

# Social and Emotional Health

A Guide for Families with Children Birth to Age 8



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Brought to you by the  
Michigan Great Start Systems Team:

Michigan Department of Community Health  
Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start  
Michigan Department of Human Services  
Early Childhood Investment Corporation

*Special note: Throughout this guide the term “parents” is used to refer to any adult that is living with and caring for young children birth to age 8 such as grandparents, guardians, biological parents and foster parents.*



## Social and Emotional Health: A Guide for Families with Children Birth to Age 8

As parents, we want to help our children succeed in school. We want them to grow up and have good jobs and happy lives. Experts say that if we want our young children to do well in school and life, we should be teaching them all kinds of things before they even get to Kindergarten.

Exactly what should we be teaching our young children so they will be ‘ready to learn?’ Most parents believe we need to focus on helping children learn to read, write their names, identify shapes and colors and count to 20 and beyond. These skills are important for young children to learn.

However, there are other very critical skills a child needs to have in order to be ready to learn. These are called social and emotional skills. This booklet is for parents who want to help their children (birth to eight) to be socially and emotionally healthy so they are ready to:

- make and keep friends,
- express how they feel in safe ways and,
- learn throughout life.

# What is Social and Emotional Health?

Social and Emotional health is a young child's growing ability to:

1. Form close relationships with other people, especially parents and other familiar caregivers (social skills). For example, depending on his age, the child:

- Enjoys interacting with others
- Trusts others to protect him
- Seeks and responds to attention from others
- Makes and keeps friends
- Shows kindness towards others

2. Express and manage emotions (emotional skills). For example, depending on her age, the child:

- Shows many emotions (smiles when happy, cries when sad, says how she feels, etc.)
- Turns to parent or other caregiver when scared or unsure
- Calms down when upset without hurting self or others
- Works through conflicts with others

3. Explore new environments. For example, depending on his age, the child:

- Actively explores people, places and things around him
- Takes on challenges
- Is able to stick with a task

Children who are not socially and emotionally skilled may have trouble making friends and adjusting to school.



## How Does Social and Emotional Health Affect Readiness for Learning?

Teachers say that social and emotional skills are the foundation for learning. In the early years, many teachers say social and emotional skills are even more important than “the ABC’s and 1, 2, 3’s.”

Children do well in school if they can:

- Get along with others
- Make friends
- Share and take turns
- Care about how other people feel
- Communicate feelings
- Calm themselves when upset
- Ask for what they need

Children with the skills above are better able to:

- Pay attention to the teacher
- Follow simple instructions
- Stay in their seats
- Stick with the task at hand
- Try new things
- Solve problems

Children who can follow directions and finish tasks get better grades. They are eager to learn and adjust to school more easily. They like school because they feel confident and secure. Confident and secure children have better self-esteem and can do things on their own. They are able to have healthy relationships later in life and bounce back from life’s disappointments.

Children who are not as socially and emotionally skilled may have trouble making friends and adjusting to school. If it is hard for them to express themselves, they may withdraw from others or ‘take their feelings out on others’ by biting, hitting, screaming, using unkind words or bullying. As a result, their classmates may avoid or tease them. If they cannot follow directions and stick with tasks, school becomes a struggle. They do not feel good about school or themselves, making it even harder for them to learn.

## How Can I tell if My Child is Socially and Emotionally Healthy?

Here are some signs of social and emotional health that you can look for in your own infant, toddler, preschooler, and school-age child:

### Young Infants (birth to 12 months):

- Cry, coo and smile
- Look at faces
- Accept comfort from a familiar adult
- Seek comfort
- Show excitement
- Show curiosity about other people

### Older Infants (12 months to 18 months):

- Explore with enthusiasm
- Are curious about other people
- Laugh out loud
- Enjoy books, songs and simple games
- Express many feelings (sad, happy, scared, angry, etc.)



### Toddlers (18 months to 3 years):

- Show shyness in unfamiliar places
- Smile and laugh
- Enjoy simple books and games
- Are playful with others
- Begin protesting and saying “No”
- Express many feelings (sad, happy, scared, angry, etc.)
- May use a blanket or toy for comfort when upset

### Preschoolers (3 to 5 years):

- Begin to show feelings for others
- Express many feelings (sad, happy, scared, angry, etc.)
- Listen to gentle reminders
- Accept changes in routines
- Try new things
- Show curiosity about people and things
- Make up imaginary games and may enjoy imaginary play with others
- Ask many questions: who, what, where, when, why, how?

### School-Age Children (5 to 8 years):

- Begin to work independently
- Start to see the point-of-view of others
- Show respect and kindness to others
- Develop and keep friendships
- Think through their actions
- Talk through problems to solve them
- Enjoy challenges
- Focus attention and take the time needed to complete tasks

# As a Busy Parent, What Can I Do To Support My Child's Social and Emotional Health?

Many parents think that kids just naturally know how to get along with others and manage their emotions, not true. Adults must guide young children to learn these skills. Much of this social and emotional learning happens before kids enter Kindergarten, starting at birth. This means parents are very important teachers when it comes to social and emotional learning.

The good news is that many of the things you do every day with your child can help her learn these skills without taking extra time, effort or money! You can begin to do most of the things as soon as your baby is born. Here are some examples:

## Birth to age 5

### 1. Gently hold and cuddle your child often.

Hold them close when reading a story, rock them gently when they are tired and give a loving hug when you are sharing a fun activity together. This will help your young child to bond with you. Physical touch can also generate brain connections that will support all areas of your child's development helping them to walk, talk, learn and love.

### 2. Respond to your child's efforts to communicate with you.

When your infant coos, coo back. When he looks at you, make eye contact and talk with him. When he lifts his arms up to you, pick him up and let him know you are happy to hold him. When your toddler or preschooler wants to tell you something, get down to her level and take time to listen. These immediate responses tell your child that his communications are important and effective. This will encourage him to continue to develop these skills. He will learn to be a good listener and a good communicator with the people in his life.



**3. Enrich your child's daily routines (e.g., meal, bath and nap times) by making eye contact and sharing smiles, conversations, stories and books.**

These day-to-day interactions are a way for you and your child to continue building strong ties to each other. This is very important. If your child has a good relationship with you, she will be able to have good relationships with other people throughout her life. For example, reading books to your child while you are snuggling together will help her learn to read later on. This is true even if she is too young to understand the words right now.

**4. Take time to follow your child's lead. Join her in one-on-one play and talk with her about her activities whenever possible.**

Making time to get down on the floor and play with your child gives her a sense of safety and encourages her to take initiative and explore. Really listening to your child makes her feel understood and tells her that she is important to you.

**5. Gently guide your child through social situations.**

Babies love to look at other babies. Toddlers and preschoolers learn to socialize by practicing with help from caring adults. If you support your child in social situations, he will learn how to make friends and get along with others. As you acknowledge the range of feelings he experiences during peer interactions, he learns to recognize and successfully use those feelings. This is an important first step in teaching children to handle conflicts.

**6. Be sure your expectations match what your child is socially and emotionally ready to do.**

When a parent expects a child to do something that he is not ready to do, it is frustrating for both parent and child. For example, a parent may expect her 2-year-old to share his toys. When he refuses, she gets angry. She does not know that most 2-year-olds are not ready to share. If she keeps insisting on it, they both become very upset. The child may even start to feel bad about himself. (How would you feel if your loved one kept demanding that you do something you just do not have the ability to do?) What you can expect from a 2-year-old is different from what you can expect from an older or younger child. That is why it is so important for parents to know about social and emotional development at every age.



## Age 5 to 8

### 1. Be consistent.

Make clear rules and stick with them. Follow-through on what you say you will do. Children learn best through kind, consistent words and actions. Children need to believe that you mean what you say. This helps them learn to trust you. Trust helps you better guide your child to positive actions.

### 2. Be open and honest with your child.

Understand that your child values what you think and say. When your child asks a question, or seems unsure, watch and listen carefully. Respond in a way that your child will understand. For example, if you are dropping off your child at school rather than leaving when they cannot see you, you could say, “Daddy sees you frowning. I have to go to work now; I will be back at three to pick you up. Ms. Johnson will take good care of you.” As your child grows, they will continue to feel safe coming to you with worries, fears, or questions.

### 3. Model the words and actions you want to see in your child.

You are helping shape your child’s behavior by the ways you live your life. Children watch and listen as you use manners, handle problems, and talk through frustration. They are likely to copy these actions/words. Be as positive as you can, and set a good example for your child to follow.

#### **4. Get involved.**

Show an interest in your child's projects, friends, and activities. Ask questions and listen closely to the answers. Encourage and respond to your child. They will learn that you care about things that are important to them.

#### **5. Let your child make mistakes.**

We all learn from mistakes. If you rescue your child before every mistake, you may limit learning. For example, if your child is helping you to pour water into cups for dinner and some spills onto the table and floor, let them take time to problem-solve before giving advice. Children begin to feel empowered when their own actions lead to positive change.

#### **6. Show affection.**

Children often seek acceptance from friends and important adults in their lives. At this age, your child is learning the behaviors that help him make and keep friends. Use multiple ways to show affection through a high five, a pat on the back, sharing a smile, a gentle hug or kind words such as, "Way to go!" Be sure not to tie your kindness as a reward or withhold it as a punishment. This confuses children and may make it difficult for them to form healthy relationships.

#### **7. Encourage responsibility and independence.**

Encourage your child to take on a few tasks around the house. This might include keeping themselves clean and helping to put things back after they are used. Provide initial support so your child can eventually do these things by themselves. This sets children up to respect themselves and his belongings and also, builds confidence.

#### **8. Help your child speak up for herself.**

Help your child to speak up for herself when unkind or unsafe things happen to them or others. Offer options when someone treats her in an unkind way, for example, you might help her to say, "No, I don't like that," "Please stop," or ask an adult for help. All children need to learn that they are to be treated with respect and kindness.

# Important Tips for Parents with Children of All Ages

## 1. Celebrate your child's strengths.

Every child has things that make him special. Talk about what your child enjoys and what he is good at doing. Enjoy your child's company and celebrate what makes him one-of-a kind.

## 2. When your child "acts up," try to uncover the real reason for her behavior.

A young child does not "act up" because she's "bad." She "acts up" because there is something going on with her that she cannot handle or put into words yet. She may be scared, frustrated, hungry, sick, tired, or sad – there are many possibilities. If you can find out what is causing these feelings, you can help meet her needs and reduce the troubling behavior.

## 3. Do not let your child witness family violence. Do not let anyone physically abuse or hurt your child with words.

This type of trauma is very painful for young children. It can cause life-long mental and physical health problems such as depression and obesity.

## 4. Take care of your own social-emotional health.

All parents of young children feel stressed at times. Young children need so much care and parents have to juggle so many responsibilities. It seems impossible to take time for yourself. But you must. If you are always stressed out, your family will pay the price. If you are going through divorce, depression, unemployment, illness, or some other difficult situation, it is even more important for you to seek the support you need. Talk to your doctor, or someone you trust. Taking care of yourself is taking care of your kids.



## How Does Discipline Affect the Social and Emotional Health of Young Children?

All children need discipline to learn how to behave and get along with others. However, there are different kinds of discipline. Punishment is a well-known kind of discipline. It involves doing something that the child will not like after he misbehaves so he won't do it again. Punishment does not teach the child what he should be doing instead of the "bad" behavior. Positive discipline is different. It involves guiding a child to learn the "good" behavior we want her to use to replace the "bad" behavior. Positive discipline is better than punishment for a child's social and emotional health.

### Positive Discipline with Infants

Disciplining infants is really about protecting them from harm. Infants are "wired" to touch and explore things. They are too young to understand what danger is or how dangerous something might be. All they know is that an object looks attractive and they just have to touch it, taste it, or try it out. So, if you do not want your baby to stick his fingers in the electrical outlets, you put safety caps on them. If you do not want her to crawl upstairs, you put up a baby gate. If you do not want him to explore a dangerous place, you gently remove him.

### Positive Discipline with Toddlers and Preschoolers

Toddlers are busy exploring the world, trying new things on their own, and saying "no"! This stage can be fun and rewarding as well as challenging. It is not easy to deal with toddlers having temper tantrums — hitting, biting, kicking and screaming.

Preschoolers are learning to separate from their parents. They have wild imaginations and enjoy acting silly. They often develop fears and struggle to gain inner control over their emotions.

Toddlers and preschoolers will test the patience of their parents over and over again. There is no getting around it. It is very important for a parent to calm himself before disciplining a child. When a parent is angry and frustrated, it's just too easy to cross the line and say and do things that could harm the child physically or emotionally.

There are 4 steps to positive discipline with toddlers and preschoolers. The parent:

1. Calms self
2. Sets clear, firm limits
3. Gently enforces the limits and teaches the positive behavior
4. Follows through consistently

For example, when a toddler throws a toy in the house, the parent:

1. Takes a deep breath and counts to three.
2. Says, "You may not throw the toy in the house - it's not safe and you might break something."
3. We can play with the toy together on the floor or you can throw some bean bags in the bin.
4. Does the same thing every time the child throws a toy in the house (redirects and gives a choice).

## Positive Discipline with School-Age Children

The guidelines are similar to the above for school-age children. The parent:

1. Calms self
2. States the limit or rule that was broken
3. Discusses the rule and the consequences
4. Follows through with consequences
5. Guide the child in problem-solving

## Working through Problems Together

Remember, school-age children are starting to learn to solve problems. They are learning to think independently, and make decisions for themselves. They can play a more active part in the positive discipline process as they learn that their actions can hurt others.

Together you are trying to learn how a situation could be handled better next time.

Let your child do as much of her own problem-solving as possible. Ask open-ended questions, “What is another way you could have handled that?” “What might have worked better?” Help your child understand how each person felt during a conflict.

Discuss:

- what your child could have done instead
- what can be done differently next time, and
- how your child could help the other person feel better

It is helpful not to force an apology. Instead, ask how your child can make things better when he is ready. Most children forgive quite easily. They may just need a little time to calm down and think. Even when mistakes are made, the outcome can be a learning moment, and one that brings you closer as a family.

**For children of all ages, the bottom line on discipline is this:**

- If a parent doesn't set any limits (lets the child do whatever he wants), the child does not learn how to get along with others. This is not good for the child's social and emotional health.
- If a parent enforces limits by spanking or calling the child hurtful names, the child focuses on his pain and humiliation, not on how to behave differently. He also learns that it is okay for adults to hurt children. This is not good for the child's social and emotional health.
- If a parent enforces limits with gentle, firm, consistent, positive discipline, the child knows he is loved and is expected to do better next time. This is good for the child's social and emotional health. It is also much better for the parent-child relationship.

For more information about positive discipline, visit your local library to read:

- *Discipline: The Brazelton Way*. T. Berry Brazelton & Joshua D. Sparrow
- *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years: From Infant to Toddler: Laying the Foundation for Raising a Capable, Confident Child*. Jane Nelson, Cheryl Erwin & Roslyn Ann Duffy

Or check out reliable websites such as:

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children's section for families at: [www.families.naeyc.org](http://www.families.naeyc.org)
- Zero to Three at: [www.zerotothree.org/child-development](http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development)

# What if I have Concerns about My Child's Social and Emotional Health?

Here are some signs that your child may have social and emotional health concerns:

## Your Infant:

- Resists holding
- Is difficult to comfort
- Has sleeping or eating problems
- Rarely seeks or makes eye contact
- Doesn't seem to respond when people try to interact with her
- Shows any loss of language or social skills

## Your Toddler or Preschooler:

- Shows little preference for any one adult
- Shows no fear of strangers
- Appears very irritable or fearful
- Lacks interest in other people or playthings
- Has extreme and frequent tantrums
- Often appears sad or withdrawn
- Shows any loss of language or social skills





### Your School-Age Child (5-8):

- Does not seem interested in forming friendships
- Talks poorly about herself and/or others often
- Struggles with doing things on his own
- Has a hard time controlling her anger
- Acts nervous or clingy in new situations
- Lies or cheats
- Is easily distracted, so that her school work suffers
- Has a hard time adjusting to simple changes in the daily routine such as having a substitute teacher, or not being able to wear their favorite shirt.
- Has difficulty understanding feelings of others
- Shows feelings that do not match the situation, for example, laughing when they are injured.

If you see any of these signs or have questions, contact one of the following to find help in your area.

- Talk to your child's doctor.
- If your child is in school, talk to your child's teacher, principal or school social worker

Or, contact one of these programs below:

- **Early On® Michigan (birth to 36 months)**  
1-800-EARLY ON  
[www.1800earlyon.org](http://www.1800earlyon.org)
- **Project Find (children 3-8)**  
[www.ProjectFindMIchigan.org](http://www.ProjectFindMIchigan.org)  
1-800-252-0052
- **Mental Health:** Find your local community mental health service provider by calling 211
- **Great Start Initiative**  
[www.ecic4kids.org](http://www.ecic4kids.org)
- **Great Start (birth to age 5)**  
[www.migreatparents.org](http://www.migreatparents.org)

# Where Can I Learn More about Social and Emotional Development?

For more information, check out the organizations below:

## Bright Futures

A national initiative focusing on promoting the overall health of children. Find information about child development here:  
[www.brightfutures.aap.org/Family\\_Resources.html](http://www.brightfutures.aap.org/Family_Resources.html)

## The Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

A national resource center to promote social-emotional health and school readiness for children birth to age 5.  
[www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel)

## Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

A national resource center created to develop and share strategies to help Head Start programs build a strong mental health foundation for their children, families and staff.  
[www.ecmhc.org](http://www.ecmhc.org)

## Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health (MI-AIMH)

A state association to promote the social and emotional well-being of all babies and toddlers. MI-AIMH has two developmental wheels for sale at a nominal price:

- o Baby Stages - A Parent's and Caregiver's Guide to Social and Emotional Development of Infants and Toddlers (Spanish and English language versions available)
- o Preschool Stages - A Parent's and Professional's Guide to Social and Emotional Development in the Preschool Years  
(734) 785-7700, ext. 7194, [www.mi-aimh.org](http://www.mi-aimh.org)

## Zero to Three

A national organization to support the healthy development and well-being of infants, toddlers and their families.  
[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)



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Mary Mackrain & Mary Ludtke, Michigan Department of Community Health,  
Division of Mental Health Services to Children and Families

Linda Dann, Project LAUNCH, Michigan Department of Community Health,  
Division of Family and Community Health

Deb Marciniak, Michigan Public Health Institute

Kelly Hurshe, Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start

Claire Vallotton, Michigan State University

Taryn Mack, Copper Country Community Mental Health

Cathy Benda, Copper Country Great Start Collaborative

Dalia Smith, Saginaw County Community Mental Health Parent Liaison

Jennifer Champagne & Karen Anthony, Oakland Schools

Karen Cairone, Consultant

Michigan Department  
of Community Health



Rick Snyder, Governor  
James K. Haveman, Director



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powered by the  
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