



Social and Emotional Development

parentingmontana.org/social-and-emotional-development

Listen to an audio file of this resource.

Introduction

Healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development is important for young people to lead meaningful, productive, and engaged lives.¹ Research suggests healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development is shaped by genetic, biological, social, and environmental factors that influence all stages of development (even before conception).¹ “Children’s social and physical environments literally shape their brains and consequently the behaviors and emotions they learn.”¹

There are many strategies that can promote and strengthen healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development. One powerful strategy is to grow social and emotional skills.¹ Social and emotional skills include understanding and managing oneself, relating to others, and making responsible choices based on self and others. In this document, social and emotional development is defined; the benefits of growing social and emotional skills are explored; and examples are provided of the many ways that you as a parent or someone in a parenting role can support your child’s social and emotional skill development.

Social and Emotional Development Defined

Social and emotional development can be defined as how people learn skills to understand and manage how they act, how they relate to others, and how they make responsible choices. These skills include being able to understand and control emotions, understand and care about others, and make good decisions. These skills also include behaving responsibly and with good intentions, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and avoiding negative behaviors.^{2,3}

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) created a framework that includes five social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Within each of the five competencies are a collection of skills that can be developed and strengthened throughout the lifespan. The competencies and skills can be grouped into three categories: Self (those focused on understanding and managing one’s own emotions), Others (those focused on relating to others), and Choices Based on Self and Others (those focused on decision making). Table 1 summarizes the social and emotional competencies and skills within these three categories.

Table 1. Social and Emotional Competences and Skills

Self

Competency: Self-Awareness

Others

Competency: Social-Awareness

Choices Based on Self and Others

Competency: Responsible Decision Making

The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions, thoughts, values, and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

Skills: identifying emotions, accurate self-perception, recognizing strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy

Competency: Self-Management

The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations – effectively manage stress, control impulses, and motivate oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

Skills: impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, organizational skills

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Skills: perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity, respect for others

Competency: Relationship Skills

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

Skills: communication, social engagement, relationship-building, teamwork

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the wellbeing of oneself and others.

Skills: identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, ethical responsibility

[CASEL, 2019](#)

Growing social and emotional skills is developmental. As children develop, so do their social and emotional skills. For example, young children are just learning to see themselves as individuals. They are developing the understanding that they can have their own thoughts and feelings and that someone else can have different thoughts and feelings. This is key for children to learn empathy, an important skill in social awareness. Much of a child's learning is based on interactions with others in their environment. As a parent or someone in a parenting role, promoting your child's social growth and supporting their independence are essential. This teaches key social and emotional skills like self-awareness and self-regulation.

Social and emotional skills can be taught and practiced in everyday real life situations. They are best learned in a social setting taught by parents, those in a parenting role, teachers, siblings, and peers. Social and emotional development is a lifelong process. It starts at birth and continues throughout adulthood. For example, the skill of self-management is learned when a child can control their emotions and wait their turn. This same skill is learned as an adult when an adult can control their emotions when faced with inappropriate behavior from their child or from their colleague at work.

Social and emotional skills are often learned through modeling, as children watch their parents or those in a parenting role practice and model self-awareness and self-management skills or express empathy. As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you can model these skills not only for your children but also for coworkers and other family members.

Social and Emotional Skills Are Essential

The benefits of strong social and emotional skills are evident for both children and adults. Social and emotional skills are associated with improved behavior,^{4,5} lower levels of emotional stress,^{4,5} and positive wellbeing.⁵ Social and emotional skills are also associated with doing better in school^{5,6} and obtaining a stable full-time job.⁷ Having social and emotional skills can help avoid unfavorable situations later in life such as being arrested by police and substance misuse.⁷

These positive outcomes from social and emotional development continue into adulthood. Developing social and emotional skills in adults can increase their success at work, help them achieve career and personal goals, and receive higher pay. These skills can also help adults be more creative, have healthier relationships, better manage stress, and achieve greater self-awareness.^{5,8,9,10}

While the value of growing social and emotional skills to strengthen healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development is evident, research shows that strengthening social and emotional skills has economic value as well. In a cost-benefit analysis of six programs designed to grow social and emotional skills, it was found that every \$1 invested produced an \$11 return.⁹



Tip

By supporting social and emotional skill development, you as a parent or someone in a parenting role can directly impact your child's healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development.

Social and emotional skill development results in an enhanced work ethic, healthier family relationships, better job performance, and improved health across the lifespan.

Ways to Support Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional skills are developed through relationships, interactions, and ongoing social situations. As a parent or someone in a parenting role, there are many ways that you can support your child's social and emotional skill development and ultimately improve their mental, emotional, and behavioral health. Some ways include:

- Build Awareness
- Model the Skills
- Focus on Decision Making
- Practice

Build Awareness

Increasing social and emotional awareness in your daily life is the first step in developing social and emotional skills. This means noticing when your child is doing something right and letting them know that you noticed. Building awareness might look like:

- **Recognize Cues (Facial Expressions, Movements, and Sounds) and Respond** – For example, if your infant is rubbing their eyes and yawning, offer to rock or cuddle and then put them down for a nap. (e.g., *“You are rubbing your eyes and yawning. It makes me think you might be tired. Lets cuddle for a minute and then take a nap.”*) If your child has a sad facial expression, name the feeling and respond with empathy. (*“You seem really upset about this. Are you feeling sad?”*)
- **Notice and Name the Skill You Want to Develop** – Start to notice when your child demonstrates any level of social and emotional skills. Then, name the skills (*“I notice you are moving toward the toy that you want. Great problem solving”* or *“I just noticed you pause and reflect for a second before you responded to your brother.”*), so that your child can start to identify what the skills are right after they demonstrate them.
- **Ask Your Child to Name the Skill** – Ask your child to name the skill (e.g., *“Your sister just did something different, what did you notice her do?”*) or ask your child to notice what they did (e.g., *“You used a great skill right now; what did you notice you did?”* or *“That conversation went really well; why do you think that is?”*). Having your child connect the behavior with the social and emotional skill will help them build awareness.

Model the Skills

Social and emotional skills are developed through watching others and learning from their behavior. As adults, you are constantly modeling for those around you, whether it's your children, coworkers, or family members. This doesn't mean that you must be perfect. What it does mean is that when you make mistakes, you should talk about them with your children.

Talking about mistakes and learning from them cultivates a growth mindset. Having a growth mindset is important when supporting your child's social and emotional development. Having a growth mindset

means believing that skills and abilities can be learned and improved continuously. Information and feedback are pathways to learning and not a reflection of a person's value or worth. Actions then become experiments, and failure can be a pathway to learning.

This means that as a parent or someone in a parenting role, you don't always have to do things right. Admitting mistakes and being willing to recognize and apologize for the impact your actions have on others are opportunities to grow important skills in your children. When you admit failure without delay and are willing to apologize, your children are more likely to develop a growth mindset and develop their own social and emotional skills.

- *"I am going to step back and take a minute to think through this."*
- *"I can only imagine how upset you are right now, so I am just going to listen to you, so I hear you fully."*

Focus on Decision Making

Improved social and emotional skills develop healthier decision making. Therefore, it is helpful for you to focus on how your child makes decisions. For young children, find opportunities to support their decision making by giving them choices, *"Would you like blueberries or a banana for your snack?"* For older children, get curious about the thinking process involved in their decision making. Ask your child what their thought process was and whether the outcome was positive or negative. It can be as simple as asking, *"Why did you make that decision?"* or *"What did you consider when you made that decision?"* or *"What were some of the consequences you thought about when you made that decision?"* This will help you highlight any gaps in their decision making. If you do this on a regular basis, it will increase the likelihood that your child will slow down and pay more attention to their decision making.

Practice

Social and emotional skills do not always come easily. In high stress situations, it is tough to maintain self-awareness and to express empathy. In a high-drama conversation with your child, it can be tough for you both to engage in a calm and supportive discussion. Therefore, it is very important that social and emotional skills are practiced every day. The more these skills are practiced, the more natural they feel, and the greater the likelihood they will be used in high-stress situations. Intentional practice means being deliberate about trying a social and emotional skill you want to develop. Once you get better at a skill, try adding the next skill.

- *"It sounds like you have some ideas about how to respond to your friend. Try it with me, and I will pretend I am your friend. What specifically would you say?"*
- *"Let's redo that conversation and try it a little differently."*

Closing

Many strategies can be used to promote and strengthen healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development; one such strategy is to grow social and emotional skills.¹ Developing social and emotional skills helps you understand yourself and others and achieve your goals. From birth to adulthood, these skills are developed by building awareness, improving decision making, and practicing. In childhood, social and emotional skills support success in school and improve wellbeing. In adulthood, these skills will facilitate improved work performance and higher pay.^{5, 10, 11}

Download and print the at-a-glance resource highlighting key information for [Social and Emotional Development](#).

References

- [1] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *Fostering Healthy Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Development in Children and Youth: A National Agenda*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25201>
- [2] Elias, M. (2007). *What is social and emotional learning?* Retrieved from Institute for Social and Emotional Learning website: <http://www.instituteforsel.org/why-sel>
- [3] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2019). *What is SEL?* Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>
- [4] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- [5] Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156–1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
- [6] Zins, J., Bloodworth, M., Weissberg, R., & Walberg, H. (2007). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success: *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17, (2-3). 191-210. doi:10.1080/10474410701413145
- [7] Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., & Crowley, M. (2015). Early Social-Emotional Functioning and Public Health: The Relationship Between Kindergarten Social Competence and Future Wellness. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(11), 2283–2290. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630>
- [8] Domitrovich, C., Durlak, J.A., Staley, K., & Weissberg, R. (2017). Social-emotional competence: An essential factor for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in school children. *Child Development*, 88(2), 408-416.
- [9] Donelan-McCall, N., & Olds, D. (2012). *Prenatal/postnatal home visiting programs and their impact on the social and emotional development of young children (0-5)*. Retrieved from <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/home-visiting/according-experts/prenatalpostnatal-home-visiting-programs-and-their-impact-social-and>
- [10] Cherniss, C., Goleman, D., Emmerling, R., Cowan, K., & Adler, M. (1998). *Bringing emotional intelligence to the workplace: A technical report issued by the consortium for research on emotional intelligence in organizations*. Retrieved from http://www.eiconsortium.org/reports/technical_report.html
- [11] Oden, K., Lohani, M., McCoy, M., Crutchfield, J., & Rivers, S. (2015). Embedding emotional intelligence into military training contexts. *Procedia Manufacturing*, 3, 4052-4059.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Social and Emotional Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>

ParentingMontana.org was supported [in part] by CFDA 93.959 and 93.243 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative (PDG B-5), Grant Number 90TP0026-01-00, from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and by the Montana State General Fund. The views and opinions contained do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the Montana Department of Health and Human Services, and should not be construed as such.