

# DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS

Peggy Patten, M.Ed.  
Statewide Child Care Resource & Referral Training Coordinator  
Human Development and Family Studies University of Illinois

Child care professionals play an important part in raising healthy children. Caregivers help children develop healthy bodies, minds, and feelings about themselves. One of the most important things providers teach children is how to get along with others. No matter how gifted a child is physically or mentally, that child's happiness and success in life will also depend on his ability to get along with people.

There are many ways to help children develop social skills. One way is to establish a set of rules or standards for acceptable behavior in your center. While the exact rules may vary among caregivers, most probably fall into one of three broad categories. These are:

- We need to respect ourselves
- We need to respect others
- We need to respect things.

The rules you establish that teach these general principles must be repeated often and made very clear to the children.

A second way we teach social skills is by the behavior we model. We cannot ask children to treat each other decently and then treat children disrespectfully ourselves. Children learn by watching and practicing what adults do. Every time you talk kindly to the children, you are teaching them how to talk kindly to each other.

A third way to encourage positive behavior is to teach children specific social skills. One important skill children must learn is to consider the feelings of others. They also must think about how their behavior affects others. Very young children do not have this ability. But you can help them learn to do this. For example, if one child has hit another you might say: "Mary is crying. You hurt Mary when you hit her."

We can also teach children acceptable ways to respond to difficult situations. Don't just TELL children to share. Teach them HOW to share. They could take turns. Or they could divide the toys up so that each has some. They could also find a way to play together with the toys. Children who grab toys from others or bother other children who are playing sometimes just want to play with them. But they do not know how to join the group. Teach them how to ask to play. You can also teach children words to use when they are hurt or bullied by other children. Teach them to say "That really hurts!" and "Stop that!"

In each of these examples, you are giving children the skills they need to deal with a difficult social situation. You can help provide the words to use. Make sure that communication is actually occurring. See that the matter gets resolved, and give children feedback about how well they managed the situation. Tell them what worked or did not work. Your ultimate goal is for your children to be successful enough in using these new skills that they just naturally want to use them. Eventually they won't need so much coaching.

Take advantage of these unplanned times to teach social skills throughout the day. You can also plan opportunities to give children practice in these areas. Have discussions at mealtimes or group times. Plan activities that teach specific social skills.

Get photographs of faces showing different emotions: happiness, anger, fear, sadness, or surprise. Show only half the face. Ask the children to identify the emotion. Talk about how they knew how the person in the photograph was feeling. Ask why that person might be feeling happy, sad, angry, or scared. This exercise helps children identify emotions in themselves and in others.

Offer older preschoolers and school-age children activities to encourage problem solving and cooperation. Provide something for your group of five children that cannot be easily divided among all members. You might use four puppets, two cars, or three balls. Ask the children to suggest ways to use the toys that they can all accept. Be sure that all ideas are discussed.

Encourage children to offer and accept affection and appreciation. Try an "Appreciation Circle." Introduce this activity by telling children that it is sometimes hard for people to tell others what they like or appreciate about them. Each day, give one child a turn to be appreciated. Everyone should say one thing that they really like or appreciate about that person. This activity is especially good for those "hard-to-like" children. These children are seldom shown affection by children and adults.

Puppets are good tools for teaching children how to respond to difficult situations. Involve the children in puppet shows about the kinds of problems they might have dealing with other children. Have the puppets act out different ways to solve the problem.

Books can give you more ideas for activities to help develop social skills in children. Ask your local librarian for suggestions. Some books you might look for are: \*Promoting the Social Development of Young Children\* by Charles Smith, \*The Cooperative Sports and Games Book\* by Terry Orlick, \*Creative Teaching with Puppets\* by B. Rountree, or \*The New Games Book: Play Fair, Nobody Hurt\* by A. Flugelman.

---

#### **DOCUMENT USE/COPYRIGHT**

National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Part of CYFERNET, the National Extension Service Children Youth and Family Educational Research Network. Permission is granted to reproduce these materials in whole or in part for educational purposes only (not for profit beyond the cost of reproduction) provided that the author and Network receive acknowledgment and this notice is included:

**Reprinted with permission from the National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Patten, P. (1992). Developing social skills. In Todd, C.M. (Ed.), *Day care center connections*, 1(4), pp. 1-2. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.**

Retrieved from: [http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc14\\_develop.social.skill.html](http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc14_develop.social.skill.html)