

Infants & Toddlers
Child Abuse: Prevention

Promoting Children's Social Skills and Emotional Competence

Social and emotional competence of children is a protective factor in preventing child abuse and neglect. In this lesson, you will learn strategies for promoting children's social skills and emotional competence.

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Objectives

- State why social and emotional competence is a protective factor that prevents abuse and neglect.
- Identify strategies to promote social and emotional competence in children.
- Use strategies that promote social and emotional competence in all children.



Learn



Know

As a child development professional, promoting social and emotional competence is a major part of your job. Appropriately, you will spend the bulk of your time with infants and toddlers promoting positive interactions, helping solve problems, and responding to intense emotions. You are promoting positive social and emotional skills in every interaction you have with a child. Evidence suggests that social and emotional competence contributes significantly to skills in other domains like cognitive and physical development. Researchers at the Center for the Study of Social Policy found an additional benefit of such an emphasis on social and emotional

competence: It decreased the amount of child abuse and neglect in families. Parents with children in exemplary programs reported that the skills their children learned related to anger management and violence prevention directly affected the way parents and children interacted. When children expressed their emotions appropriately, parents began to see their children differently. While these findings might seem more relevant to older children and preschoolers, you begin this important work with infants and toddlers. You can have a large impact on how parents and children interact. Families notice the way you interact with children: how you soothe an infant, how you help calm a dispute over a toy, or how you respond when a toddler tantrums. Your relationships can become a model for families.

What does this have to do with preventing child abuse and neglect in center settings? The answer is simple: when you see each interaction as an opportunity to build a positive relationship, you are more likely to view children positively. You are more likely to see behaviors as communication.

- The crying infant is saying, "Comfort me."
- The 9-month-old trying to climb the shelves is saying, "Help me explore."
- The 14-month-olds pushing their way to the top of the slide are saying, "We want to play, but we don't know how."
- The toddler running around the room is saying, "Play with me."

This makes you less likely to become frustrated or overwhelmed. You are more likely to make good decisions about responding to behaviors that challenge you. These decisions help strengthen your relationships with children, and these relationships help infants and toddlers develop and learn.

You can learn more by downloading and reading the article on Social and Emotional Competence at the end of the Learn section.

What is Social and Emotional Competence?

Social and emotional competence is the ability to interact with others, regulate one's own emotions and behavior, solve problems, and communicate effectively. We cannot expect infants and toddlers to have these abilities; they are still learning and developing the skills they need to connect with others. Rather, it is better that we think about social-emotional development for infants and toddlers. Consider this definition from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL; www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel):

The term social-emotional development refers to the developing capacity of the child from birth through five years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture.

Caregivers promote healthy development by working to support social-emotional wellness in all young children, and make every effort to prevent the occurrence or escalation of social-emotional problems in children at-risk, identifying and working to remediate problems that surface, and, when necessary, referring children and their families to appropriate services.

(Adapted with permission from ZERO to THREE's definition of infant mental health, 2001.)

There is strong research evidence that social and emotional development contributes to development across domains: cognitive, physical, communication (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Smith, 2010; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Wahlberg, 2004). In many ways, social and emotional development opens the door to richer and deeper learning. In early childhood, we understand that relationships are the foundation of all learning. So, it makes sense that having strong relationships helps children learn.

Social and emotional competence begins to develop even in infancy. During the first six months of life, infants learn how caregivers (parents and other adults) will respond to their needs. This is known as attachment. Attachment relationships are those relationships that help an infant feel safe and protected—especially when they are ill or scared. All infants become attached to caregivers, but there are different qualities of attachment. The quality of attachment depends on how adults respond to the infant. Adults who respond quickly and lovingly to a crying infant build secure attachment relationships. Adults who ignore crying or respond negatively build insecure attachment relationships.

Secure attachment sets the stage for later social and emotional growth. A securely attached infant knows an adult will comfort her in times of distress. At one year of age, securely attached infants cry less, are better able to soothe themselves, and respond more quickly to a soothing caregiver (Benoit, 2004). As we respond to infants' needs, they learn that they are effective communicators. They learn the back and forth of conversations and interactions. This has a large impact on a child's social development from infancy through adolescents.

There are several key ways programs can promote social and emotional competence in infants and toddlers (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, 2008) including: fostering nurturing and responsive relationships, creating supportive environments and routines, and providing targeted social and emotional supports.

Nurturing and Responsive Relationships:

- Providing physical and emotional security for each child
- Developing meaningful relationships
- Assisting infants and toddlers in regulating emotions
- Applying knowledge of children's individual temperaments to interactions and practice
- Engaging in ongoing observation and reflection about children's social and emotional learning

Creating Supportive Environments and Routines:

- Designing responsive environments that promote social and emotional competence
- Designing responsive routines and schedules that promote social and emotional competence
- Ensuring smooth transitions
- Individualizing plans and curriculum to promote social-emotional competence
- Using age-appropriate expectations to guide children's behavior
- Supporting families to develop home environments and routines that promote social-emotional competence

Targeted Social-Emotional Supports:

- Using prompting and reinforcing of positive interactions effectively
- Providing guidance to aid children in their development of social practices
- Identifying and labeling emotions in self and others
- Exploring the nature of feelings and the appropriate ways they can be expressed
- Developing individualized approaches to support children in distress

You will learn more about these strategies in the Positive Guidance and Social & Emotional Development courses. You can also visit <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu> for information on the Infant and Toddler training modules developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.



See

What do programs that promote social and emotional competence look like? Watch this video to find out.



Do

One of the strongest ways to promote social and emotional competence for infants and toddlers is through continuity of care (Cryer, Hurwitz, & Wolery, 2003). Children stay with the same caregiver(s) throughout most or all of their infant and toddler years. Stressful transitions are minimized for the children and adults. This program structure allows infants, toddlers, and caregivers to build consistent nurturing relationships. Allowing secure attachments have the opportunity to form. It is within these secure attachments that caregivers are best able to promote children's social and emotional competence. You might not have control over how long children stay in your classroom or program, but you can take steps that provide more consistent experiences for infants and toddlers. For example:

- Remain close to children and families who have been in your classroom. Have conversations and remain a part of that child's experience in the program.

- Support the transition between classrooms. Visit the new classroom with the child before the transition and talk positively about the new classroom. Provide information about the child to the new classroom team. Visit the child after the transition to check-in.
- Work with other classroom teams to make sure the transitions are easy. Find ways to increase the similarities between your classrooms (schedules, activities, favorite books or toys).
- Respond in a comforting way to children's fears. Remember that this might be hard or scary for the child. Validate the child's fears and concerns. Provide extra hugs and remember the child's temperament: you might expect the child to act out more than usual or to be more timid than usual. Be consistent and nurturing. Talk about the transition with toddlers and read stories about "going to preschool."

From the Center for the Study of Social Policy:

- Always give children an opportunity to say goodbye when they are leaving the program or when staff changes occur.
- Help children process class or staff changes.
- Communicate staffing changes to parents and children.
- Intentionally help children enter into new settings (e.g. by allowing for transition/orientation time).
- Encourage children to express their feelings.
- For older toddlers and preschoolers, encourage sharing, taking turns, and cooperative play.
- Offer children many ways to express themselves: theater, music, visual arts, dramatic play.

According to the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, to foster emotional literacy you can:

- Read infants' communication cues.
- Respond to infants' communication attempts and gestures.
- Provide responsive care to meet infants' needs.
- Talk about and display photos of infants, toddlers, and their families and label various emotional expressions.
- Notice and label children's feelings and describe how/why you think they are feeling that way (i.e., "You look so happy, you're smiling").
- Label your own feelings.
- Provide opportunities for infants to explore mirrors so they can see their facial expressions.

- Read books that show emotions and point out pictures/images to children.

To promote problem-solving you can:

- Encourage children's persistence (i.e., at reaching for a toy, trying again, etc.)
- Provide opportunities for infants and toddlers to explore their interests and surroundings
- Play games with infants like a peek a boo or imitating sounds
- Encourage infants to use their bodies to explore by placing an object just outside their reach
- Provide educational toys and experiences that encourage problem solving (e.g. stacking cups, etc.)

To promote relationships and early friendship skills, you can:

- Recognize infants' interest in human faces and interaction
- Provide ample opportunity to interact with an infant or toddler and time for the infant to interact with their peers and other adults
- Play games such as peek a boo
- Talk to the baby often
- Sing songs and read books with the baby
- Smile often at the baby
- Engage in lots of back-and-forth communication



Promoting Children's Healthy Social and Emotional Development

Use strategies to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect



Explore

In this activity, you will begin looking for social behaviors in infants and toddlers. In the *Observing Social Interactions* activity below, you will spend 15 minutes observing a child or a group of children. Write down the behaviors you see that are social (a child offers another child a toy) and the behaviors that might be signs that a child could use support around developing social and emotional competence (a child snatches a toy from another child). Remember to include social interactions between adults and the child, too. As you observe or after your observation, talk with your administrator, trainer, or coach about how you could help the child learn or use social behaviors.



Observing Social Interactions

Record social behaviors and social emotional behaviors that could use support



Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator



Apply

There are a variety of tools available to help you apply what you have learned. Read and review the list of practices from the *CSEFEL Inventory of Practices for Promoting Infant and Toddlers' Social-Emotional Competence* below. Reflect on the practices you see there. Use the list to make sure you are doing all you can to promote social and emotional competence in your classroom or program. For the full set of practices, visit: http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training_infant.html.



Promoting Social and Emotional Competence

Review best practices for promoting infant and toddler social emotional development

GLOSSARY

Attachment:

One part of the relationship between an adult and a child that helps a child feel safe, secure, and protected. An attached relationship is a secure base from which to explore



Demonstrate

Q1 Carly is crying and sitting alone. Which of the following responses from her caregiver best promotes social and emotional competence? *

- "Carly, I can tell you're sad. What happened?"
- "Carly, stop crying and go play."
- "Carly, be a big girl."
- Leave Carly alone and let her work through her problems.

Q2 Malone and Jacob want the same toy. Which of the following responses from their caregiver best promotes social and emotional competence? *

- "Malone, give it to Jacob and find something else to do."
- "If you are going to fight, no one gets the toy."
- "It looks like we have a problem. Let's find another truck, so both of you can play."
- "Share please."

Q3 Why is social and emotional competence important? Choose the best answer. *

- It contributes to development in all areas of a child's life.
- It prepares a child for school and life.
- It prevents child abuse and neglect.
- All of the above

Q4 True or false? Social and emotional competence begins developing in early infancy. *

- True
- False

- Q5** Where can you learn more about promoting children's social and emotional development?
Choose the best answer. *
- The Social and Guidance courses on the Virtual Laboratory School
 - Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL: www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel)
 - Zero to Three (www.zerotothree.org)
 - All of the above

References & Resources

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