

How to Help Your Child in Social Situations

Children are born with the need and desire to connect with others, but this doesn't always come naturally. Some obstacles that might prevent young children from establishing positive relationships with others include not knowing how to express themselves, how to empathize with others and how to manage their emotions. Luckily, you can help your child develop these skills.

Try the following strategies to help develop your child's social-emotional skills:

Imitate your baby's facial expressions and sounds.

Imitation is a crucial tool for infants to learn new behaviors, and a skill that sets the earliest foundation for interacting with others. You can encourage this by copying your baby's facial expressions and sounds from a young age. If you spend time talking to and copying your baby, they will learn to be more animated and are likely to repeat the same communicative behaviors again.

Encourage pretend play.

Pretend play is an excellent strategy for practicing social skills. It allows your child to step outside their own shoes and imagine what different people might say, think or do. This develops language as well as empathy for others.

Acknowledge when they exercise self-control.

Many children struggle to manage "big emotions" like anger, anxiety or joy, especially in social contexts. When your child is tempted to respond one way but resists, praise their self-control. This might sound like: "You were nervous and wanted to sit by yourself, but you stayed and made a new friend! Good work!" Other positive behaviors to acknowledge could include comforting a friend, following a simple direction, or sharing a toy.

Model appropriate behavior.

Be aware of your own behaviors in social situations; your child notices your facial expressions, body language and actions and responds accordingly. When you have caring, respectful relationships and interact with others in a positive and upbeat way, your child learns from your example.

Remember that every child develops at their own pace, and you know your child best. However, the first three years are the most important building blocks of a child's future. If you're concerned your child may be developing more slowly than expected, or have a disability affecting early development, Milwaukee County's Birth to 3 Program can help.