



48 months *to* 60 months

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How are children learning about feelings and relationships?

OVERVIEW

How children think about and manage

- themselves,
- their feelings and behavior, and
- their relationships

is what we call *social-emotional development*.

The development of these skills is as important in children's success in school as are other skills, such as language and literacy and mathematics.

During the first five years of age, children are learning how to

- manage their own behavior,
- recognize, express and manage their feelings,
- notice and respond in caring ways to the feelings of others,
- interact with friends,
- be a member of a group, and
- develop close relationships with adults, including parents, other family members, and teachers.

Children learn these social-emotional skills in close relationships with adults through back-and-forth communication, shared experiences and nurturing guidance. Play is also central to helping children learn these skills. Through play, children practice their social skills, explore feelings, try on new behaviors and get feedback from others. Play allows children to learn more about themselves and others and develop their communication and interaction skills.



Introduction

What are my children learning about themselves and their feelings?

- She likes to feel “independent” but still likes to spend time with her parents and family.
- Your five-year old is enthusiastic about doing things herself. She may refuse your help, even if she is struggling and frustrated.
- He has developed a lot of skills and likes to show you what he has recently learned how to do.
- They have lots of ways to describe themselves and their skills. “I’m five now! That is older than four!” “I know all the names of the planets!” “I know how to ride a skateboard! I couldn’t do that when I was a baby.”
- They can start cleaning up by themselves, sometimes without being asked.
- They have developed some ways to help themselves calm down when distressed, but sometimes need the support and comfort of their adults to help remind them of strategies they can use.
- They can express and describe feelings such as “sad,” “mad,” “frustrated,” “confused,” and “afraid,” can explain what caused them, and can ask for specific comfort.
- They can sometimes predict what feelings will happen in certain situations: “If she hits me, I’ll feel sad and I won’t want to play with her.”
- They can also describe the feelings of other children and sometimes identify the reason they feel that way: “Theo is mad because Laurene knocked down his blocks.”
- They can offer comfort and show empathy for others sometimes, especially if they weren’t directly involved in the conflict.

What are they learning about other people and relationships?

- Friendships are important to children’s success in school and in life.



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- Their growing ability to communicate and negotiate with their friends allows them to play for longer periods of time and to engage in more complex kinds of play. Together with friends they can imagine that they are on a spaceship that travels to outer space and can work together to construct it out of cardboard boxes.
- They can compare their friends with themselves: “Daniel is the fastest runner, but I can build the highest.”
- They may be developing special friendships with certain children and use the words “best friend.”
- They are still learning what “friendship” means and may think that if they are mad at someone, they aren’t friends anymore.
- They have a variety of skills to enter play with other children. They might watch for a while, start playing beside others, or ask if they can play—for example, suggesting that they could be the “father” in the pretend family play.
- They have some negotiation skills and might use them to resolve a conflict with friends. They are more often able to share toys and materials in play with other children, but will still engage in negotiations about “who had it first” and “how long the turn will be.”
- They can give directions to others in play—for example, “You have to be the zookeeper, and we will be the animals”—and can sometimes take directions from others. But other times they might get upset and threaten to leave the play if people don’t do what they want.
- They can participate in group activities with several other children, and can often wait for a while for their turn to talk.
- They like to know what will be happening and if given information about an upcoming transition, may be able to participate cooperatively.
- Parents and teachers are very important to them as sources of comfort and information, but they may resist adult direction or try to negotiate, saying, “I’ll clean up my toys if I can watch a video.”



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- They seem eager to make decisions and continue to do some “testing” to see if the adult is still in charge of a decision.
- They are beginning to be able to follow the rules and will remind other children of the rules, even if there isn't an adult nearby, but sometimes still need to be reminded to follow the rules.

Here are some tips to support your child learning about themselves as a person, learning about other people and learning about their feelings

Learning about self as a person

- Include children in real household work like folding laundry, washing the car, taking out the recycling, loading the dishwasher, or feeding the dog. If you rotate the tasks so that he is regularly learning to do something new, he may stay more interested and will also learn different skills.
- Take time to talk to her about what she is learning and show interest in her new skills. This lets her know that you are interested in her as a person. Be specific: “You learned how to ride that bike, using your balance. I saw how long you practiced to get it.” This is more helpful to your child than praise like “Great job,” which doesn't let her know that you were really observing her.
- Now that your child is busier with friends, toys and electronic toys, it is even more important that you plan regular time to spend together with him. He still needs to talk with you, read with you, do your favorite activities together and cuddle with you.
- She is full of questions and makes some interesting observations about the world. As well as offering her your opinion about things, it is also important to ask her opinion. (child to dad) “Dad, that person just walked across the street, but the light was red.” (dad to child) “I noticed that too. What do you think about that?” Asking your child his opinion gives her a chance to try out her theories, to put her ideas into words and to practice her reasoning skills.

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- He is able to discuss some more abstract ideas now. You can talk to him about some of the values that are important in your family, for example, kindness, friendship, listening, cooperation, etc. You can ask him questions about these ideas and tell him stories to illustrate these values. These everyday discussions offer you a chance to teach your child about the values and beliefs of your family and culture and give him a chance to "think out loud" with you about his own growing understanding of things.

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- In her attempt to be "grown up" she may resist doing what you ask her to. Even when you need to stop her or set a limit, you can let her know you understand her idea. If she refuses to clean up her cars, even after you have given her a warning, you can talk to her in the following ways:
 - "It's time to put your cars away now." (positive limit)
 - "I know how much you love to play with them." (acknowledging her idea)
 - "We need to put them away so they won't get broken or lost." (offering information)
 - "Are you ready to put them away now or would you like to play for 5 more minutes?" (choice)
 - "How shall we do it? Shall we put them away by color or kind of car?" (invite her ideas)
 - "I know you love to play with your cars, and they need to be put away now. If you can't put them away now, I'll put them up for the rest of the day and we'll try again tomorrow." (final limit and follow-through, if needed)

Learning about own feelings

- Make time regularly to talk about feelings and ask her about her feelings.
 - "How was your day? What were you happy about? Did you get mad about anything? Was there anything sad that happened? What was your favorite part of the day?"



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- “How do you think your friend was feeling today when Derek wouldn’t play with him?”
- When she shares her feelings and experiences with you, you can listen to her ideas and talk to her about them.
- Help her to understand his feelings by offering names for them when she doesn’t have words for them.
 - “It looks like you are feeling sad.”
 - “It can be frustrating when you try to build a tower and it keeps falling down.”
 - “I can see how excited you are to go to your friend’s house.”
- Help her to find safe ways to express her feelings.
 - “It looks like you are angry with your friend. Can you tell her what you are angry about?”
 - “It’s not safe to hit someone when you are mad. What else could you do when you are mad that will be safe for you and those around you?”
- When your child is fearful, stay close and offer comfort. Sometimes your child doesn’t want to be taken away from the scary situation, but wants you to be there to help. If she is afraid of monsters, you can ask her about what she is worried about. She might want to draw pictures of the monsters she is afraid of. You could even help her make her pictures into a book (stapling it together and writing her words for the story). You can ask her what might make him feel safer. Discussing the things that she is afraid of can help her gain a sense of mastery and knowledge and can help the fear feel more manageable.
- Let her know that all his feelings are healthy and that you will listen to or acknowledge her feelings. This allows her to trust you with her feelings and not feel like she has to hide her feelings from you, and sets the stage for her to be able to share her feelings with you for a long time to come.



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Learning about other people

- Provide opportunities for him to play with other children (at the park, with neighbors or family, in childcare or in community activities).
- Check in periodically when he is playing with other children. He may need some help in negotiating, listening to her friends' ideas, voicing his own ideas and feelings and coming up with solutions when there are conflicts. He may also need some help with safety, as he and his friends might be excited about trying new things and don't always know how to make safe decisions.

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