

Supporting children's development

Social skills and relationships

In the first of a series of articles on supporting areas of development, Anne Stonehouse examines the importance of children's emerging social skills and relationships, and how child care professionals can support these.

Relationships are at the centre of a fulfilling life. Babies are born ready to relate to and interact with others, and the basic need and desire for relationships continues throughout life. Although babies possess some skills at birth, and develop many more such as smiling, babbling and using language over the first few months and years of life, learning to interact effectively with others is a lifelong experience.

Starting in childhood and throughout life, we have to figure out how to appropriately stand up for and look after ourselves while still caring for others and taking their needs into account. Throughout our lives we continue to develop our social skills as we encounter new people and relationships.

Helping children to develop their social skills is one of the most important responsibilities of child care professionals. This is partly because, as in all areas of learning and development, interactions and relationships in the early years are foundations for those that occur later. Children's early experiences can set them on a path that will affect their social skills and relationships throughout life.

The value of social skills to other areas of child development

Social skills affect all areas of children's development and learning. There is now greater recognition than in the past that children are important teachers of other children. For example, children can teach each other physical skills, facts about the world, new ways of being creative and how to solve problems. Of course children learn from adults, but in good quality child care, adults encourage even very young children to learn from their peers. Much learning happens in interactions and relationships, and children who do not have social skills can miss out on important learning experiences.

Relationships and interactions have a strong impact on a person's self-concept. We learn about who we are and how we are valued through the messages we get from others. Our identity comes not only from our family and

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 2.1, 2.2 and 3.1-3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 5.1-5.4

QIAS Principles: 1.1-1.5, 2.1, 3.1-3.3 and 4.1-4.6

cultural background, but also from the messages we get from others about what we're good at, the contribution we make, how we make others feel and whether they like us or not. From birth children get messages from their family, and these messages are reinforced, contradicted or complemented by messages from others. Children in child care are likely to have longstanding and important relationships with adults and other children, therefore the messages they receive from those people are significant to the shaping of their self-concept.

Friendships and being valued by peers matter tremendously to school aged children, as they become increasingly independent of adults and more reliant on their relationships with other children. They look to them for messages about themselves, guidance about behaviour and attitudes, and indications about appropriate interests and ways to spend their time. The capacity to make and keep friends, and to develop relationships is critical to all areas of development in middle childhood.



Supporting children's development

The development of social skills

Social skills improve rapidly throughout childhood. Babies are highly skilled in 'hooking' the attention of others through looking, smiling, laughing, imitating and making sounds. They have powerful non-verbal ways of expressing themselves. When they begin to understand language, and later to use it themselves, there are many new opportunities for them to make themselves understood and to understand others.

Babies and toddlers have greater capacities to interact and relate, and to show sensitivity to the feelings of others, than was previously understood. Child care professionals who work with children in the first three years of a child's life are privileged to see many examples of children showing empathy and kindness and considering the needs and feelings of others. However, while these kinds of behaviours should be appreciated when they occur, they should not be expected to occur most of the time.

As children get older, their skills expand and become more sophisticated. Examples include, increased ability to express their feelings, wants and needs in words; better understanding of rules; greater self control; improved negotiation skills; greater capacity to see others' perspectives; and heightened awareness of the impact of their behaviour on others.

School aged children are typically very skilled at making and sustaining long-term relationships, and their interactions with other children influence their behaviour and interests. Children are aware of similarities and differences in people, and by the time they start school they have formed views about these. It is critical to their wellbeing, as well as to that of others, that they are comfortable with differences, and can form relationships with a variety of other people. School aged children have great capacity for empathy and sensitivity if they have been encouraged to use these qualities and skills.

Individual differences in social skills and the ability to interact effectively are evident throughout childhood, even in very young children. Some children are more outgoing than others, and they need and enjoy the company of others. Others are more content with their own company. Some children are more assertive than others, some are inclined to be leaders and others to

be followers most of the time. Some children are more skilled than others at 'reading' situations and the behaviours of others, or are more in tune to others' feelings. While all children's social skills need to be encouraged, individual differences must be respected.

Supporting children's social skills

Child care professionals play an important role in helping children to learn effective social skills. Some points that child care professionals should keep in mind are:

Keep expectations reasonable for the abilities of the child. It's easy to expect too much of children because it would be so much easier if children could interact constructively all the time. However, it is important to avoid thinking that children are intentionally relating to each other inappropriately. Snatching, pushing, saying unkind things, and even excluding others, occur a lot of the time due to children 'acting their age'. It takes children time, with mistakes and challenges along the way, to learn to interact appropriately.

Identify each child's strengths and talk about these with the children. Help children learn to accept and value each other and to appreciate each the talents of others. Be open about the challenges some children have in relating, and help the child and their peers to find ways to support constructive interactions. However, take care to avoid labelling children, as labels tend to create self-fulfilling prophecies, whereby children begin to behave in the way they have been labelled.

Use the strategies that you use in other areas to support children's social learning. These include: modelling, repetition, making situations easier, allowing children to figure things out for themselves, encouraging, acknowledging success and giving simple explanations.

Ensure that children have choices about interacting with others. Don't force children to relate. It is essential to have enough space for children to choose to be together or to spend time apart. Negative interactions often occur when children are crowded. While equipment, materials and experiences that encourage collaboration and cooperation should be provided, ensure that alternatives are provided that children can explore alone.

Supporting children's development

Respect individual styles. Some children are more social than others. Avoid pressuring all children to be outgoing, to be leaders or to spend most of their time interacting with others. When you get to know children, you will find out whether or not those who do not interact much with others behave this way by choice or because they lack the skills and/or confidence to do so. Those in the latter category will benefit from adult support to extend their social skills. Everyone needs to have the choice of being alone or with others.

Try to see things from the child's perspective, especially they are having difficulty interacting. It is important to recognise that it can be hard for children to be in a group situation, particularly for extended periods of time. Child care professionals need to support children when they are having difficulty coping.

Have a no-tolerance policy to teasing or bullying, expressions of bias or prejudice, and exclusion.

While everyone needs to have a choice about interacting and spending time with other children, no child should be left out, put down or made to feel that they don't belong or are not valued. Children who are frequently excluded from the play or activities of others may be those who are different in some way (for example, because of cultural background or a disability) or who lack the skills to interact in constructive ways.

Talk as well as act. Embrace the important role you play in helping children to learn social skills. Acknowledge constructive interactions and acts of caring and kindness. Ensure that your own interactions model how you want children to interact with others.

Encourage children to interact with children of different ages. In mixed age groups the learning that occurs between children can be valuable. However, avoid pressuring older children to

interact with or 'look after' younger children. It is also beneficial to provide children in mixed age groups with some time to be solely with children of their own age. This can support the development of children's relationships with peers with whom they may share some similar interests and skills.

Encourage children's independence. Although children at times need adult help to mediate interactions and relationships, the ultimate aim is for children to be able to relate and interact successfully and independently of adults.

Talk to families about their child's social skills. Highlight the child's strengths and talents in relating to others. For some families this may be a dimension of their child that they don't know about. Let families know how valuable social skills are, and help them to appreciate the challenges children, especially young children, often face in learning to be in a group and to interact successfully with others.

Remind yourself that helping children learn to engage successfully with others is one of the most important roles you play. Every part of their being is affected by their ability to relate to others. Supporting children to develop social skills can take perseverance and commitment because, as with other areas of learning, children are not likely to learn these skills 'in one go'.

Learning to interact and relate to others is a critical life skill that is not easily or quickly learned. As with so many other areas of learning in childhood, children need opportunities to try out new skills, to practise ones already mastered, and to learn by observing what others do and say. To develop these skills, children require guidance from sensitive adults who show respect for all children ■

References and further reading

- Department of Human Services. (2004). *Shared visions for outside school hours care*. Melbourne: Department of Human Services.
- Greenman, J., Stonehouse, A. & Schweikert, G. (2007). *Prime Times – a Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Care*. Minnesota: Redleaf Press.
- Hammer, M. & Linke, P. (2004). *Everyday Learning about Friendship*. Watson, ACT: Early Childhood Australia Inc.
- Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways*. Gosford: National Family Day Care Council.
- Stonehouse, A. & Gonzalez-Mena, J., (2004). *Making Links – a Collaborative Approach to Planning and Practice in Early Childhood Services*. NSW: Pademelon Press.