

# Caring and Sharing to Last a Lifetime: Helping Children Develop Positive Social Skills

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Getting along with others is an important social skill for everyone. Babies show social skills from the time they are born. From the first time a baby turns to the sound of his mother's voice, young child willingly plays with another child, social skills are being developed.

## Developing Positive Social Skills

It may seem like common sense that children need to get along with others. However, nurturing positive social skills takes time and practice. Skills grow when children have ongoing and steady relationships with their parents, caregivers, teachers, and friends. These skills continue to develop and grow throughout their lives.

Research has shown that a child with positive social skills is more likely to succeed in school and in life. Some children need a lot of help to develop these skills. Research also shows that a child who is not able to interact positively with others tends to be unable to make and keep friends, and may have problems in school (such as acting out, and showing aggressive or violent behaviors).

A child with positive social skills:

- Plays well with others;
- Feels comfortable in her environment;
- Shares and cooperates;
- Takes Turns;
- Identifies and expresses his feelings;
- Shows concern for others.

## Getting Children to Share

Parents of young children know the importance of having good social skills. Play groups and play dates are popular ways for many parents to make sure their young children have the chance to be around other children their own age.

Even though sharing is an important social skill, toddlers and young preschoolers are not developmentally ready to share or wait for long periods of time. Not until the ages of four and five are most children ready to share toys and materials with others. Although you

may want your child to share a toy or take turns with other children when she is very young, she may not be ready. Don't force it.

Your child goes through many social, emotional, physical and mental developmental stages and milestones. Before expecting certain behaviors from your child, check to make sure your expectations are appropriate for his age.

### **Getting Children to Care**

Caring about others and having the ability to understand another person's feelings (empathy) are also important social skills. The first step in a child's ability to care about the feelings and well-being of others is to first be able to be aware and label his own feelings.

You can help your child to identify how they are feeling by using "feeling" words to describe their emotions. ("You seem a little grumpy this morning. Are you tired?") Facial expressions are also a good way to help children learn how certain feelings may look. ("Your mouth is turned down. Are you sad?")

You can make a chart of different facial expressions and label them. This can help your child identify basic emotions, such as: happy, sad, mad, surprised, scared, and tired.

The best way to encourage caring skills is through action. Model caring behavior to your child.

- Let him child see you helping your neighbor carry groceries;
- Take her with you when you volunteer at the community center once a week;
- Let her help you gather glass and plastic items to recycle and explain why you are doing it.

### **Helping Babies and Toddlers Care and Share**

The idea of babies and toddlers sharing may bring a smile to your face. Parents know how unlikely it is for babies and toddlers to share with others, much less care for others. It is much too early to have those kinds of expectations of them. However, you can show them through your words and your actions what caring for and sharing with others is about. Babies and toddlers will imitate the important adults in their lives, and that is you - the parent. So every time you tell your baby "You are very important to me," or "Let me help you put your shoes on," you are teaching him what caring is about. Remember to talk with your baby and toddler as much as possible when you are doing things together or doing even the smallest things. Little ones absorb everything they hear and see, so your words do not go unheard.

<b>AGE</b>	<b>DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES</b>	<b>WHAT YOU CAN DO TO ENCOURAGE SHARING</b>
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2 to 3 years	Able to show awareness of own feelings and those of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Using words that encourage sharing:</b> "I'll cut this sandwich in two pieces so that both you and Jeremy can have a slice."</li> <li>• <b>Modeling sharing:</b> Let your child see you share on a regular basis. Talk about sharing too. "I'm going to let Mr. Ray use my extra umbrella so that he won't get wet in the rain."</li> </ul>
3 to 4 years	Able to talk about feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Not requiring long periods of waiting, if possible:</b> Plan trips to the store when there are likely to be less people there. Have toys or other items for your child to play with if waiting is needed.</li> <li>• <b>Having duplicates of favorite toys:</b> Have two or more copies of popular toys for toddlers and young preschoolers to avoid struggles. Child care providers and teachers already use this strategy.</li> </ul>
4 to 5 years	Ready to share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Providing experiences and materials that encourage creative or pretend play:</b> Social skills take practice, practice, practice. Give your child open-ended materials such as play dough, finger paints, dolls, and safe items around the house that they can use in pretend play. Children love to act out real-life situations, such as going to the doctor or writing and mailing a letter.</li> </ul>

### When It's More Than "Just a Phase"

Being able to manage your feelings is an important part of social and emotional development. Some children have a hard time understanding and controlling their feelings. Children who do not know how to talk yet or how to self-regulate their feelings and behaviors may bite, hit, threaten others, throw things, and so on.

If your child consistently behaves in ways that go beyond the typical tantrums or meltdowns of a toddler, you may need to see your pediatrician to rule out any physical causes. There is a lot of research and support available for parents who have children with challenging behaviors. Your pediatrician or family doctor should be able to help you get the support you need.

Learning to care and share are lifelong social skills that grow as we do. Remember, all children do not develop at the same pace, but they all have the capability to learn how to get along with others and develop positive relationships. Helping children develop positive social skills could be the most important skills they'll ever learn, and the most rewarding.

### **Reading to Your Child**

Knowing how to identify feelings is important. You can help your child to learn to identify feelings by reading to them. Point to the pictures and characters and say, "He is sad. He lost his bunny." Comment on the character's feelings and show empathy. "He is so sad. Aw, I hope he'll feel better once he finds it."