

Building Social and Emotional Skills

About Social and Emotional Skills

Developing effective social and emotional skills and a positive sense of self are important elements of children's development. Key social and emotional skills or personal characteristics that children develop in the early years include their capacity to:

- Recognise and identify a range of feelings, in themselves and others
- Manage their own feelings and behaviour in socially acceptable ways
- Respond appropriately to the feelings of others
- Form social connections with other people, including their peers
- Develop a sense of autonomy, agency and an emerging sense of self
- Develop prosocial attitudes and skills such as empathy, sharing and helping others.

This handout gives some suggestions about how to help children to develop effective social and emotional skills and a positive sense of self. You may also be interested to read about identifying and responding to difficulties in a child's social and emotional development. For information on this, you can refer to other handouts in this series such as: *Identifying Emotional and Behavioural Problems*; and *Early Intervention*.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Social and emotional development and relationships in early childhood can have an important impact on a person's self-concept and wellbeing throughout life. Self-concept is a mental picture or idea about who we are. It is made up of various components such as: how we view ourselves; how we think others see us; whether we feel valued and cared for; and whether we feel competent and able to do things.

Fostering autonomy and the development of age-appropriate social and emotional skills is important in early childhood. As we grow through childhood and adolescence, we build on our early abilities and experiences to develop a more complex self-concept and more advanced life skills. Important skills include negotiating with others, taking responsibility, solving problems, communicating assertively and being able to ask for and give support to others. All of these contribute to our mental health and wellbeing, because they help us to maintain positive relationships, deal with stress and setbacks in our lives and work toward our goals.

There are many factors that impact on mental health and wellbeing as children move into adolescence and adulthood, such as life experiences, the physical and social environment, and biological or genetic factors. While we cannot predict life outcomes for any individual child, we can aim to give all children a positive start that will help them to deal with life's challenges.

What should I look for?

Secure attachment relationships in infancy and early childhood lay the foundations for optimal social and emotional development and wellbeing. When caring for babies and young children, look for opportunities to integrate the principles of secure attachment into your care practices. The handout on *Attachment and Mental Health* provides many practical suggestions.

Children in your care will show individual differences in temperament, development and personal preferences. Some will be outgoing and sociable. Some will prefer to watch before joining in. Some will be highly independent. It is important to look for and respect these individual differences, while supporting the development of a range of skills in each child.

What should I do?

To support the development of social and emotional skills and a positive sense of self, we need to provide children with an environment that is safe and supportive, physically, socially and emotionally. As children develop, they learn by observing others and by receiving feedback. The way adults communicate with children during their day-to-day care giving practices can have an important influence on children's self-concept and their development of social and emotional skills. You can read more about this in the handout on *Communicating with Children*.

To support children's development of social and emotional skills and a positive self-concept:

- Observe children's verbal and non-verbal signals and get to know them as individuals.
- Respond in a caring and consistent way to children's physical and emotional needs.
- Keep expectations appropriate to the child's abilities and stage of development.
- Provide opportunities for alone time or quiet activity and for play with peers or adults.
- Give children choices and opportunities for exploration, to promote their autonomy.
- Respect and value cultural and personality differences and individual preferences.
- Respect and support children's early attempts at connection and communication.
- Consistently model the behaviour and communication styles you want children to use.
- Acknowledge children's achievements and give praise for positive behaviour.
- Help children to recognise and label their emotions and to express their feelings.
- Use stories, art, dramatic play or other activities to explore feelings and friendships.
- Encourage older children to take turns, to share resources and to share adults' attention.
- Model prosocial skills and praise children for showing empathy and helping others.
- Help children to solve problems and negotiate with peers when disputes come up.
- Be aware that children may have difficulty using their skills when they are sick or tired.
- Recognise that learning new skills requires time, practice and positive feedback.

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*.

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