



# 36 months *to* 48 months

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

*How are children learning about feelings and relationships?*

### OVERVIEW

How children think about and manage

- themselves,
- their feelings and behavior, and
- their relationships

is what we call *social-emotional development*.

The development of these skills is as important in children's success in school as are other skills, such as language and literacy and mathematics.

During the first five years of age, children are learning how to

- manage their own behavior,
- recognize, express and manage their feelings,
- notice and respond in caring ways to the feelings of others,
- interact with friends,
- be a member of a group, and
- develop close relationships with adults, including parents, other family members, and teachers.

Children learn these social-emotional skills in close relationships with adults through back-and-forth communication, shared experiences and nurturing guidance. Play is also central to helping children learn these skills. Through play, children practice their social skills, explore feelings, try on new behaviors and get feedback from others. Play allows children to learn more about themselves and others and develop their communication and interaction skills.



### Introduction

*What is my child learning about themselves and their feelings?*

Your four-year-old is enthusiastic about doing things herself. She may refuse your help, even if she is struggling and frustrated. She has lots of ways to describe herself and her skills. “I’m four now!” “I’m bigger.” “I like to draw.” “I know how to ride a scooter!” She may celebrate her accomplishments with a cheer. She has developed a few ways to help herself calm down when distressed, but sometimes needs the support and comfort of her adults to help her soothe herself. She can start cleaning up by herself, sometimes without being asked. She can think about how she has changed. “I used to be three, but now I’m four!”

He can express and describe feelings such as “sad,” “mad,” and “afraid,” can explain what caused them, and may be able to ask for specific comfort. He can also describe the feelings of other children and sometimes identify the reason they feel that way. “Theo is sad because Laurene knocked down his blocks.” He can offer comfort and show empathy for others sometimes, especially if he wasn’t directly involved in the conflict.

*What are they learning about other people and relationships?*

- Friendships are important to children’s success in school and in life. Their growing ability to communicate and negotiate with their friends allows them to play for longer periods of time and to engage in more complex kinds of play.
- They are beginning to notice and describe differences between themselves and others. “Nona’s hair is brown and mine is black.”
- They may be developing special friendships with certain children and may use the words “best friend.”
- They are still learning what “friendship” means and may think that if they are mad at someone, they aren’t friends anymore.
- They have some skills to enter play with other children. They might watch for awhile, start playing beside others, or ask if they can play—for example, suggesting that they could be the “sister” in the pretend family play.



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- They have some negotiation skills and might use them to resolve a conflict with friends. They are sometimes able to share toys and materials in play with other children, but will still engage in negotiations about “who had it first” and “how long the turn will be.”
- They can give directions to others in play—for example, “You have to be the daddy”—and sometimes take directions from others. But other times they might get upset and threaten that if people don’t play by their rules, they can’t come to their birthday party.
- They can participate in group activities with several other children, but may not be always able to wait for their turn to talk. They like to know what will be happening and if given information about an upcoming transition, may be able to participate cooperatively.
- Parents and teachers are very important to them as sources of comfort and information, but they may resist adult direction, saying, “You’re not the boss of me.” They seem eager to make all the decisions and have to “test” regularly to see if the adult is still in charge of a decision. They are beginning to be able to follow the rules, even if there isn’t an adult nearby, but sometimes need to be reminded about the rules.

### ***Tips to support your child learning about himself as a person, learning about his feelings and learning about other people***

#### ***Learning about self as a person***

- She likes to feel “independent.” Taking time with routines so your child can do some of the things by herself lets her know you think she is capable and gives her practice with new skills.

*Taking time with routines so your child can do some of the things by herself lets her know you think she is capable and gives her practice with new skills.*

- She may want to pick out her own clothes, as well as dress and undress herself.
- She likes to help with household tasks like cooking, gardening, sorting the laundry, setting the table, putting toys away or helping wash the car.



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- In his attempt to be “grown up” he may resist doing what you ask her to. Even when you need to stop him or set a limit, you can let him know you understand his idea. If he refuses to turn off the TV, even after you have given him a warning, you can talk with him, acknowledge his feelings, suggest when he can watch again, and give him a choice about how to end the activity.
  - “It’s time to turn off the TV now.” (positive limit)
  - “I know you love to watch this program.” (acknowledging her idea)
  - “After we turn it off, we can make a plan for when you can watch it next.” (closed-ended choice)
  - “Can you turn it off yourself or shall I help you?” (closed-ended choice)
  - “Let’s find another fun activity to do—maybe something where you get to move around and be active or maybe something where you could write your own story.” (open-ended choice)

### ***Learning about own feelings***

- Ask her about feelings.
  - “How are you feeling now?”
  - “Look at the boy in the book. How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think he is feeling like that?”
- Help him to understand his feelings by offering names for them when he doesn’t have words for them.
  - “It looks like you are feeling sad.”
  - “It can be frustrating when you try to build a tower and it keeps falling down.”
  - “I can see how excited you are to go to your friend’s house.”
- Make time regularly to talk about feelings.
  - “How was your day? What were you happy about? Did you get mad about anything? Was there anything sad that happened? What was your favorite part of the day?”
  - When she shares her feelings and experiences with you, you can listen to her ideas and talk to her about them.





## How are children learning about feelings and relationships?

### SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Help him to find safe ways to express his feelings.
  - “It looks like you are angry with your friend. Can you tell her what you are angry about?”
  - “If you are mad and want to hit something, you can hit this cushion, but it’s not safe to hit your friend.”
  - When your child is fearful, stay close and offer comfort. Sometimes your child doesn’t want to be taken away from the scary situation, but wants you to be there to help. If he is afraid of the neighbor’s friendly dog, you can squat down next to him, holding him, and talk about the dog. Often, your presence and some information and safe interaction will help him feel less afraid. If he wants to move away, take your cues from him. Sometimes taking a photo of the scary thing and letting your child hold and talk about the photo will help him with his fear.
  - You can make the photos into a book or ask him if he wants to draw pictures and help make his pictures into a book (stapling it together). When the pictures or photos are in a little book, he might want to tell you some words to write about the pictures. Reading this book with him can help him learn to manage his fears.
- Let her know that all her feelings are healthy and that you will listen to or acknowledge her feelings. Acknowledging your child’s feelings allows her to trust you with her feelings and not feel like she has to hide them from you.

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### **Learning about other people**

- Provide opportunities for her to play with other children (at the park, with neighbors or family, in childcare or parent/child classes).
- Be available when he is playing with other children. He may need some help in negotiating, listening to her friends’ ideas, voicing his own ideas and in coming up with solutions. He may also need some help with safety, as he is excited about trying new things.

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