# Understanding Social Development in

# Early Childhood 0–6 Years Old

**Social development in early childhood lays the foundation for lifelong relationships. From birth to six years old, children actively learn how to interact with others, express their emotions, explore different environments and build connections. Communication skills and growing emotional intelligence are key components for building nourishing and rewarding relationships. When socialising, children learn what to expect from others and what others expect from them.**

As a caregiver, you play a crucial role in shaping your child's social abilities and confidence. Gaining insight into the stages of social development and learning how to nurture them can give you and your child confidence and fulfilment.

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# Key Stages of Social Development

## Infancy (0-12 months):

Newborns are wired for connection. They bond with caregivers through eye contact, smiles, and cooing. Babies begin to recognise familiar voices and use differing cries to communicate their needs. Babies start responding to social cues by six months, like smiling back at you. As they approach one year, they may develop stranger anxiety, showing a preference for familiar caregivers, which is a normal part of attachment development.

## Toddlerhood (1-3 years):

Toddlers begin asserting independence while also craving security. During this stage, they become more aware of others and may start imitating behaviours they observe. Toddlers begin to use simple words to express their needs and emotions, though frustration can sometimes lead to tantrums. They engage in imitation and parallel play (playing alongside but not directly with peers) and start learning to take turns and express emotions. Toddlers grow in confidence and ability when asking for what they want and begin participating in simple group activities such as dancing and singing.

## Preschool Age (3-6 years):

Children develop stronger friendships, engage in cooperative play, and begin to understand empathy during the preschool stage. They start to prefer playing with peers rather than alone and practice important social skills like sharing, negotiating, and taking turns. Children also become more aware of social rules and fairness at this stage, often voicing concerns about what is “fair” or “unfair.” As preschoolers develop a stronger sense of identity, they begin to learn conflict resolution skills and start to build emotional resilience.

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# How Parents Can Support Social Development

### Foster Secure Attachments

A child's first social relationship is with their primary caregivers. Providing consistent love, affection, and reassurance helps build trust and emotional security. Responding to your child's needs and comforting them when they are upset teaches them that relationships are safe and nurturing.

### Model Positive Social Interactions

Children learn social skills by observing the people around them. Demonstrate kindness, patience, and effective communication in your daily interactions. Show them how to greet others, share, and express gratitude. Let them see you working through conflicts in a respectful way. When they attempt social interactions, give them encouraging feedback such as 'When you looked at the shop assistant and said thank you, you showed wonderful manners.'

### Encourage Play with Peers

Play is the most natural way for young children to develop social skills. Arrange playdates, visit playgrounds, or enrol them in group activities like music classes or storytime sessions. Through play, children learn to communicate, negotiate, take turns, and cooperate. Caregivers can model positive social interactions by actively participating in play and demonstrating how to share and take turns. Allow opportunities for your child to initiate play and encourage inclusion with practice and preparation, such as "You can say, 'Hi, can I play with you?' Let's practice together." Supporting their efforts while allowing them to take the lead builds confidence and social competence.

### Teach Emotional Intelligence

Help your child identify and express their emotions. Use simple language like, "I see you're feeling frustrated because your toy isn't working." Encourage them to use words to identify their emotions in the moment or after an emotional outburst. Reading books about emotions and role-playing different scenarios can be powerful tools. Telling them how you feel, accompanied by facial and behavioural cues (such as clapping and smiling whilst saying I am so excited, or droopy shoulders and a sad expression whilst saying I'm feeling really sad), will also help them recognise emotions are normal and something everyone feels. This will also help them foster empathy.

### Set and Reinforce Boundaries

Young children thrive with clear, consistent rules about acceptable social behaviour. Teach them about personal space, using kind words, and resolving conflicts peacefully. Use gentle reminders and praise positive behaviours when they make good choices. When setting and reinforcing boundaries, remember the three c's: be clear, confident and consistent. As a caregiver, it is your job to set and maintain the boundary – even when your child tells you how they feel about it.

### Final Thoughts

Every child develops at their own pace, and social growth is a journey, not a race. With love, patience, and intentional guidance, you can help your child build the confidence and skills needed to form meaningful connections. By supporting their early social experiences, you are setting them up for a lifetime of positive relationships and emotional well-being.

## About the Author

Kirsten is an early childhood expert with over 20 years of experience in education, including teaching, leadership roles and policy development. Holding a Master's Degree in Early Childhood and a Bachelor of Education (Primary), she specialises in assisting parents and their children navigate the early years of life, school readiness and the transition to school. Kirsten has contributed to early education policy papers, school readiness programs, teaching standards, and curriculum development and served on advisory boards and committees for the NSW Institute of Teachers, the Catholic Education Office, and the NSW Independent Schools Association. Through her consultancy, she empowers parents and educators with expert guidance on best practices in early childhood development, ensuring strong foundations for lifelong learning.