

Improving Kids' Social Skills

Learn about the social milestones your child should have at different ages and the activities that can help enhance social development.

Not all kids need help with the same social skills, and what your child needs practice with could vary, depending on her age. "It's important to know the normal developmental skills appropriate for different age groups so you can determine where the help is needed," says Susan Diamond, M.A., a speech-language pathologist and author of *Social Rules for Kids*. The proper social skills that need to be taught can be divided into three stages: determining the social skills that need development, figuring out ways to teach the skills, and reinforcing lessons with the right resources. We'll take you through all three stages and offer examples on how a child struggling with general shyness and social anxiety can become a friendly kid who's comfortable and ready to handle any social situations.

Determining the Stages of Social Development

In general, kids will have developed certain social skills and social cues by these ages:

2- to 3-year-olds: able to seek attention from others, initiate social contact with others both verbally (saying "Hi" and "Bye") and physically,

look at a person who's talking, have the ability to take turns talking, and laugh at silly objects and events.

3- to 4-year-olds: are able to take turns when playing games, treat a doll or stuffed animal as though it's alive, and initiate verbal communication with actual words.

4- to 5-year-olds: are able to show more cooperation with children, use direct requests (like "Stop"), are more prone to tattling, and pretend to be Mom or Dad in fantasy play.

5- to 6-year-olds: are able to please their friends, say "I'm sorry," "Please," and "Thank you," understand bad words and potty language, are more strategic in bargaining, play competitive games, and understand fair play and good sportsmanship.

6- to 7-year-olds: are able to empathize with others (like crying at sad things), are prone to sharing, use posture and gestures, wait for turns and are better losers and less likely to place blame, joke more and listen to others tell their points of view, and maintain and shift/end topics appropriately. At this age, however, they still can't understand the clear difference between right and wrong, and may not take direction well.

Improving Social Development

Play dates are a crucial part of growing up, but kids with social issues can have a hard time making plans. "Having a play date is a great way to introduce your child to the concept of using rules when a friend comes over and to teach him how to be polite to guests," Diamond says. Discuss ahead of time any situation that could be uncomfortable. "Write a plan beforehand. Go over all the different things the kids can do together,

and then have your kid offer his guest three activities to pick from. Have them take turns picking activities from there, to avoid fights and to help teach compromise," Diamond says. "Talk about what you think will happen, what could possibly happen. You can even role-play and practice greetings and manners. If it's necessary, write a script to help reduce your child's stress."

Teach empathy: Run through different scenarios by asking your child how other people might feel when certain things happen, and substitute different situations each time.

Explain personal space: Tell your child that it's important for everyone to have some personal space to feel comfortable, and practice acceptable ways to interact with someone during playtime.

Practice social overtures: Teach kids the proper way to start a conversation, get someone's attention, or join a group of kids who are already playing together. These are all situations that can be discussed and brainstormed at the dinner table, or in the car on the way to school or activities.

Go over taking turns: Sit with your child for at least an hour a day and play with him to explain what it means to wait, take turns, and share.

Reinforcing Specific Social Skills

Activities and games can provide additional help in developing specific skills, and you can reinforce your child's social development and interaction by playing The Name Game and Follow the Leader.

Researchers Sandra Sandy and Kathleen Cochran developed The Name Game to help young children learn the importance of getting someone's

attention before speaking. Have kids sit in a circle and give one kid a ball. Ask him to name another child in the circle, and roll the ball to that child. The recipient then takes his turn, naming another child and rolling the ball, and so on. The classic Follow the Leader game teaches kids about taking turns and practicing patience. Designate either yourself or your child as the leader, and have the follower(s) mimic the leader's actions.

For nonverbal skills: Help kids recognize facial expressions and body language by watching kid-friendly TV shows with the sound off and observe what characters are doing and what certain movements might mean. (Just make sure to follow the media guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which suggests that kids watch TV for a maximum of two hours a day.) "Predict what you think they're saying, and really start [observing] facial gestures," Diamond says. "You can also look through magazines and make collages with different facial expressions, and talk about what the people in those photos might be saying."

For tone: To help kids differentiate a range of tones, "use a tape recorder and record different emotions in your voice and ask your child what they are, then explain how meaning changes with voice change," Diamond recommends. For example, try recording phrases like "I'm angry!" in a loud, emphatic voice and "I feel so sad" in a soft, low, dejected voice.

For attention span If your child has trouble staying on point, pick a topic and say three sentences -- two related to the topic and one random. Then ask your child to pick the sentence that's off-topic. For example, bring up the family dog. Talk about how long he played outside today and what he did at the dog park, and then say something about the weather.

Ask your kid to differentiate between the different sentences. "Also, at the dinner table, have your kid keep track of how many times the topic changes during dinner,"

There are plenty of good apps available that reinforce social skills. "Model Me Going Places" allows kids to look at photos of other children modeling appropriate behavior in certain situations (the hairdresser, doctor, playground), "Responding Social Skills" teaches kids how to respond to others and how to understand others' feelings, and "Small Talk" presents conversation fillers for awkward social moments. But if your child still seems to have difficulty keeping up with the skills she should be developing for her age group, it may be time to give her a little help. "Some children have problems with impulse control and self regulation; some have a problem with processing information." "These issues can lead to [kids] having awkward interactions with peers." So if social issues cause your child fear or make him feel isolated, seek help from your pediatrician or another child expert, such as a therapist.

5 Ways To Improve Your Child's Social Skills

• By Ekta Sharma Bhatnagar

Your little ones face many challenges the day they open their eyes in this material world. Developing social skills and interacting with the world around them will be a critical part of their success and happiness, even more important than their academic results. Are you ready to help them develop the desired social skills?

For example: talking effectively, interacting with strangers, starting a conversation, listening, getting along, being responsible for their behavior, making friends (and keeping them too), dealing with uncomfortable situations, teasing, bullying, awkwardness or unpopularity, bonding, interacting, accepting and finding acceptance, empathizing, and giving compliments, etc.

Some kids are naturally more socially adept than others. Nevertheless, socializing is an art one is mastering every single day of growing up. Teaching your children pick up social skills and communicate well is a big task for parents.

1. Encourage eye-contact

When talking to somebody, encourage your children to look into their eyes and talk for effective communication and to build confidence. Your toddlers may need practice every day to master this art. Try games like 'staring contest,' tell your children to talk to their soft toys, or tell you stories looking into your eyes.

2. Teach them emotions

Let your children imitate a variety of emotions—joy, anger, disappointment, excitement, mischief, weirdness, nervousness, tiredness, terror, danger, etc. Play ‘identify the emotion’ game by making faces or holding placards of different smiley. This helps them differentiate emotions and express better; and not get confused when mingling with other kids or people. “To teach them emotions, it is important that you also communicate to your kids what makes you happy and sad, so when they misbehave I make a straight face and tell them upfront that I am upset.”

3. Make them communicate

Verbal or non-verbal, your children should learn to express, interact, and respond to social stimulus. Help your children learn appropriate greetings and responses. Kids may need help or guidance to interact with others appropriately, to overcome shyness, to manage a response, and express true feelings. Let your children know that they are free to talk, ask, question, and communicate their needs, desires, beliefs and ideas. As parents and grandparents, talk to them every day and make generous use of words like ‘please,’ ‘let’s,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘common,’ etc.

4. Give them the environment

A lonely child may have difficulty in interacting with the world. Give your children good company, exposure, and chances to interact with different types of people. Kids with social skill deficits often have trouble reading expressions and interacting socially. So activities that get them more comfortable with these situations are a great idea. Playschools, hobby classes, playgrounds, sports activities, etc., will give them a chance to socialize. When kids mingle with other kids or elders, they develop a range of interpersonal skills that become the foundation of their personality.

5. Prepare them for higher social skills

A child who can communicate and express himself/herself fearlessly is armed to face the challenges when he/she grows up to tackle complex situations. Let your children maintain good communication channels, and pick up skills like negotiation, conflict resolution, non-verbal communication, assertiveness, bargaining, public-speaking, etc.

I-Contact

Making eye contact while talking to others is both a good manner and a positive character trait. Practice the good habit with kids from an early age.

Supplies:

Stickers that look like eyes

Directions:

- You might look like a funny clown when you're doing this activity but trust us; eye contact is such a desirable quality in kids that you will thank us later!
- Play this game when you are at home, on a lazy day. Stick a pair of eye stickers on your forehead.
- Encourage them to look at the stickers and talk. Kids often fail to make eye contact and talk, so this will be a task that they'll take time to master.
- This social skill activity is a great way to train kids to look in the right direction in a funny, yet less threatening way!



How Do I Feel?

Teach preschoolers the different kinds of human emotions by showing the below images and asking them to guess how each emoticon feels.



Three Social Skill Activities

It's essential to build social skills in kids from an early age. Here is a collection of activities that you can do with them to help them develop various skills such as eye contact, conversation, and storytelling.

Activity 1:

Take your child to the community park which has a swing. Make eye contact with your child as she swings back and forth. Ask them to try and reach you with their left foot if you're standing on her left and right foot if you're standing on the right. This activity will help the child concentrate her focus on you, therefore calming her down. The eye contact will also help the child stay focused.

Activity 2:

Face games make great social skill activities. Touch your forehead and ask your child do the same, pinch your nose and ask him to follow, and lightly box your ears asking him to do the same. This will help the little ones pick up expressions and read them appropriately.

Activity 3:

Storytelling is a crucial social skill. Cut pictures of different emotions from magazines and keep them facing down. Ask your child to pick up and weave a story (a couple of lines -5 lines will also work fine, depending on the child's age) around the emotion. Help your child build his storytelling skills to converse confidently in public.

