

# Social-Emotional Health and School Readiness

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS WITH CHILDREN  
Birth to Age 5



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### A Guide for Parents with Children Birth to Age 5

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 (birth to age five) to do well in school, we should be teaching them all kinds of things before they even get to Kindergarten so that they'll be "ready to learn."

Exactly what should we be teaching our young children so they'll be "ready to learn?" Most parents believe we need to teach them to write their names, say the alphabet, identify shapes and colors, and count to ten. These are important skills.

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

## What is Social-Emotional Health?

Social-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
- 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
- 3. Explore new environments. For example, depending on his age, the child:**
  - ▶ Is curious about the people and things around him
  - ▶ Actively explores new places
  - ▶ Likes to discover new things



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

## How Does Social-Emotional Health Affect School Readiness?

Teachers say that social-emotional skills are key to school readiness. Many say they 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-emotionally skilled may have trouble making friends and adjusting to school. If it’s hard for them to express themselves, they may “take their feelings out on others” (biting, hitting, screaming, etc.). Or, they may withdraw from others. As a result, their classmates may avoid or tease them. If they can’t follow directions and stick with tasks, school becomes a struggle. They don’t 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-emotional health that you can look for in your own infant, toddler or preschooler.

### 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
- ▶ Begin to show feelings for others
- ▶ 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):

- ▶ Enjoy books and simple games
- ▶ 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?



## 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-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:

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

Why? This will help your young child to bond with you. Also, physical touch can generate brain connections that will support all areas of your child's development (e.g., social-emotional, language, physical coordination, etc.)

### **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.**

Why? 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.**

Why? 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'll be able to have good relationships with other people throughout her life. Also, reading books to your child while you are snuggling together will help her learn to read later on. This is true even if she's too young to understand the words right now.

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

Why? 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's important to you.

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

Why? 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-emotionally ready to do.**

Why? When a parent expects a child to do something that he is not socially-emotionally ready to do, it's 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 doesn't know that most 2-year-olds aren't 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 don't 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's why it's so important for parents to know about social-emotional development at every age.

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**7. When your child “acts up,” try to uncover the real reason for her behavior.**

Why? A young child doesn’t “act up” because she’s “bad.” She “acts up” because there is something going on with her that she can’t handle or put into words yet. She may be scared, frustrated, hungry, sick, tired, or sad – there are lots of possibilities. If you can find out what’s causing these feelings, you can help meet her needs and reduce the troubling behavior.

**8. Don’t let your child witness family violence. Don’t let anyone physically abuse or hurt your child with words.**

Why? This type of trauma is very painful for young children. It can cause long-term problems, including depression.

**9. 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’re always at the end of your emotional rope, your family will pay the price. If you’re going through divorce, depression, unemployment, illness, or some other difficult situation, it’s even more important for you to seek the support you need. Taking care of yourself is taking care of your kids.



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

All children need discipline to learn how to behave and get along with others. There are different kinds of discipline, however. Punishment is a well-known kind of discipline. It involves doing something that the child won't like after he misbehaves so he won't do it again. But punishment doesn't 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-emotional health.

### Positive Discipline with Infants

Disciplining infants is really about protecting them from harm. Infants are "wired" to touch and explore things. They're too young to understand what danger is or how dangerous something might be. All they know is that an object looks attractive and they've just got to touch it, taste it, or try it out. So, if you don't want your baby to stick his fingers in the electrical outlets, you put safety caps on them. If you don't want her to crawl upstairs, you put up a baby gate. If you don't 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's 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's no getting around it. It's 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 climbs on the table, the parent:

1. Takes a deep breath and counts to 3.
2. Says, "You may not climb on the table - it's not safe."
3. Goes over to the child, gently guides her down, and helps her start another activity, like going outside to climb.
4. Does the same thing every time the child climbs on the table.

The bottom line on discipline is this:

- ▶ If a parent doesn't set any limits (lets the child do whatever he wants), the child doesn't learn how to get along with others. This is not good for the child's social-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's okay for adults to hurt children. This is not good for the child's social-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-emotional health. It's also much better for the parent-child relationship.

For more information on positive discipline, you might 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



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

Here are some signs that your child may have social-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

If you see any of these signs or have questions about your child's social-emotional health, you can talk with an early childhood specialist. Contact one of the programs below to find a specialist in your area. The specialist will keep your information confidential.

▶ **Great Start Initiative**

For more information see the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) website: [www.ecic4kids.org](http://www.ecic4kids.org)

▶ **Great Start** (birth to age 5)

[www.migreatparents.org](http://www.migreatparents.org)

▶ **Early On Michigan** (birth to 36 months)

1-800-*EARLY ON*<sup>®</sup>

[www.1800earlyon.org](http://www.1800earlyon.org)

▶ **Child Care Expulsion Prevention** (birth to age 5)

Available in 31 of Michigan's 83 counties.

1-866-424-4532 (Michigan Community Coordinated Child Care Association Referral Line)

[http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2941\\_4868\\_7145-14785--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2941_4868_7145-14785--,00.html)

▶ **Community Mental Health Services Programs** (all ages)

517-241-5767 (Mental Health Services to Children and Families, Michigan Dept. of Community Health)

[http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2941\\_4868\\_7145--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2941_4868_7145--,00.html)



## Where Can I learn More About Social-Emotional Development?

For more information, contact the organizations below:

### **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 (\$1.25 each for Michigan residents):

- ▶ Baby Stages - A Parent's and Caregiver's Guide to Social and Emotional Development of Infants and Toddlers (Spanish and English language versions available)
- ▶ Preschool Stages - A Parent's and Professional's Guide to Social and Emotional Development in the Preschool Years (734) 785-7700, ext. 7194, <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.

(202) 638-1144

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

### **Center on 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.

(615) 322-3978 or (866) 433-1966

[www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel)

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