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Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Social and Emotional Development

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Your formerly charming four-year-old is incredibly uncooperative at nursery school. Your five-year-old suddenly announces that the friend from down the block is never to come in the yard again. Occurrences such as these are common as the young child develops socially and emotionally. Parents are often confused by such behavior and wonder what they can do. Through understanding how your child develops and using suitable techniques, you can promote healthy social and emotional development.

Social and Emotional Development

Children's social and emotional development is related to their self-concept. Self-concept is how one sees and feels about oneself. A good self-concept is vital to healthy social and emotional development. Children with a good self-concept like themselves, feel relaxed about themselves and feel free to express what's on their minds. It should not be assumed that children who announce "I don't like you!" are showing poor social-emotional development. Rather, it may mean children feel free enough to express both their likes and dislikes. In fact, children who only express pleasure are likely holding in some negative feelings. Children who hold in their feelings often have poor social-emotional development. For children to develop good self-concepts, it's important that they be cared for by adults who like themselves. Socially and emotionally well-adjusted adults will likely promote adjustment in children they care for. The social and emotional skills described below are listed with the typical age of achievement. Children differ in the time they achieve these skills. Development occurs in stages with each new stage building on the previous ones. The fact that children progress through the stages in sequence and continue to progress is what's important, not the timing.



Seeing oneself in a mirror builds self-awareness.

Birth to 12 months

Basic trust is necessary to the development of a good self-concept. At birth, an infant is moved from mother's comfortable womb to life outside the womb. There are many adjustments and babies need to begin to feel comfortable about the outside world. For example, when



Children can handle some aspects of self-care if the physical setting is convenient.

hungry they need to be fed; when fussy they need attention. When babies are loved and their needs are met, they develop the sense of trust so important to the development of a good self-concept.

Emotionally newborns are either quiet or restless, comfortable or uncomfortable. Gradually emotions develop so that by the second month a baby's cries mean different things such as one for hunger, one for pain and one for discomfort. At three months babies show the emotions of delight, distress and excitement. At six months each of these emotions is clearer. Previously babies showed distress in a variety of situations. Now the distress is shown either as fear or disgust. Delight and excitement also become clearer as children develop.

For the first month or two of life, babies have little interest in others. Sometime during the second month babies smile in response to attention such as their mother talking and cooing to them. Up to five months, they've been most interested in whoever cares for them. After that time, they become more interested in other family members. At six months they enjoy looking at themselves in the mirror and playing simple games like peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake. From seven to nine months babies show that they can recognize the familiar and feel most comfortable with it. They will be doubtful of strangers. This is called stranger anxiety and is normal in babies of

this age. After this stage of anxiety passes, babies become friendly toward strangers and will likely smile unless overly enthusiastic strangers try too hard.

One to three years old

Though one-year-olds are friendly and social they remain egocentric. Being egocentric means that they feel the whole world revolves around them. They only see situations from their own viewpoint. Because one-year-olds are egocentric they treat people as objects. For example, when toddlers play together there may be some hair pulling and hitting especially if there's a fight over a toy. Children this age may engage in parallel play. This means they play beside one another rather than interact with each other.

Two-year-olds enjoy parallel play. They like to have someone to talk to but do not want interference in their play from another child. At this age they are unable to share or take turns.

The first signs of negativism appear at about eighteen months. Negativism is children's resistance to others' expectations of how they should behave. Children of this age are also trying to be independent.

Four to six years old

Four-year-olds struggle for independence in much the same way as they did when they were two. They tend to feel that they are grown up and can do anything. They often argue and hate being treated like a baby. They are usually sensitive about mistakes and know when people are laughing at them. Four-year-olds need a few firm rules and gentle guidance when they break the rules.

Four-year-olds show interest in friends. They like to play in groups and seek the approval of other children.

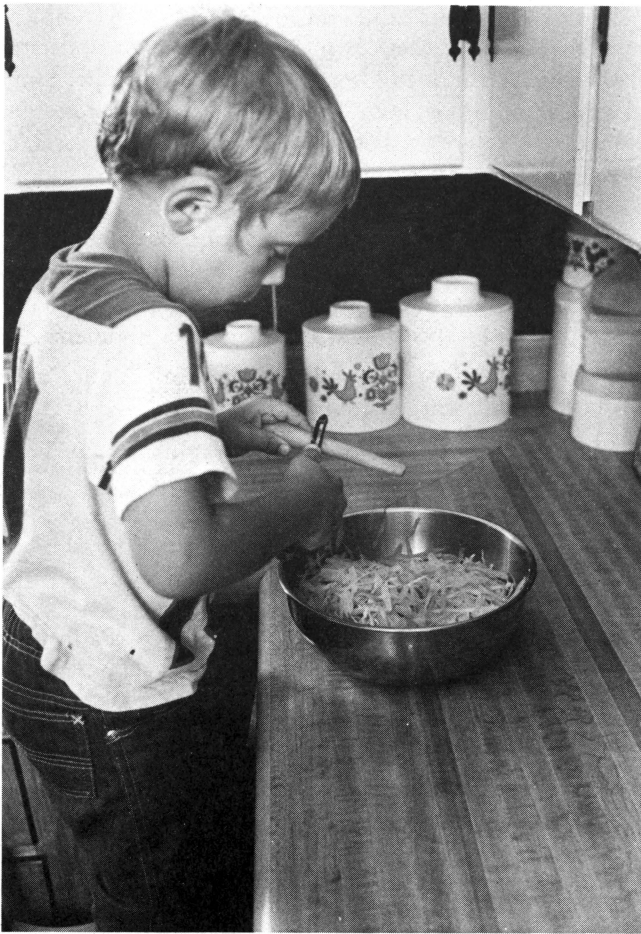
The fifth year tends to be relatively calm with less struggle than the fourth. Five-year-olds have an interest span that allows them to finish things they start. While they may still delight in making up stories, they are better able to tell fact from fiction.

Five-year-olds usually have their first experience with school. They usually get along fairly well because they are more considerate than previously. They still can't be totally considerate especially when they're tired or not feeling well.

Six-year-olds usually display rapidly changing moods. They may talk back to adults and tease other children. Again, as when they were four, a few firm rules are the best policy. Remaining patient and appealing to their well developed sense of humor are the best ways of dealing with a difficult six year old. Six-year-olds like to have friends but often have difficulty because they want everything their own way.

Some Ways to Encourage Your Child's Healthy Social and Emotional Development

The suggestions below are arranged in age groups. Depending on individual growth and development, activities listed for a younger or older age group may be enjoyed. These activities promote self-awareness, skill



Children can make simple foods and share them with family members.

mastery and social responsiveness which all lead to the development of a good self-concept.

Birth to 12 months

- Hold and cuddle your baby during feeding. Allow generous time for feeding.
- Respond to your baby's needs when uncomfortable or unhappy.
- Look at your baby—use direct eye contact, smile and talk often.
- Provide an unbreakable mirror near the crib. Your baby will enjoy looking into it.
- Play imitation games with your baby. Clap your hands and then ask your baby to repeat after you. Put a hat on your head—now see if your baby will do it.

One-to three-year-olds

- Make a washcloth mitten—your child can wash easier with one.
- Put a stool in the bathroom. This will help your child get a drink or use the toilet when necessary.
- Choose foods that make it easy for your child to eat without help. Encourage your child to eat independently as often as possible.
- Choose clothes that make dressing easy and then allow your child frequent practice in dressing.
- Let your child help with household chores and participate in other adult activities when interested.

- Put low shelves for toys and books in your child's room. When your child can reach the shelves, it's easier to make a game of putting the toys and books back.
- Help your child learn to put feelings into words. Being able to say "You make me mad" or "You hurt my feelings" provides your child an alternative to holding in feelings or striking out.
- Make a list of five good things your child did recently. Share the list with your child.
- Provide opportunities for your child to be with other children and adults.

Four-to six-year-olds

- Trace the outline of your child's body on a large piece of paper. Put your child's name on the paper and hang it up. A few months later do another one to show the changes in the growing body.
- Display photographs of your child and your family and friends. Talk about the pictures asking questions such as "Who are they?" or "What are they doing?"
- Make simple foods with your child. Allow your child to do as much as possible. Then serve the food at a family dinner.
- Take your child to the place where you work and explain your job so it's understandable.
- While away from home, even at work, write your child a short note and drop it in the mail. It'll be a thrill to get

it and will make your child feel important.

- Allow your child to answer the telephone once you teach how to do it courteously. However, tell your child not to answer questions or volunteer information to strangers who call. Have a friend or neighbor call and let your child answer to practice the skills.
- Show by example how to wait patiently while your child dresses; share talking time at the dinner table; and take turns when checking out at the grocery store.

When To Be Concerned

If your child shows any of the following, seek professional advice from your doctor.

- No interest in being held or cuddled.
- Extremely dependent behavior.
- Extremely fearful behavior.
- Extremely aggressive behavior.
- Extremely destructive behavior.
- No interest in other children.
- After age four, preference for an imaginary playmate rather than real playmates.
- After age five, inability to distinguish fantasy from reality.
- After age five, inability to obey even a few simple and realistic rules.

These are reasons for concern and indicate a need for professional attention.

It's important to take the time to really watch your child in order to be able to answer the question, "Does my child show healthy social and emotional development?"

However, since it's difficult for parents to be completely objective about their own child it helps to understand what is typical of children in a certain age range. Simply understanding is not enough as parental interest and involvement are the keys to promoting healthy social and emotional development in young children.

For more information on your child's development see the following Home Economics Guides:

- 6112 Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Speech and Language Development
- 6113 Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Large Motor Development
- 6114 Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Small Motor Development

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