

Developing Social Skills

*We need other people,
not in order to stay alive,
but to be fully human . . .*

—Hugh Prather, *Notes on Love and Courage*



Learning how to interact with others is necessary for being a member of any group—family, neighborhood, school, work, or community organization. Through each new encounter we stretch our understanding of ourselves and others. Being able to understand and reach out to others makes us feel needed and competent, a part of the group and yet uniquely special—alive.

Social skills are more than manners. They are the basic attitudes and tools needed for getting along with other people. They include:

- Showing interest in others
- Giving and receiving
- Asserting our needs and rights in appropriate ways
- Showing consideration and sympathy
- Communicating effectively

We are not born with these skills. Learning how to get along with others is a process that begins at birth and continues throughout life.

From “me” to “us”

Babies begin to respond to other people from the first hours of life. They quickly learn to charm adults with their smiles, coos, and wiggles. Despite their interest in other people, however, they are unaware of others’ feelings and needs. From their point of view, everyone and everything exists to satisfy their every wish.

In time, children discover that other people’s feelings and needs may conflict with or differ from their own. Although babies expect instant service, they have to learn to wait. Toddlers want everything they see, but they have to learn to respect other people’s property.

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It’s hard to hold their own desires in check and consider other people’s feelings. Sometimes it’s hard for children to understand other children’s actions and make their place in a new group.

Because of their pleasure in being with others and their need to be accepted and loved, children learn these lessons. They begin to be able to share, to wait for others, and to express anger in appropriate ways. This learning may be painful at times, but it has powerful rewards, such as making a new friend or being included in the neighborhood group.

It is a challenge to adults as well as children to be aware of others’ points of view and learn how to get along despite differences or misunderstandings.

The widening circle

Children learn social skills from other people. As parents, you are their most important teachers. You are first on the scene and most influential for some time.

You are always teaching social skills through your own example. Children watch you carefully, absorbing how you behave with them, with each other, and with friends, relatives, and strangers. Your children often will imitate just what they see you say and do.

H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

Besides teaching social skills through your own example, you can:

- Give children experiences with different adults and children
- Help children interpret the different ways people show their thoughts and feelings
- Tell children how they should act in specific situations and why
- Praise children when they use social skills

Although you will experience ups and downs teaching social skills, you also will enjoy rewards. Hearing that first laugh, receiving that painting all in red ("I made it for you!"), and watching your child reach out and make friends will be among your warmest and most satisfying moments as a parent.

Social security for children



Children are born with a social drive. The following timetable shows how they grow in social awareness, and how you can help them develop their skills at each age.

Babies. Babies are already social creatures.

They enjoy other people but can't empathize. They:

- Watch, smile, and "perform" for familiar people but may be fearful of strangers
- Need to receive lots of love before they can give it
- Have no concept of ownership and reach for every thing they see
- Think everyone feels and thinks the same way they do
- "Talk" through cries, gestures, and expressions

You can provide babies with their first satisfying social experiences:

- Encourage friendliness by talking and playing with babies; be present when different adults and children visit
- Give lots of love and attention; this does not "spoil" babies
- Put things that belong to other people out of babies' reach; let them explore other safe objects
- Teach consideration by treating babies with tenderness and responding to their feelings
- Respond to babies' "talk" and speak to them at every opportunity

Toddlers. Toddlers continue to reach out to people, but their first attempts are often awkward. They:

- Play alone or next to other children but need to check on parents occasionally
- Can't share easily; tend to hit, push, and poke to get things they want and hold onto what is theirs
- Can't always take other people's point of view, but begin to try to please parents and other familiar adults
- Can use words and simple sentences

You can encourage and support children's efforts, but don't expect too much too soon:

- Invite other children into the home; start a play group so toddlers can play with other children
- Show toddlers how to share with others, but don't force them; provide them with their own toys
- Help children to protect what's theirs, but stop hitting and pushing; teach children to use words instead
- Begin to teach toddlers simple rules and routines such as touching people gently; praise them often when they follow rules
- Tell toddlers what to do and why in simple, direct language

Preschoolers. Preschoolers can work together with people and become more selective about their friends. They:

- Gradually learn to play with other children and make friends
- Learn to understand the idea of sharing and taking turns
- Begin to use words rather than physical force to get what they want and protect their possessions
- Learn to "read" others' feelings, pretend to be other people, and become more considerate of other people
- Are able through language to express their feelings and get along with other people

You can help children get along with their widening circle of friends:

- Continue to give preschoolers experiences with different adults and children
- Teach skills through your own example; tell children how they should act and why
- Continue to encourage children to use words rather than hitting or grabbing
- Talk with preschoolers about their experiences; help them recognize their feelings

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