

Social and Emotional Development

About social and emotional development

Social and emotional development is the process of learning key social and emotional skills. Development is affected both by biological factors (as children grow and mature) and by environmental factors (such as relationships and their care situation).


Attachment in the early years is a key factor that influences development. Babies and young children develop a preferred **attachment style**, which describes the way they usually behave and express their feelings when separating from a parent or carer. When adults are attuned to the child's cues and responsive to his or her needs, a secure attachment relationship can develop. Secure attachments in childhood are the best foundation for later social and emotional development. For more information, read the handout *Attachment and Mental Health*.

Some elements of social and emotional development include:

Birth to six months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develops attachment to main carer and secondary carers• Recognises and prefers familiar carers but will go to others• Communicates through face, gestures, body language, crying, gurgling, babbling• Learns to respond to communication from carers, e.g. by smiling or laughing.
Six months to 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uses carer(s) as a secure base to explore the world, if there is secure attachment• May start to show anxiety and distress when separating from familiar carers• Gradually gains some understanding of emotions of others, may show empathy• Starts to show a wider range of emotions including affection and anger• May be able to use language to describe basic emotions, e.g. happy, sad, angry• Has a growing need for independence and will want to do things themselves.
2 years to 3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Growing capacity to recognise own emotions and emotions of others• Begins to try to manage own emotions or behaviour• Has some control of impulses and can wait for a short time• Growing need for independence, may reject help, can become frustrated• Plays alongside other children and imitates them• Egocentricity means that sharing or taking turns does not come naturally.
3 years to 6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Growing awareness of self as a person, separate from others• Better understanding of the emotions and behaviour of other people• Can make choices about showing emotions, e.g. to hide sad or angry feelings• Growing capacity to reflect on and to manage both emotions and behaviour• Accepts social rules such as 'please', 'sorry', sharing and taking turns• Becomes more interested in playing with other children.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Positive social and emotional development in the early years is a good foundation for later wellbeing and may help to protect us against some types of mental health problems. Social and emotional skills help us to maintain wellbeing, manage stress and overcome challenges.



Some children may have a developmental disorder that limits their social and emotional development, such as autism. Early identification of any developmental disorder and access to early intervention services is important in assisting these children and their families.

What should I look for?

The way we describe children's development is just a guide. Things tend to happen in a developmental sequence, but the actual age at which the milestones occur will vary from child to child. Poor health or other problems can cause a temporary delay in development.

Be aware of children whose social or emotional development seems very different from their peers, particularly if your observations persist over time. Signs of concern might include:

- Significant changes from the child's usual feelings or behaviour
- Development that is out of step with peers at a similar stage
- Regression in any area of development that is not explained by context
- Not showing the range of emotions that others do, such as being happy, sad or angry
- Poor-quality play that seems limited and repetitive
- Signs of insecure attachment, such as being overly clingy or distant at separation
- Difficulty calming down after getting upset, despite carers' efforts to comfort them
- Having more trouble than others in managing impulses and paying attention
- Being withdrawn, fearful, anxious or upset much of the time
- Being frustrated, angry, defiant or aggressive much of the time.

What should I do?

Children's services staff can play an important role in helping babies and young children to build key social and emotional skills. A separate handout in this series lists some useful tips. If you are concerned about a particular child's social and emotional development, you should:

- Observe the child during a few different activities, at different times of the day.
- Write down specific examples of your concern or the behaviour you see.
- Write down any additional information about the child's health and family situation.
- Speak with your supervisor, manager or service director.

If necessary, you or your director can talk with the family to suggest assessment by an appropriate early intervention support service in your area.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

Kearns, K., & Austin, B. (2006). *Becoming socialised*. In *Birth to big school: Working in children's services* (pp. 181-217). Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

Nixon, D., & Aldwinckle, M. (1999). *Social-emotional development*. In *Exploring: Child development from three to six years* (pp. 54-79). Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press.

Nixon, D., & Gould, K. (2000). *The first year of life: Emotional development* (pp. 69-82) and *The second year of life: Social and emotional development* (pp.140-145). In *Emerging: Child development in the first three years*. Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press.