

The role of parents and educators

Parents and educators support children's social and emotional development every day through their responses and their example of how to behave with other people.

Providing a model of appropriate behaviour

Children are very observant. If you act in a way that you want children to behave, they learn just from watching.

Provide a good example in the way you deal with other people, express your feelings, resolve conflicts and solve problems.

While each child has an individual temperament, home and early education environments have a strong influence on children. Adults and other children provide a role model for children's social and emotional skill development.

Children who do not see positive examples of joining in, sharing, compromising, solving problems and dealing with conflict may have difficulty getting on with other children. They may be more vulnerable to being involved in bullying.

Having reasonable expectations

Many challenging behaviours are a normal part of development. They also give you a chance to teach appropriate behaviour.

Read about children's typical social and emotional development on the Starting Early pages of Bullying. No Way! so you can have reasonable expectations of children's behaviour. Expect gradual progress and accept regular backward steps in new social and emotional skills.

Children need a clear idea of how you expect them to behave. Telling a child they need 'to be good' is too vague.

You can be clear by giving precise details, such as:

- *'I want you to share your toy truck with your brother'*
- *'You need to put all the toys away now and come to the dinner table'*
- *'If you don't like that, you need to say, "stop it", to her'.*

Respecting children's feelings

Emotions, both 'positive' and 'negative', are a fact of life.

Children as young as three years of age have experienced happiness, interest, fear, sadness, surprise, anger, frustration, excitement, disgust, jealousy, hurt, worry, shyness, embarrassment, humiliation, distress, loneliness, guilt, pride, disappointment, irritation, friendliness, love, boredom and other feelings.

Teach children the names for feelings and regularly talk about how you feel as well. This helps children learn to manage their feelings and it also shows that you respect their feelings.

Feelings are not right or wrong. They just are. If a child says that they feel happy or angry or disappointed or anxious or excited, just accept this by saying, 'Oh, I see,' or 'Mmm, I sometimes feel like that too.'

Avoid belittling children's emotions.

When you respect and accept children's feelings you are teaching them:

- to identify and understand why they have certain feelings
- to trust their own feelings and learn ways to manage overwhelming or strong feelings
- that both good and bad feelings are a normal part of life
- that while all sorts of feelings are accepted, not all sorts of behaviours are acceptable.

Your natural impulse might be to protect young children from upsetting or challenging experiences. However, having upsetting experiences and so-called 'negative' emotions allows children to learn that they can deal with all sorts of situations.

Helping children deal with feelings like anger can be a challenge. Their feelings can sometimes provoke strong feelings in you too. **To help children develop mastery over their feelings, you need to say calm.**

Encouraging empathy

In talking about feelings with a child, you sow the seeds of empathy.

Empathy includes knowing how others feel and having concern for other people's experience of pain or hurt.

Empathy develops over time. It gives children a great start in getting on with other children. Children tend to like other children who show sensitivity to feelings, including distress or hurt.

Talk about how other children might feel and why they might act a certain way. Talk about how things you do can affect other people.

For example, if a child grabs someone else's toy and the second child reacts by hitting the first child, use this to explore empathy. Ask each child how they would feel if someone took their toy or hit them.

Empathy is the key to positive social behaviour. It is the main feeling behind compassionate behaviour to others.

Children who are empathetic are less likely to behave impulsively and use aggression. Understanding how what you do impacts on others helps children develop self-control.

Teaching social problem solving skills

Avoid jumping in to sort things out before children have had the chance to find their own solutions. But if you need to get involved, use the opportunity to teach ways to sort out conflicts and solve problems.

Teach children social problem-solving skills. It may slow things down at first, but it leads to confident and resilient children who can work out what to do in most situations.

By about 5 years of age, children can begin to talk about how they might solve a problem.

When a child comes to you with a problem about sharing toys, arguments, or not being included in games, talk about:

- What is wrong (help them identify exactly what the **problem** is) and how they **feel**
- What they think **should** happen
- What they **can do** about it
- Other **options** for what to do (suggest some options for the younger child or ask prompt questions for children over about 5 years 'I wonder what else you could try')
- The possible **consequences** of each option.

Allow the child to decide what to do and to learn through 'trial and error', although do not allow children to try options that are dangerous.

This way, children learn they have choices in solving social problems and that some choices are better than others. They also learn there will usually be more than one option, and they can try something else.

Giving realistic and specific praise

Provide realistic and specific praise about positive social behaviour. The sorts of things to say are:

- *I noticed how kind you were when Jane was sad.*
- *That was great that you shared your toys with Eric.*
- *I saw you taking some quiet time in the corner to calm down; that was very grown up of you.*
- *You really tried to sort that out yourself; you should be proud of yourself.*
- *You were quite upset yesterday, but I noticed you didn't get rough with the other children. You were careful about them weren't you?*

Providing lots and lots of real life practice

Social and emotional skills require lots and lots of practice. In the early stages, the skills can be unstable – there one day and gone the next – and will be affected by the context, by fatigue and by illness. This is normal.

Be alert to opportunities every day to talk about feelings and to promote appropriate behaviour.

You do not have to formally 'teach' social and emotional skills or use special toys or materials. Everyday situations are the basis of real life learning.

Allowing the chance to 'fail' and try again

Teaching children social and emotional skills and how to behave is a lengthy process of guidance and support.

Children will not always know what to do, or want to do what is expected. You need to allow children the chance to 'fail', and to try again.

Teaching should not involve punishment for not knowing how to behave with others.

A shortcoming of relying on punishment is that the 'control' of behaviour rests 'external' to the child, with you as an adult. Children need to develop their own, or 'internal' self-control and self-regulation of behaviour. This comes with support and learning, consequences for behaviour and your emphasis on empathy.

The use of punishment alone, without teaching children more appropriate ways to behave, can also result in heightened anxiety in children who don't know what to do and who may feel unable to predict what will happen.

Responding appropriately if you see aggressive behaviour

Aggressive behaviour is a normal part of children's development. **Your role is to respond in ways that help them to learn more appropriate ways to behave.**

When you see aggressive behaviour:

- comfort the child who has been hurt
- find out why it happened
- demonstrate other more appropriate ways to act
- teach children other ways to solve problems
- reassure other children if necessary.

The aim is to teach children that non-aggressive ways of sorting out problems are better for everyone.

Starting early with online safety (cyber safety)

Getting on with others includes learning how to behave online. Start early teaching your child about being safe online and about appropriate ways to behave online.

Visit the Office of the eSafety Commissioner's Parent resources for ideas about encouraging safe online behaviour for children. Another resource on the site is Zippep's Astro Circus, a series of online games for young kids aged 5 to 7 years that reinforces the concept of online security. The Office is at <https://esafety.gov.au/>