

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Children use social-emotional skills to understand and manage emotions, build empathy, develop positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. These skills also include practical abilities like sharing, taking turns, and waiting.

Many resources and studies show that a sensitive, supportive presence from parents and caregivers lays the foundation for a child's security, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and self-control. See the Attachment resource guide for more information.

Note: The developmental information below reflects typical patterns in Western societies. All children develop at different rates, and skills may vary between individuals and cultures.

Why It Matters

Social-emotional skills help children:

- Make and keep friends.
- Connect meaningfully with others.
- Gain self-confidence.
- Solve problems independently.
- Regulate emotions and manage stress.
- Use good judgement.
- Resist peer pressure.
- Understand themselves and others.
- Recognize their own strengths and challenges.

Developmental Milestones

If you have concerns about a child's development, seek professional support or explore the resources at the bottom of this guide.

Birth to 6 Months

- Begin to smile (1–2 months)
- Respond to others' presence
- Make distinct facial expressions
- Make and maintain eye contact
- Develop more regular sleep and eating routines
- May self-soothe for short periods (thumb-sucking, soother)
- Recognize “fun” interactions and show distress when play ends

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Developmental Milestones Continued

Birth to 6 Months continued:

- Recognize primary caregivers (4-5 months)
- Engage in early "conversations" through vocal turn-taking
- Communicate needs non-verbally
- Respond to facial expressions

6 to 12 Months

- Distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people
- May show anxiety when separating from trusted adults
- Seek comfort, play, and attention from caregivers
- Begin social games and understand commonly used words (7 months)
- Follow caregiver's gaze to share attention (8 months)
- Show interest in own reflection (7-9 months)
- Express desire for independence (10-12 months)
- Point and gesture to communicate (12 months)

12 to 18 Months

- Display challenging behaviour to assert independence
- Enjoy being with peers but struggle to share and take turns
- Show interest in helping others (15 months)
- Show empathy and self-awareness (15 months)
- Mirror emotions they see in others (15 months)
- Bring objects to show caregiver, sibling, or peer (18 months)

By 3 Years:

- Show emerging impulse control
- Navigate more complex social interactions independently
- Become more aware of gender roles
- Expand imaginative play
- Gain independence

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Developmental Milestones Continued

By 3 Years Continued:

- Begin using words instead of physical reactions in conflicts
- Improve at sharing, taking turns, and cooperating
- Show more control of aggressive impulses
- Play with 1 to 2 peers with shared goals
- Begin resolving simple social conflicts independently

By 4 Years:

- Play in a more complex way (with 3 to 4 peers at a time)
- Understand the difference between real and pretend
- Continue developing emotional regulation and social awareness

By 5 Years:

- Begin forming more meaningful friendships
- Follow rules more easily across different environments
- Show increasing empathy
- May switch quickly between demanding and cooperative behaviour

Supporting Children's Social-Emotional Development

- Model the skills. Show the behaviours and emotional regulation you want the child to develop.
- Learn through play. Use stories, pretend play, and games to explore emotions and relationships.
- Stay calm. During challenging moments, do your best to stay regulated and model the behaviour you hope to see.
- Repair and reconnect. If you lose your patience, take time to reconnect. Acknowledge what happened and restore the emotional connection with the child.

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Need More Support?

Local Resources:

- Family Physicians, Pediatricians, or Nurse Practitioners
- Public Health Nurse
- Supported Child Development
- Counsellors (e.g., Child & Youth Mental Health)
- Art Therapists

Resources Available at the WKCCRR Library:

- The Social Skills Picture Book: Teaching Communication, Play and Emotion by Jed Baker
- Talkabout for Children: Developing Self-Awareness and Self-Esteem by Alex Kelly
- Feelings Book Pack
- How Are You Feeling? by Lisa Fyfe
- What to Do When You Feel Like Hitting by Cara Goodwin and Katie Turner (Illustrator)
- Exploring Feelings & Emotions Exploration Kit

Podcasts:

- Janet Lansbury - How to Help Your Child Engage More Successfully with Peers

Online Resources:

- [What Are Social Emotional Skills? Age-Appropriate Tools to Support Them](#)
- [The Importance of Play in Social Emotional Development](#)
- [American Psychological Association - Navigating Friendships](#)
- [How to Support Social Emotional Development in Toddlers](#)