



18 months *to* 36 months

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How do children learn about feelings and friendship?

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 are my children learning about themselves and their feelings?

Your three-year-old child has developed a strong sense of himself and can often tell you what he wants and how he feels. He can tell you about who is in his family and who his friends are. He can clearly express his likes and dislikes. His circle of preferred people may include family, friends, teachers and neighbors.

She likes the feeling of being able to do new things. She likes to “do things herself,” even if they are difficult and she gets frustrated. She might insist on putting on her own shoe, even though it takes her 10 minutes and ends up backward.

When playing with friends, he can sometimes include other people’s ideas in the play and share the toy, but is still likely to use the word “mine” regularly. He generally enjoys time with friends and may request to get together with them.

She has words to express several of her emotions (“happy,” “sad,” “mad,” “scared”) and can ask for comfort when needed. Her feelings may still be overwhelming to her and can result in tantrums. She may also experience fears at this age, such as fear of bees, dogs, or monsters. She practices feelings and may “pretend to cry” when her play involves something sad. She may also look at herself in the mirror when she is practicing feelings so she can see what feelings look like.

He can show awareness of the feelings of others and may offer comfort by hugging or bringing his friend his favorite toy. He is sometimes able to empathize with others, but is more likely to be empathetic when he isn’t having big feelings himself.

She will often use her play to practice real-life events that she has experienced, like going to the doctor or the grocery store. This play helps her understand the event and gives her a sense of understanding and predictability about her life.



How do children learn about feelings and friendship?

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What are they learning about other people and relationships?

Your 36-month-old has developed some skills in playing with other children. Sometimes she will play alongside another child, using the same kinds of toys, but each playing their own game. Other times she will interact, talking and playing with others. She likes “pretend” play and can pretend that she is the dog or baby and can give simple instructions to his friends: “Now you go to sleep, baby.” She will imitate friends as well as adults in order to learn new behaviors and skills. She can sometimes include another child’s ideas in the play and share a toy, but is still likely to use the word “mine” regularly. She generally enjoys time with friends and may request to get together with them.

He can participate in simple clean-up routines, especially if an adult is working along with him.

If he has had experience with being in childcare, he is usually fine with being dropped off. Some children may still cry for a few minutes when parents leave, but will soon become engaged in play.

Here are some tips to support your child learning about themselves as a person, learning about other people and learning about their feelings:

Learning about self as a person:

- Encourage her to do as much for herself as she wants to. Young children love to participate, learn new skills and feel like they are helping. 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 might dress and undress herself, serve and feed herself, pour her own water from a little pitcher to her cup, help to wash the vegetables, help to set the table, put her toys away or help wash the windows.
- When he says “no,” or won’t do what you want him to, remember that he is practicing being his own person. Even when you need to stop him or set a



How do children learn about feelings and friendship?

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

limit with him, you can let him know you understand that he has a good idea.

- “I’m going to stop you from climbing on the bookshelf.” (physical limit)
- “Can you get down yourself or shall I help you down?” (closed-ended choice)
- “Are you interested in climbing or are you trying to get a book?” (identifying his good idea)
- “The bookshelf isn’t stable and could fall if you climb on it.” (giving him information)
- “If you want to climb, let’s try the climber outside. If you want a book, I can help you get it down.” (offering choices and another way to express his idea)

Learning about own feelings:

- Help her to understand her feelings by offering names for them.
 - “It looks like you are feeling sad.”
 - “It can be frustrating when you try to put on your shoe and it gets stuck.”
 - “I can see how excited you are to go to the park.”
- Help him to know what makes feelings happen.
 - “You fell down. I wonder if you are hurt and a little scared.”
 - “When you say good-bye to your mama, sometimes you feel sad.”
 - “You look so happy when you are playing with your brother.”
- Ask her about feelings.
 - “How are you feeling now?”
 - “Look at the boy in the book. How do you think he is feeling?”
- Help her find safe ways to express his feelings.
 - “If you are mad you can tell your friend, ‘I’m mad.’”
 - “If you are mad and want to hit something, you can hit this cushion.”
- You can use books about feelings or photos showing feelings to name and talk about children’s feelings.



How do children learn about feelings and friendship?

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Have a mirror at your child's level. He might be interested in looking at his face when he is having a certain feeling, or practicing making different feeling expressions.
- 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 she is afraid of the neighbor's friendly dog, you can squat down next to her, hold her and talk about the dog. Often, your presence and some information and safe interaction will help her feel less afraid. If she wants to move away, take your cues from her. Sometimes taking a photo of the scary thing and letting your child hold and talk about the photo will help him with her fear.
- Let him know that all his feelings are healthy and that you will listen to or acknowledge his feelings. Acknowledging your child's feelings allows him to trust you with his feelings and not feel like he has to hide them from you.

Acknowledging your child's feelings allows him to trust you with his feelings and not feel like he has to hide them from you.

Learning about other people:

- Take time in new situations to help your child adjust to new people. If a family friend will be watching him when you go out, invite her over the day before or a couple of hours before you go out to visit and play with him. The more familiar he is with the new person, the more comfortable he will be with you leaving.
- When your child starts childcare, make sure she has time to get to know the new caregiver and setting.
 - Visit a few times and stay with her, so that she can check in with you while she is exploring the new setting.
 - Get to know the new caregiver yourself so you are confident in leaving your child with them.
 - Practice leaving your child for shorter periods at first, so that she learns that you will come back.



How do children learn about feelings and friendship?

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Provide opportunities for him to play with other children (at the park, with neighbors or family, in childcare or parent/child classes).
 - Remember that while he may be excited about other children, he doesn't always know how to play with them, and there may be conflict over toys or hesitance to join the play.
 - Sharing can be hard at this age. Playing in neutral areas like parks, the beach or yards can cut down on some of the conflict about toys. Sand and water play with a few scoops and containers can offer fun play opportunities with friends.
 - Supervise him at this age when he is playing with other children. He may need help expressing his ideas and feelings, listening to the ideas of others, and working out solutions.