



Social development

Social development is about children and young people learning the values, knowledge and skills that enable them to relate to others.

What is social development?

Children are born social

Social development occurs throughout life and explains how we recognise, interpret and respond to social situations. Healthy social development is a known protective factor for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Daily contact and interactions with family members, educators and friends teaches children and young people about the social world and the rules, practices and values that support it. Social development is also influenced by wider networks including extended family, as well as participation in the community and culture around them.

Through their relationships and connections with others, children build a sense of who they are and where they fit in the social world. By actively participating in these relationships, children also affect the ways that adults and their peers relate to them.

Learn about how you [can support social development](#) in children and young people.

Social development in young children

From birth, children delight in positive social interactions with people.

Babies spend almost every waking minute developing their first relationships with primary caregivers and other members of the family. When these first relationships are based on secure attachment, children learn that they can trust others to care for them, get their needs met and enjoy life with others. This is the start of give and take in relationships.

Friendships and relationships with other children become more important to children as they grow. Social development strategies in learning communities and the broader community help children learn and enjoy getting along with others.

Social development as children and young people grow

To achieve healthy social development, children and young people need to form social bonds with others who can model and encourage positive social values and behaviours.

To create these bonds, children and young people need:

- opportunities for social interaction

- active participation and meaningful engagement with others including family members, educators and peers
- to learn social skills through guidance and modelling in daily informal interactions and incidental opportunities, as well as planned teaching which might include participation in social skills programs
- recognition and reinforcement when positive social interaction occurs.

Opportunities, skill development and recognition need to be appropriately matched to children and young people's age and stage, as well as individual characteristics.

Children's understandings and behaviours are closely interwoven with emotions and temperament and the values and attitudes of those around them. Through ongoing interactions with the important people in their lives (such as family members and educators), children refine social skills such as turn-taking, listening, cooperation and respect to help them build positive relationships and friendships.

Prior to the school years, families have the greatest influence on social development. As children and young people grow older, they become increasingly influenced by peer group values and the behaviours of community role models such as sporting heroes or media personalities.

When adults are fair, caring and respectful, children and young people feel a greater sense of trust and belonging.

Children and young people are more likely to cooperate with adult guidance when they feel valued and respected. By contrast, when they feel they've been treated unfairly, they're less likely to listen and more likely to avoid or resist discipline.

Learning social values

Children and young people's ability to understand others and take their needs and views into account develops over time.

Young children are naturally self-focused

They often play beside, rather than with, other children and tend to think that everyone sees things the same way that they do. In early primary school, children learn that others may see things differently

from them. Then, as their thinking skills and [brain develop](#), children and young people are more able to understand another person's point of view and, finally, to appreciate multiple ways of looking at the same event or situation.

Teaching children how to put themselves in someone else's shoes helps them to relate better to others and manage conflict more effectively. It promotes caring, respect and fairness. Research shows that children and young people who've learnt to value others are more likely to include and appreciate people who are different from them or who are viewed negatively by others.

Be You Professional Learning

Check out content on social and emotional learning (SEL) and teaching for resilience in the [Learning Resilience](#) domain.

References

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2018). Core SEL competencies. Chicago: CASEL. Retrieved from <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>.

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External links

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

[Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child: Serve and Return](#)