

Supporting Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Everybody has feelings! Children experience feelings in their bodies and minds and express them through their words, actions, and behavior. As Mr. Fred Rogers said, “Whatever is mentionable can be more manageable.” When caring adults and peers help children with their feelings, children learn to cope and regulate rather than be overwhelmed.



Social-Emotional Development Defined

Developmental milestones—social-emotional, cognitive, language, and motor — form the foundation for lifelong health and learning. Social-emotional development is shaped by the child’s temperament and interactions with family, friends, teachers, and community.

Although each child is unique, parents, pediatricians, teachers, and developmental specialists monitor patterns of development to help understand children’s health and development. These patterns align with expected skills and tasks that a young child’s brain is ready to learn.

Core Components of Social-Emotional Development



Emotional Regulation

Young children learn to experience, tolerate, and express a wide range of emotions.



Relationships

When young children feel safe and loved, they can build trusting relationships with parents, siblings, family members, teachers, peers, and neighbors.



Culturally Expected Skills

Community values shape what children learn. For example, parents who value education may read to their children and help them prepare for school success.

How to Support Social-Emotional Development

Everyone who cares for or teaches a child can support their social-emotional development. Here are some practical ways to encourage growth:

- **Celebrate your child's uniqueness and learn to read their cues.** For example, I get grouchy when I am hungry, I get frustrated when I am tired, I want to be close to you when I am worried or anxious.
- **Give attention to the behaviors you want to see.** Offer praise when your child tries something new and doesn't give up, or when they follow through with what you asked them to do.
- **Provide predictable routines** that set your child up for success and help them feel proud that they can do some tasks on their own.
- **Make time for play.** Play supports development — playing together strengthens your relationship.
- **Be selective about screen time.** Not all screen time is equal. Brief interactive media can help teach a skill; passive media can interfere with attention and the ability to focus on tasks that require concentration and “stick to it-ness.”



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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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How to Seek Support



11-20% of young children in the United States meet the criteria for a behavioral or emotional disorder, and 10-15% of preschoolers have developmental delays. Parents can ask their pediatrician for resources to track their child's social-emotional development and get help if concerns arise.

Request an evaluation when a child:

- Misses one or more developmental milestones.
- Loses previously acquired skills.
- Shows persistent behavioral or emotional challenges, especially when they affect relationships or learning.

Early identification improves children's mental and developmental health and can reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. Supporting healthy early childhood development — from before birth through age 5 — produces significant educational, social, and financial benefits for children and their communities.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood