



8 months *to* 18 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 is my child learning about himself and his feelings?

- At 18 months, your child recognizes his name and can more reliably let you know what he needs using gestures, sounds and some language.
- He can communicate hunger and sleepiness.
- He can let you know if he wants to play, go outside, or do something himself.
- He is excited about trying out his own ideas and may be starting to resist doing what you tell him to do, but you are still very important to him.
- He wants to share his ideas with you, to be comforted by you, and to know where you are.
- Because he can remember things so well, he also has a lot of feelings. If you take something away from him that he was playing with, he might cry for a long time, even though you offer him other interesting things to play with, because he still remembers that he was enjoying something else.
- He is also beginning to see himself as separate from you, and so spends some of his time resisting your ideas. As soon as he learns to say “no,” he has a lot of uses for it. “No, I won’t get dressed.” “No, I won’t brush my teeth.” “No, I won’t be gentle with the cat.” While challenging for the parent, this flexing of his independence is helping him figure out that he is not the same as you—instead, he is a different and separate person from you.
- He experiences many feelings at this age. He can be very excited, very sad, very frustrated, very loving, very happy, and may also begin to be fearful.

What is she learning about other people and relationships?

- Your 18-month-old is very interested in people—both adults and children. She likes to be with familiar adults and takes a while to warm up to new people. She is often interested in other children and may show you by walking right up and playing alongside them, taking their toy or watching them from a distance. All of these demonstrate an interest in her peers, but



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she still has very beginning skills in actually playing with friends. Waiting for her turn is hard because she doesn't really understand how time works, so she worries that she won't ever have a turn.

- While she is interested in the feelings expressed by others, and sometimes concerned to see someone crying, she still doesn't understand other people's feelings. She often believes that people around her feel the same way she does, so she may be surprised when she hits someone and they start crying.

Tips to support your children learning about themselves as people, learning about their feelings and learning about other people

Learning about self as a person

- Encourage him to do as much for himself as he wants to. Young toddlers love to participate, learn new skills and feel like they are helping. Giving your child opportunities to participate during routines helps him feel competent and encourages him to keep developing his skills.

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- He might help with dressing and undressing himself, feed himself, pour his own water from a little pitcher to his cup, help to wash the vegetables, put his toys in the basket or sweep the floor with a small brush.
- It might take some more time for him to do these things himself, but spending this kind of time with him lets him know that you think he is capable.
- It is helpful to divide these tasks into easier steps for him, for example, holding his pants while he steps in, or helping him find the hole in the shirt before he tries to put it on.
- When he says "no," or won't do what you want him to, remember that he is practicing being his own person.



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- Even when you need to stop him or set a limit with him, you can let him know you understand that he has a good idea.
 - “I’m going to stop you from pulling the cat’s tail.” (limit)
 - “It seems like you are interested in the cat and her soft and long tail.” (stating his good idea)
 - “When you pull her tail, it hurts and she meows and runs away.” (giving him information)
 - “If you want to play with the kitty, you can touch her softly on her back or wiggle the string for her to chase.” (offering choices and another way to express his idea)
 - “Can you be gentle with the cat or shall I help you move to the other room and find something else to do?” (follow-through/offering two possibilities to keep the cat safe)

Learning about own feelings

- Help her to understand her feelings by offering names for them (“I wonder if you are feeling . . .,” “It looks like you are feeling . . .”)
 - “I see you crying. It looks like you are feeling sad.”
 - “It can be frustrating when you try to stack the blocks and they fall down.”
 - “I can see how excited you are to go to the park.”
- Help her to know what makes feelings happen.
 - “You fell down. I wonder if you are hurt and a little scared.”
 - “When you say good-bye to your mama, sometimes you feel sad.”
 - “You look so happy when you are playing with your brother.”
- Help her find safe ways to express her feelings.
 - “If you are mad you can tell your friend, ‘I’m mad.’”
 - “If you are mad and want to hit something, you can hit this cushion.”
- If she shows interest when other children are expressing feelings, you can describe to her what is happening.



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- “Lola just said good-bye to her daddy. He looks sad. Maybe he is missing his daddy.”
- You can use books about feelings or photos showing feelings to name and talk about children’s feelings.
- Have a mirror at your child’s level. She might be interested in looking at her face when she is having a certain feeling, or practicing making different feeling expressions.
- 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 the neighbor’s friendly dog, you can squat down next to her, hold her and talk about the dog. Often, your presence and some information and safe interaction will help her feel less afraid. If she wants to move away, take your cues from her. Sometimes taking a photo of the scary thing and letting your child hold and talk about the photo will help her with her fear.
- Let her know that all her feelings are healthy and that you will listen to or acknowledge her feelings. Acknowledging your child’s feelings allows her to trust you with her feelings and not feel like she has to hide them from you.

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Learning about other people

- Take time in new situations to help your child adjust to new people. If a family friend will be watching him when you go out, invite her over the day before or a couple of hours before you go out to visit and play with him. The more familiar he is with the new person, the more comfortable he will be with you leaving.
- When your child starts childcare, make sure he has time to get to know the new caregiver and setting.
 - Visit a few times and stay with him so that he can check in with you while he is exploring the new setting.



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- Get to know the new caregiver yourself, so you are confident in leaving your child with them.
- Practice leaving your child for shorter periods at first, so that he learns that you will come back.
- Provide opportunities for him to play with other children (at the park, with neighbors or family, in childcare or parent/child classes).
 - Remember that while he may be excited about other children, he doesn't always know how to play with them, and there may be conflict over toys or hesitance to join the play.
 - Supervise him closely at this age when he is playing with other children. He may need help expressing his ideas and feelings and listening to the ideas of others.

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