!”)
- Find opportunities to label and encourage preschoolers’ positive behaviors and be specific. For example, when you see a preschooler putting toys away, say, “Thank you for putting your toys away!”
- Set up everyday routines that include preschoolers’ interests. For example, if a preschooler enjoys dinosaurs, check out dinosaur books from the library and take turns acting out parts of the book together.

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

- Help preschoolers learn to recognize, understand, and regulate their own emotions. For example, if a preschooler asks a friend for a toy and the friend refuses to share, say, “If you are mad because your friend won’t share, find another toy to play with then ask him again later.”
- Encourage preschoolers to recognize and understand emotions by asking questions about characters’ emotions during shared book reading. For example, say, “How does the girl feel? Yes, she is afraid. What made her feel like that? Tell me about a time you felt afraid.”
- Let preschoolers observe you using strategies to manage your emotions when you are distressed. For example, while waiting in a long line, say, “I am frustrated and ready to go home. I am going to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down.”

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

- Give preschoolers clear expectations before beginning a routine. For example, say, “We are going to your friend’s house to play. Make sure to share toys with your friend and wait your turn. Let’s practice sharing toys before we go.”
- Provide specific praise and positive encouragement for following expectations within a routine (e.g., “You are sharing your toys with your friend. Great job!”).

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

- Teach preschoolers how to wait for others and take turns during a game. For example, while playing a board game, say, “You took your turn. Now let’s watch your friend take their turn. Then, it will be your turn again.”
- Encourage preschoolers to participate in pretend play with others using costumes, activity centers, toys, or their imagination. For example, if a preschooler is playing with their friend and a doll, say, “I see you both helping to feed the baby! It is nice to see you working together.”