Social and emotional development

Every child is an individual. Children vary in their temperaments, empathy and sociability.

Children are not born knowing how to behave and to get on with others. They learn this gradually over time in nurturing environments. Parents and early childhood educators have a critical role in teaching the appropriate ways to behave, alternatives to inappropriate behaviour, and how to respond if other children's behaviour upsets them.

When you know about children's typical development, you can teach social and emotional skills, and understand whether to give help and comfort or to expect more 'grown up' behaviour.

Below are some general guidelines for development. The guidelines below are not hard and fast rules. Skills take time to learn and to become established.

Sickness, fatigue and stress can result in backward steps with young children's emerging social and emotional skills. Children learn skills at different times.

**The 3 to 3 1/2 year old**

**Emotional development**

- Can talk about emotions
- Has an idea about what might have upset another child
- Attempts to comfort others
- Early self-regulation
- Feels only one emotion at a time
- Early empathy development
- Aggression in response to emotions starts to decline

**Self-concept**

- Gender awareness establishing, including knowledge about stereotypes
- Views self as a whole person
- Can panic at physical injury
- Wants to attain goals

**Relationships**

- Cooperates more with other children
- Functions in a group of up to four
- Early reciprocal friendships – one or two preferred friends
Language skills

• Increasing language complexity
• Language supports moral reasoning
• Can use language to solve problems but only from their perspective

Thinking skills

• Concentration span for adult-led activities is around 9 minutes
• Fantasy play is increasingly inventive
• Can plan out pretend play
• Developing sense of time
• Capable of some deception

Behaviour

• Limited understanding of impact of behaviour on others since they do not yet understand the idea of consequences
• Uses both prosocial and aggressive means to get things and dominate others
• Aggression levels may remain high if children experience authoritarian discipline
• Actions are goal orientated
• Begins to be able to take turns and share
• Emergence of whining
• Increasing self-control of activity levels
• Increasing independence

The 4 to 4 1/2 year old

Emotional development

• Empathy developing
• Repertoire of helping behaviours expanded to helping, sharing, offering verbal sympathy, protecting and defending victims
• Feels only one emotion at a time

Self-concept

• Accepts others' assignment of a reputation on them (I'm shy)
• Sees self as good or bad (simple dichotomies)

Relationships

• Learns how to build and maintain friendships
• Establishes groups of consistent play partners
• Rapidly expanding range of social skills
• Wants to be like friends
• Wants to please other people, including friends
• Happy to work with others to achieve common goals – e.g. building blocks together
Language skills

- Beginning to develop meta-linguistic skills – talking about language (e.g. caterpillar is a big word) and what words mean

Thinking skills

- Increasing memory
- Increasing awareness of their own thinking process
- Emerging understanding of unfairness
- Concentration span for adult led activities is around 12 minutes
- Can distinguish fantasy from reality
- Increasingly aware of what others think

Behaviour

- Emerging interest in rules and beginning to understand the consequences of their behaviour
- Rigid adherence to rules
- Will use exclusion of others in response to perceived injustice
- Can repress impulses fairly consistently
- Only limited persistence at difficult tasks
- Attempts to regulate others’ behaviours and routines
- Can cooperate, but can also be very stubborn or demanding

The 5 to 6 year old

Emotional development

- Empathy developed to the stage of protecting others
- Comforts other children in distress
- Feels only one emotion a time
- Small percentage of 5-6 years olds still show moderate levels of aggression
- Relatively independent, but may seek support when tired

Self-concept

- Often decline in self-assurance on school entry
- Strong sense of gender-assigned expectations

Relationships

- Likely to have reciprocal friends and to be members of small networks of peers
- Engages in more social play
- Spends more time with members of social and friendship networks.
- May favour same-sexed parent
- Plays simple competitive games
- Chooses own friends
Language skills

- Complex language developing allows understanding of increasingly complex concepts, e.g. cause and effect

Thinking skills

- Increasing understanding of the consequence of choices and behaviour
- Judges behaviour as right or wrong
- Able to divide concentration to a few tasks and ignore distractions

Behaviour

- Understands the reasons for rules
- Sensitive to the notion of fairness and justice and able to weigh the needs of others as they make decisions
- Proactive bullying can emerge, especially in children who have experienced authoritarian discipline
- Able to regulate own behaviour – reasonable self-control of activity level

The 7 to 8 year old

*By about 6 to 8 years of age, children should be able to manage their emotions and behaviour in most social situations.*

Emotional development

- Empathy developed to the stage of protecting others
- Comforts other children in distress.
- Small percentage of 7-8 years olds still show moderate levels of aggression
- Able to understand that they can feel two emotions at once, e.g. anger and love

Self-concept

- Sensitive to criticism
- May be sensitive to losing or not being skilled at things
- Can reliably label own characteristics in comparison to other children

Relationships

- Likely to have reciprocal friends and to be members of small networks of peers
- Engages in more social play
- Spends more time with members of social and friendship networks.
- May favour same-sexed parent
- Plays simple competitive games
- Chooses own friends

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Language skills

- Complex language developing allows understanding of increasingly complex concepts, e.g. cause and effect

Thinking skills

- Increasing understanding of the consequences of choices and behaviour
- Judges behaviour as right or wrong
- Sensitive to the notion of fairness and justice and are able to weigh the needs of others as they make decisions
- Reasonable understanding of time
- Able to divide concentration to a few tasks and ignore distractions

Behaviour

- Understands the reasons for rules
- Increasingly plays games with rules
- Proactive bullying reaches levels found in older children, especially in children who have experienced authoritarian discipline
- Able to regulate own behaviour, with well-developed self-control of activity level