

LEARNING TO GET ALONG:

YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Children learn in social relationships. Their learning is supported by strong bonds with responsive, nurturing adults. Children learn from example: adults can model how to make friends, solve conflicts, and manage emotions.

THE TAKE HOME:

1. Children learn socially, right out of the womb.
2. Children learn best in the context of relationships.
3. Children learn from example.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

- **Children learn socially.** Babies are born social and ready to interact. They imitate us naturally, starting just hours after birth! Imitating others allows infants to start to understand that others are “like me” and also have thoughts and emotions – a prerequisite for learning from other people.
- Healthy early relationships boost what children expect of relationships with others and how confident they are in social settings. This is one of the reasons why **young children learn best in the context of relationships**. In other words, children learn through social, responsive, back-and-forth interactions with other people.
- **Children learn from example.** They notice what we do and say, even if we are not directly interacting with them. For instance, toddlers can learn new words by overhearing adults and four-year-olds can pick up on non-verbal signals from adults, such as a disapproving glance.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- How do babies form strong relationships with caregivers? Cues might differ between children, including those with suspected or identified disabilities or delays. Pay attention to the individual cues a child might give. Infants may cry for attention or look to make eye contact with parents. Older infants may look and point at what they're interested in or follow your looks and points. Help caregivers spot these cues and respond accordingly.
- Babies often prefer to look at and interact with people who imitate them and follow their lead. They might look longer or pay more attention to people who are imitating them. In addition, many newborn babies will imitate your facial expressions, allowing for back-and-forth interactions just hours after birth.
- Have you ever noticed a child use a word or action that they were not specifically taught? Chances are that they learned from observing the adults in their life. Reflect on what they model for children even when not directly interacting with them. Help parents and caregivers do this, too.



TRY THIS!

- Try games that use mirroring, or that are reciprocal in nature. For example, you or a parent can sit across from a baby and do something simple but surprising or eye-catching, like stick out your tongue. See if the baby does it back! Make sure to respond with encouragement if she does. Imitating actions, looks, or gestures is a great way to follow the lead of children, especially children with suspected or identified disabilities or delays.
- Help parents and caregivers notice their baby's eye gaze. For example, if a child is looking at a lamp, you might say, "That is a bright light over there! Do you see any other lamps?" and follow their eye gaze.
- Strong relationships are built by responding consistently to a child's needs. But sometimes parents can't give their full attention to a child right away. You can still give a response such as looking at the child and nodding. You can also say, "I see you want me to pick up. I'll be right there!" Encourage parents to narrate their actions and responses using rich vocabulary and complex sentences. Even if the baby does not understand yet, they are building their language skills with your support!
- Adults can model how to make friends, manage emotions, and interact with others. Label children's positive behavior, in any language: "Wow, you asked Joe for the crayon so nicely!" Talking to children about emotions is especially helpful in supporting children with suspected or identified disabilities or delays. You might say, "I see that Shelby has been playing with that toy for a while. Waiting to play must be hard." You can help parents practice this skill.

LEARN MORE:

HEAD START EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK (ELOF)

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework>

FACILITATING CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIPS: THE ADULT'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING PEER RELATIONSHIPS

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/adults-role-supporting-peer-relationships>

NEWS YOU CAN USE | FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS: SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/nycu-social-emotional-development.pdf>



CONNECTING AT HOME

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Children are social. They watch, learn, and play with others. The way you talk and play with your child helps them develop healthy emotions. These early positive relationships serve as a model when children begin making friends. The following tips can help you support your child as they make new friends.

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Children like to play with fun materials, and show their toys to friends. Lay out fun items and let your child choose what to play with! Remember some of the best toys come from items right in your home, like a large cardboard box turned into a castle or garage. Play together with toys that represent your community!

RESPOND CONSISTENTLY

Consistent, positive responses make children feel supported and valued. When your child wants attention, respond. You may not be able to give your full attention right away. But you can still show that you hear them. For example, look at your child and nod. You can also say, "I see you want me to pick up. I'll be right there!" As children get older, you can explain what you're doing and when you'll be available. "I'm putting the groceries away right now, but I will be finished in two minutes."

MODEL GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

Children learn from you. Young children learn to care for others with kindness when adults in their lives show them how.

LET CHILDREN TAKE THE LEAD

Allow your child to choose a toy or game. Let them follow their own interests, and help them problem-solve. For instance, if children fight over a toy, resist the urge to solve the issue. Instead, give them tools to find a solution. You can suggest different options: "Maybe you can take turns!" or "Maybe Sally can find a new toy instead." Help children think it through. With older children, let them work on their own solution.

