



Supporting Your Child's Social and Emotional Development

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You can see your child learning so much in the first five years! But some of the most important learning is about things you *can't* see. Children's emotions and relationships in their earliest years are the basis of all their future growth and development. And their relationships with parents - and any other primary caregivers - are the most important of all. Here are six key lessons that babies and young children need to learn, and some ways you can help.

1. "I AM SAFE AND LOVED"

The first and most important thing babies need to learn is that they can trust you to take care of them and meet their needs. They need to feel safe and loved in order to learn and grow. Their strongest sense of safety comes from their bond, or "attachment," with you and other important caregivers. You can:

- **Provide "responsive" care:** When your baby cries, when your toddler has a problem -- try to help. Even if you can't fix everything, you're letting your child know you're there for him. Watch and listen to your child, pay attention to what he wants and needs, then try to meet those needs if you can. (And remember to take care of yourself too! Your baby depends on your being healthy and happy enough to give him the care he needs.)
- **Show her you love her:** Hug, cuddle, smile, talk to her, spend time each day giving her your undivided attention. Try to let her know you love her even when she's upset or cranky.
- **Soothe him when he's upset:** Hold him, sing, give him a pacifier or stuffed animal - whatever calms him. That helps him learn to soothe himself.
- **Create predictable routines:** She will feel safer and more comfortable knowing what to expect. Let her know what's coming next -- "You can play a little longer, then we'll have lunch."



2. "I ENJOY RELATING TO OTHER PEOPLE"

Your relationship with your child shows him that interacting with other people is enjoyable and lets him experience the give-and-take of relationships. You can:

- **Respond to your baby's gestures and imitate her sounds** - have a "conversation." Talk with her about what's happening, even if she doesn't understand yet.
- **When he starts talking, try to understand.** Respond with comments or questions to show you care about what he says. Get him in the habit of communicating with you -- that will pay off later!
- **Play games** (starting with tickling and peek-a-boo), sing and dance with her, cuddle while you read to her.
- **Do things together** -- play together, or just include her in things you're doing. While you're fixing dinner, give a baby some spoons or plastic cups to play with; ask a preschooler to put napkins on the table.

3. "I AM VALUED FOR WHO I AM."

From the beginning, some babies are calm, others excitable. Some are very active, others are "watchers." Some are outgoing, others take a while to get used to people. Some get upset when things change, others just go along. These inborn traits are your baby's "temperament." Later she will develop her own tastes and interests. You can accept and value who she is.

- **Observe your child to understand his temperament** and give him the support he needs. If he's hesitating, let him take his time to warm up to people. If she's constantly moving, don't try to make her sit still too long. Accept who your child is and gently help him develop new abilities.
- **Let your child follow her own interests** and find ways to support them: if she likes watching animals, show her the squirrels in the park; if he likes to draw, try to provide paper and crayons.

4. "I CAN LEARN TO UNDERSTAND AND HANDLE MY FEELINGS."

Children can be confused and overwhelmed by their own feelings. You can help them learn how to handle emotions.

- **Teach words for feelings:** "You're feeling disappointed that we have to leave the park." "You felt scared when that dog barked." "You're feeling frustrated that the block tower fell over."
- **Accept your child's feelings**, even if you have to stop her actions: "I know you're feeling jealous because Patti is playing with the truck, but you can't hit her."
- **Discuss things your child can do when she's upset:** take a deep breath, use words, draw a sad picture, pound on a pillow, do a favorite activity. And discuss how to express positive feelings: "How can we show Grandma how happy we are that she's visiting?"
- **Read books about feelings**, or talk about the feelings of characters in books.

5. "I CAN HAVE A GOOD TIME PLAYING WITH OTHER CHILDREN."

It takes children years to learn the skills they need to play and cooperate together. You can:

- **Make sure your child has opportunities to be around other children** – cousins, neighbors, other children at the story hour or playground.
- **Show your child some ways to play with other children** – "Let's give Tony a shovel and he can dig in the sand with us."
- **Teach cooperation skills** like taking turns or dividing up the crayons -- and be there to keep reminding them. They will need a lot of coaching before they do it on their own.
- **When conflicts come up**, clearly state the problem -- "You both want to play that trumpet." Or, with older children, ask each to state the problem from her point of view. Then ask the children to brainstorm solutions.
- **Use stuffed animals or dolls** to act out common problems and ask children to figure out solutions.

6. "I CAN LEARN HOW TO DO NEW THINGS AND SOLVE PROBLEMS."

In their earliest years children need to build up confidence so they will be able to deal with new challenges, learn new skills, and relate well to other people. You can:

- **Give your child time and space to play** and explore with safe, appropriate toys or household items.
- **Help him learn to solve problems** – without doing everything for him. When a baby is trying to reach a toy, move the toy so she can reach it if she stretches. If a preschooler is trying to put on his shoes, open them up so he can step in.
- **When something is hard**, encourage her to keep trying. When she's frustrated, give sympathy – and maybe suggestions – but also show confidence that she can do it.
- **Celebrate successes**, keeping the focus on what he did: "You kept trying and you made it balance!" "You used so many beautiful colors in that picture!"