**Preschool Social Skills:**

**A guide for the science-minded parent**

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Preschool social skills depend on three abilities:

• Emotional self-control

• Empathy

• Verbal communication

Many parents and educators assume that children need to spend lots of time with peers to develop strong preschool social skills.

They don't.

Playdates and preschool attendance can add stimulation—-and fun—-to your child’s daily life. But socialization-—the process of learning how to get along with others-—is not the same thing as socializing. Frequent socializing with peers does NOT necessarily lead to better social skills.

In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Too much time with peers can make kids behave badly. It’s the sulky elephant in the room that no one likes to talk about. Even upscale preschools are likely to make kids behave worse. As recent scientific studies confirm, preschool attendance increases childhood stress and retards social development. For details, see this article on [the effects of peers on preschool social skills.](http://www.parentingscience.com/preschool-stress.html)

**Why parents are better than peers**

Loving, sensitive parents are ideal social tutors. Unlike preschool peers, parents draw on extensive emotional resources when they interact with children. Parents can

• understand the causes and effects of emotions

• see things from a child’s perspective

• interpret the emotions of others

• match social interactions to a child’s developmental level

• describe emotions verbally

• regulate their own emotions

• appreciate the long-term consequences of social acts

No wonder the core preschool social skills—-empathy, emotional self-control, and communication—-are best nurtured by you.

Here are some of the most important ways that you can foster preschool social skills.

**How to nurture preschool social skills**

**Teach your child about emotions**

Emotional competence is the key to strong preschool social skills (Denham 1997). For example, the better children understand emotions, the more they are liked by peers (Denham et al 1990; McDowell et al 2000).

To teach emotional competence, talk to your child about his feelings. Talk about your own (e.g., “When you don’t pay attention to me, it makes me feel frustrated and sad”). Discuss what kinds of situations make us feel bad, and what things make us feel good. When parents explain emotions and their causes, kids learn how to better regulate their own feelings. In one study, parents who used “more frequent, more sophisticated” language about emotions had kids who could better cope with anger and disappointment (Denham et al 1992). For more information, see my upcoming article on how to teach your child to cope with his emotions.

**Maintain an intimate, loving relationship to your child**

The evidence is overwhelming. Social development builds on a child’s primary relationship—-the bond with his parent or guardian (Sroufe and Fleeson 1986).

When kids see, on a daily basis, that they can rely on you for support, they are emotionally secure. They adapt more easily to new social situations. They also develop their capacity for empathy-—a key ingredient for preschool social skills. In studies conducted at the University of Wisconsin, four year olds with [secure attachment](http://www.parentingscience.com/strange-situation.html) relationships showed higher levels of empathy than did peers with insecure attachments (Elicker et al 1992).

Other studies show that sensitive communication promotes social competence. When parents and children are responsive to each other’s cues, kids develop strong social skills (Harrist et al 1994; Pettit and Harrist 1993). One study asked preschoolers to predict how own parents would respond to them in various situations. The kids that expected their parents to be comforting were rated by teachers as more skilled with peers, more empathic, and more cooperative (Denham 1997).

**Display positive, warm emotions at home**

It’s not necessary to be in a constant state of good cheer. Sometimes parents experience setbacks or loss, and these can be opportunities for children to learn how we deal with disappointments (see above). But the key is demonstrating a positive, "can-do" attitude towards setbacks, rather than anger or despair. A growing body of research suggests that kids suffer when their parents--particularly their mothers--show frequent displays of negative emotion. The more kids see their mothers display negative emotions, the less likely they are to view their mothers as people who can comfort and counsel them (Denham 1997). Moreover, the kids with the most developed preschool social skills are the ones who experience more positive emotions at home (Denham et al 1997).

**Talk with your child about his social world**

Discuss your child’s experiences with peers in the same pleasant, conversational way that you discuss other everyday events. Such talk helps in several ways. It keeps you informed and sensitive to what is going on with your child. It shows your child that you are really interested in his social life. And it gives you opportunities to discuss social tactics with peers (see next item). Kids who talk frequently about their peer relationships develop stronger preschool social skills (Laird et al 1994).

**Encourage an upbeat, problem-solving attitude**

When your child has social problems with peers, encourage a positive, constructive attitude. Let your child know that everybody gets rebuffed and rejected sometimes. In one study, about half of all preschooler social overtures were rejected by peers (Corsaro 1981).

Kids with the strongest social skills treat rebuffs as temporary setbacks that can be improved. You can encourage this attitude by suggesting socially “generous” reasons for social rejection (like “Maybe he’s just shy,” or “maybe he just wants to play by himself for a while.”). In addition, help him brainstorm solutions, and encourage him to predict how different social tactics might work. Such thought experiments help kids consider what other kids are feeling and strengthen preschool social skills (Zahn-Waxler et al 1979).

These “what if” scenarios also allow your child to explore ways he can be adapt and “fit in.” Kids with strong preschool social skills are responsive to the play of others, and they know how to mesh their behavior with the behavior of potential playmates (Mize 1995). For instance, if Jane and Emily are playing firefighter and they won’t let Lucy join in because “there isn’t enough room in the fire engine,” Lucy might suggest playing a different role in the game. (“Help! My house is on fire and I’m stuck on the roof!”)

**Be calm and supportive when your child is upset**

When parents respond to strong emotions in soothing ways, kids are less likely to direct negative emotions at peers (Denham 1989; Denham and Grout 1993). Moreover, parents who respond supportively show their children how to behave towards others who are in distress. Young children who respond appropriately to the emotional needs of others are better liked by peers (Sroufe et al 1984) and rated as more socially competent by teachers (Denham et al 1990).

**Don’t dismiss or play down your child’s negative emotions**

When a child launches into a seemingly irrational crying jag, it’s natural to want to shut him up. But simply telling a child to be quiet doesn’t help him learn. By taking the time to talk about his feelings, you help your child become more reflective, self-controlled and socially competent (Denham et al 1997). This may be especially important for younger children, who need more emotional coaching and who are more likely to “turn off” if their parents dismiss their feelings.

**Be a role model**

During everyday social interactions, take advantage of the opportunity to discuss social behavior (“I thanked our mail carrier for bringing us the package. She works hard and I want her to know that I appreciate it.”) If your child sees you or other adults slipping up, talk about it afterwards (“Whoops. I forget to tell Daddy ‘thank you’ for bring me the book.”)

**Avoid bad social influences**

Playing with the wrong crowd can impair preschool social skills. In one study, researchers monitored the informal playgroups that 3-4 year old children form during free play periods at preschool. They found that some kids played in groups characterized by negative emotions and antisocial practices (like making upset peers feel even worse). Kids who played in negative groups were rated as less socially competent by their teachers and parents. And the ill effects were long lasting. Kids who played in negative groups at the beginning of the study were more likely to receive poor ratings a year later (Denham et al 2001).

**Practice inductive discipline**

How you discipline your child has important effects on her preschool social skills. Inductive discipline emphasizes explaining the reasons for rules and the consequences of bad behavior. When parents practice inductive discipline, as opposed to discipline styles that emphasize punishment and arbitrary parental control, preschoolers show more self-control and cooperation with peers (Hart et al 1992). Such kids are also more popular.

**Participate in pretend play with your child**

During preschool years, pretend play is one of the most important ways that children forge friendships (Gottman 1983; Dunn and Cutting 1999). Preschoolers who pretend together are less likely than other kids to quarrel or have communication problems (Dunn and Cutting 1999). If you participate in pretend play with your child, you may give preschool social skills a boost. When parents pretend with kids, pretend play becomes more complex and lasts longer (Fiese 1990).

When you play with your child, don’t criticize his ideas or try to “run the show.” Research indicates that kids with strong preschool social skills have parents who play with them in a cheerful, collaborative, way (MacDonald 1987).

**Watch for peer rejection and bullying**

Both have long-lasting effects. In one study, children who were rejected by peers at an early age showed higher rates of antisocial behavior four years later (Dodge et al 2003). By contrast, peer acceptance seems to innoculate children against developing behavioral and emotional problems (Criss et al 2002).

If your child is the victim of peer rejection, help her cultivate a friendship with at least one peer. Studies show that a single peer friendship can protect preschoolers from continued aggression and rejection (Criss et al 2002; Hodges et al 1999). In addition, take stock of your child’s preschool social skills. In some cases, rejected children need help developing prosocial behaviors, like helping, sharing and showing concern for others (Vitaro et al 1990). Preschoolers like peers who show positive affect (Sroufe et al 1984), helpfulness (Cote et al 2002), and spontaneous sharing (Eisenberg et al 1999). They also like peers who respond appropriately to conversation (Kemple et al 1992).

Bullies and their victims tend to share certain characteristics—greater exposure to adult aggression (Schwartz et al 1997) and greater difficulty regulating their emotions (Unnever and Cornell 2003; Mahady-Wilton and Craig 2000). If you suspect your child is a bully, he probably needs more help learning to understand and control his emotions. Encourage him to discuss his feelings and help him think of constructive ways to deal with them.

If your child is the victim of a bully, use the same approach described for peer rejection. In addition, coach her on how to stand up for herself. Encourage assertive behavior, not aggression. Teach her to face her bully with helpful verbal formulas like “Don’t do that to me. That isn’t nice and I don’t like it.”

**Choose TV programs that promote preschooler social skills**

Preview what your child watches. Many preschooler-oriented shows promote positive social behavior, and they can have a beneficial effect on preschool social skills. For instance, after watching excerpts from Sesame Street and Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, preschool children increased positive interactions with playmates (Coates et al 1976).

However, some seem to condone impolite behavior. For instance, the characters on "Dora the Explorer" seem to use only one vocal register—-shouting-—for all occasions. And I recently saw an episode of "Mickey Mouse Club" in which Donald accidentally knocked Daisy down. Daisy responds belligerently. "Hey, Donald. What's the big idea?!"

Also, be careful about programs aimed at older kids. Many of these programs encourage glamorize child characters who are sarcastic, shallow, driven by consumerism, and inappropriately sexual. Such programs have doubtful value for adults, let alone young children.

**Realize that sharing is difficult**

Parents often think of sharing as one of the most important preschool social skills. But sharing can be difficult--even for adults. It’s much tougher for young children, who have difficulty thinking beyond the immediate future. They may have trouble understanding that they will get their toy back. And, to be fair, sometimes the kids they share with don’t give their toys back!

Most young children don’t share very well, and kids are LESS—-not more-—likely to share after the toddler stage (Hay et al 1991). So be patient, and when you encourage sharing, try to make it as comfortable as possible. For example, don’t insist that your child share his newest toys or most loved toys. Before friends visit, put these away to avoid conflicts.

**Don’t take it personally**

Most young children do not have a good understanding of how other people’s minds work until after age 4 (Gopnick et al 1999). For instance, they don’t seem to understand that other people can be manipulated into believing something false.

This means that young children can’t really tell lies. They may say all sorts of things that aren’t true—-even if they should “know better.” But they lack the sophistication to intentionally mislead you. They also lack the ability to be spiteful.

If your preschooler says something rude or hurtful, don’t take it personally. But you shouldn't ignore it either. Take the opportunity to explain how words can hurt our feelings. When your child gains insight into the power of words, he will improve his preschool social skills.

**References: Preschool social skills**

A great deal of research has been conducted on preschool social skills. In addition to the [scholarly references cited in this article,](http://www.parentingscience.com/preschool-social-skills-references.html) any introductory textbook on cognitive development should help you gain insight into your child's preschool social skills. Online, Jacquelyn Mize and Ellen Abell, professors of child development at Auburn University, offer a research-based guide to teaching preschool social skills in [“Encouraging social skills in young children: Tips teachers can share with parents.”](http://www.humsci.auburn.edu/parent/socialskills.html)

You will also find advice about preschool social skills in chapters 7-8 of Einstein Never Used Flash Cards (2004) by K. Hirsh-Pasek, R. Michnick Golinkoff, and D. Eyer.

If you found this article on preschool social skills helpful, check out other offerings at ParentingScience.com.