

Educator Essentials *for Early Childhood* Mental Health

Early childhood is a critical period for social, emotional, and behavioral development that directly affects learning and classroom engagement. The experiences children have in their early years influence how they manage emotions, interact with peers, and participate in educational settings.

Supportive routines, positive relationships, and responsive guidance help children develop skills such as self-regulation, problem-solving, and cooperation. Understanding and supporting early childhood mental health enables educators to create classrooms where every child can succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Early Childhood Mental Health Defined

What are social-emotional skills?

Social-emotional development, also called early childhood mental health, involves children learning to understand and manage emotions and build relationships. In their first five years, children develop the ability to recognize and regulate a range of emotions. When educators and caregivers provide safe, stable, and predictable environments, children feel secure enough to explore, learn, and manage their feelings and behaviors.

Why are social-emotional skills important?

Social-emotional development is key to children's health and school readiness. When children feel safe and confident, they engage more deeply in learning, try new things, and build stronger academic and problem-solving skills.



How can teachers support social and emotional skills?

Teachers support development through responsive relationships, predictable environments, and activities that build emotional and social skills and core life skills such as self-regulation and problem-solving. Partnering with families and reducing stress helps children build coping skills, regulate emotions, and stay ready to learn.

How can you teach social and emotional skills?

- Praise positive behaviors
- Create developmentally appropriate environments
- Set expectations that match children's abilities
- Understand and respond to the meaning behind children's behavior
- Label and talk about both adult's and children's feelings
- Encourage friendships and empathy
- Teach problem-solving skills
- Read books about feelings and sharing
- Use positive discipline strategies

When to Seek Help?

Monitor children's development and share concerns with parents or specialists. Seek help when:



Infants and Toddlers (birth to age 3)

- Feeding, sleeping, or persistent irritability.
- Separation anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal.
- Limited communication, language delays, or loss of developmental skills.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

- Unusual, impulsive, or overactive behaviors.
- Long or intense temper tantrums, repeated aggression, or withdrawal.
- Limited interest in social interaction or difficulty playing with others.
- Inattention or delays in language and developmental skills.



Taking Care of You

Supporting children's social-emotional development starts with taking care of yourself. Rest, hydration, continuous learning, and peer support all help reduce burnout. Use the ABCs of self-care as a guide:

Awareness

Be aware of your own feelings and stress levels.

Balance

Seek a balance in work and home life.

Connections

Stay connected to friends, family, and colleagues who support you and promote your professional development.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood



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Healthy New Families is a program of the Mental Health Association of Maryland. We promote mental health and well-being for new parents, infants and young children, and families across Maryland by connecting families and providers with resources, education, and support.

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