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Social and Emotional Development: Academic & Social Outcomes



**How do we
know that
children's
early social
and emotional
experiences
matter?**

Researchers answer this question by following groups of children over time, looking at how their early experiences and interactions with caregivers and peers relate to later outcomes. These studies show that, just as early language and cognitive stimulation predict children's future development, infants' and toddlers' very early social and emotional experiences have a *significant impact* on their lifelong development and well-being.

So, what exactly IS social and emotional health? Broadly speaking, social and emotional skills allow us to identify and manage our feelings, regulate our behavior and behave appropriately in different settings and relationships, understand and empathize with the feelings of others, and develop and maintain positive relationships in our personal and professional lives.

Social and emotional development begins with **children’s early attachment relationships with their primary caregivers**. Children’s primary caregivers are usually their parents, and when children begin attending childcare or school programs, teachers become important attachment figures as well. In this section, we’ll look at how early childhood experiences can shape the pathways children follow toward social and emotional growth throughout school and into adulthood.

Infancy & Early Childhood



Infants and toddlers whose primary caregivers are **consistent**, **warm**, and **responsive** develop feelings of safety and self-confidence. They are encouraged to recognize and express their feelings, to ask for what they need, and to show interest in other people. They are ready to explore their environment and then come back to their caregivers for safety and comfort.

On the other hand, when children’s early experiences with caregivers are neglectful, inconsistent, harsh, or disrupted, they are *at risk* for social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Early caregiver-child relationships may be disrupted or of poor quality for many reasons. Sometimes caregivers have personal challenges that make it hard for them to care for their children, such as physical illness, mental illness, substance abuse, or a history of trauma in their own childhood. There are also larger community factors that put extra stress on caregivers and limit their emotional energy for parenting. Poverty, neighborhood violence, or unstable housing or employment are a few of these.

In addition to providing a sense of security, caregivers serve as “coaches.” They show children how to behave, how to manage their emotions, and how to interact with others. When children’s behavior is not appropriate, caring adults set limits and patiently show, teach, and redirect them toward better choices. Over time, children who are both loved and patiently coached learn how to regulate their emotions and behaviors (like a thermostat that can move from warmer to cooler and back again without freezing or overheating too often). These children often feel less anxious and more confident to start exploring the world around them, which leads to rich learning experiences. They begin to establish friendships, adapt well to preschool, and cope with the everyday ups and downs of life.

When children’s primary caregivers are under stress, children experience that stress as well. While some stress for families is completely normal, consistently stressful environments can be especially damaging to children when they have no way to control or escape from it and it lasts for a long time. Over time, children can begin to feel unsafe, anxious, overwhelmed with emotion, and unsure that their needs will be met. Their caregivers may

be preoccupied with their own needs and unable to model and coach appropriate ways to handle emotions, regulate behavior, or make friends. Without consistent support and coaching from their caregivers, children find it difficult to regulate their emotions. They are also less likely to learn the words they need to talk about their feelings, which is an important tool for regulating emotions. At least 60% of preschoolers with challenging behavior have language delays.

When these children get to preschool, they often have difficulty coping with everyday challenges such as separating from parents or transitioning from one activity to another. They may externalize feelings through anger, tantrums, and impulsive behavior. Or they may internalize their feelings, keeping them inside and causing sadness and loneliness. They may also have difficulty maintaining their attention, which negatively affects their ability to learn new things.



Elementary Age

By the time they get to elementary school, children living in supportive, stable, nurturing environments have typically had more opportunities to safely explore the world and learn the language and literacy skills that prepare them to do well in school. They are more likely to become positively engaged in school and to stay on track academically. They are also more comfortable talking about their emotions, which helps their parents and teachers recognize their needs and better support them. Their previous experiences have equipped them to handle frustration and setbacks, so they are more willing to take on new challenges that continue to expand their skills and knowledge. Because their caregivers have supported and coached them in building *social competence*, they are typically liked and accepted by their teachers and peers. This social acceptance gives them more opportunities to form positive relationships and learn from others.

On the other hand, children with poor emotion regulation skills are sometimes less curious about the world and have difficulty handling new tasks without getting frustrated and losing self-confidence. They may develop coping strategies that work in the short term—such as shutting down emotionally and socially, tuning out attention, or lashing out aggressively—but these strategies often become ineffective and problematic as the child matures.

The ability to regulate emotions is closely tied to social competence.

Children who keep their emotions inside themselves may withdraw from peer interactions, which means losing opportunities to practice building relationships, resolving conflict, and receiving support from friends. Children who express their emotions in more impulsive and poorly regulated ways may show aggressive behavior or emotional outbursts. Peers and adults are likely to react negatively to this kind of behavior. If it continues, a cycle of rejection from peers further reinforces their view of the world as an unwelcoming and unsafe place.

The Teenage Years

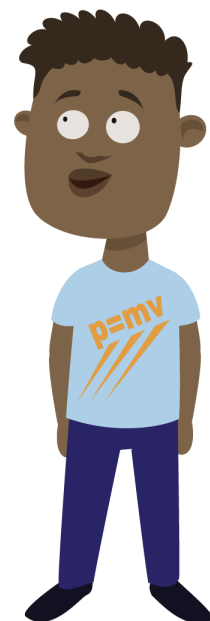


The teenage years can be emotionally challenging for adolescents, as hormones cause changes in their bodies and emotions. Children who have developed a strong social and emotional foundation—including emotion regulation strategies, a growing social support network, and a good awareness of their changing emotions—are already on, and are more likely to stay on, a healthy path. For example, the ability to manage emotions has been shown to lead to better academic performance, as these students are better equipped to keep their attention focused on the increasing challenges of school.

It's normal for teenagers to have emotional ups and downs as they navigate physical changes, social group dynamics, first boyfriends or girlfriends, and increasing independence from parents.

Those who are *on-track* socially and emotionally tend to feel more secure in their relationships. They are better able to resist negative peer pressure and are better equipped to resolve disagreements in ways that preserve relationships. They have also developed **empathy**, which allows them to support others.

At-risk teenagers are less likely to be aware of their emotional states. Teenagers who aren't fully aware of their emotions and express anger and sadness in inappropriate ways tend to have very poor academic performance and experience higher levels of depression and anxiety. This creates an ongoing negative cycle. Socially, these teenagers are often withdrawn and lonely and are more likely to form relationships with other anti-social peers. These peer groups are the most likely to engage in risky behavior that impacts their future opportunities, such as skipping school, using drugs, committing crimes, and dropping out of high school.

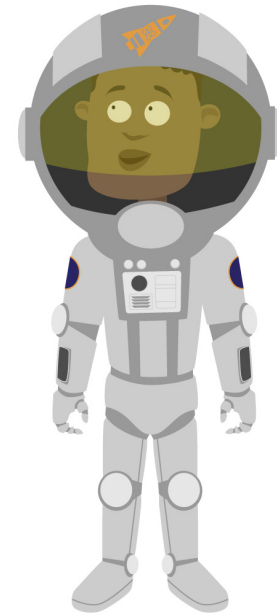


Adulthood

Social and emotional skills affect our everyday interactions with others and how we feel about ourselves as adults.

Adults with strong social and emotional skills are better able to acknowledge and manage their emotions, achieve academic and career goals, have healthy relationships with others, and generally have a positive outlook on life.

Because teenagers with healthy social and emotional skills tend to have strong academic outcomes in high school, they also tend to have better employment opportunities as adults. Success in the job market is also related to a set of social and emotional skills often referred to as *soft skills*. Soft skills are the personal behaviors, attitudes, and skills that are not listed on a resume but that help us perform well in our jobs and work with others to achieve goals. Examples include self-control, social skills, conflict resolution, and problem solving—all skills that start to emerge in early childhood.



Adults with good soft skills are more likely to be hired, do well in their jobs, receive promotions, and earn higher wages. While there is evidence that we can improve our soft skills in adulthood, supporting social and emotional development in infants and toddlers is the best way to provide a **solid foundation** from which to build these skills.

Adults who have struggled with social and emotional skills throughout their lives may need to work hard to change established patterns of behavior and learn new soft skills. The more significant the social-emotional difficulties, the more likely it is that an adult will experience serious problems in relationships (such as divorce or abuse), in physical health (such as drug abuse or eating disorders), in academic or career goals (such as dropping out of high school or unemployment), and with the law (criminal activity and incarceration). Sadly, in some cases, social and emotional impairment interacts with a person's genetic predispositions, resulting in the development of mental illness—a public health crisis that impacts roughly 1 in 5 Americans.



Resilience

It's important to remember that the development of social-emotional skills is complex, and many children who are at risk for social-emotional difficulties do overcome challenges and barriers through resilience. **Resilience** can be thought of as the capacity to adapt, recover, or “bounce back” when faced with personal difficulties. Resilience forms through protective features in a child's life that help the child to stay on a positive developmental path, or return to it, despite negative or painful experiences. These protective features include caring and supportive relationships with teachers and other adults, as well as quality learning environments that promote cognitive skills and encourage a positive outlook on themselves, their relationships with others, and school and career goals.

Early childhood educators play a very important role in providing the kind of support that leads to children's resilience.

In fact, when children are struggling at home, **school becomes an especially important place** for them—a place to receive emotional support, stability, and positive messages about their worth, their ability, and their potential.



Key Points to Remember

For a baby or toddler, adults represent models of the world and relationships that the baby remembers and carries into future relationships. Adults who respond to children consistently, warmly, and sensitively are providing the child with a model that says, “People are kind and trustworthy, and they value me.” The baby will remember this model and approach other relationships with positive expectations.

Babies and toddlers do not yet know how to regulate their emotions—they rely on adults to help them do this. Respond to babies' distress as soon as possible to help them learn to regulate their emotions. Look for toddlers who keep to themselves a lot, who seem afraid, or who are uninterested in engaging with you or other children. These children are missing out on the everyday social

interactions that promote language and social-emotional skills. Talk to these children and try to engage them in play with their peers.

Moments of conflict or disappointment in the classroom are opportunities for every child to develop social and emotional skills. The most powerful instructional tools are kindness, patience, and modeling positive social and emotional behaviors. Be patient and consistent when toddlers express anger and frustration. Offering comfort, providing choices within limits, and validating their strong feelings will help them develop more self-control over time.

Young children who have good relationships with their teachers are more likely to learn positive ways to interact with others at school and to develop social competence.

Social skills learned at school can even carry over to the home environment, positively impacting children's relationships with their families.

Supporting children's social and emotional development lays the groundwork for satisfying work and healthy relationships throughout life.

