

Scaffolding social skills in early childhood



ECE resources

Children develop skills for playing alongside others, for playing collaboratively, and for forming special friendships during their early childhood years, all of which are supported by the child's emerging social skills and underpinned by skills in language, empathy and **self-regulation**. Interactions with peers offer plenty of opportunities to learn, practise and refine social skills, yet some children may require support to develop social skills or build social confidence, and benefit from specific teaching of social behaviours. Intentional teaching and intervention are particularly important for children who do not engage with peers independently, who are shy, withdrawn or inhibited, and for children with limited **communication skills**.

Learning social skills can be supported when teachers:

- **Structure routines and activities to provide plentiful opportunities for social interaction** and collaborative play. For example, focus activities in a limited number of areas, provide equipment and materials that require cooperation and sharing, (wagons, seesaws, or simply large pieces of paper for painting) or introduce new and interesting materials and equipment to areas. Use **teacher-guided play** to give children particular roles in play that put them in contact with other children. Research shows that environments that are carefully arranged to promote peer interactions result in a significant increase in positive peer interactions and children's prosocial behaviours.
- **Model specific social skills** such as how to get someone's attention or have a conversation, or how to invite another to play with you, as well as general social skills such as sharing, turn-taking and helping others. Children who observe adults modelling values such as generosity, empathy and tolerance for frustration are more likely to develop these qualities.
- **Explicitly teach social skills**. For example, teach children how it is important to wait for a good moment to catch someone's attention, and to initiate interactions by smiling, making eye-contact, playing alongside and passing resources to one another. Rehearse social skills in whole group times by role playing ways to get each other's attention, compliment each other, or ask to play, and use puppets for exploring social problem-solving scenarios. Children whose parents explicitly coach them in social skills are found to have higher levels of social competence and acceptance by peers.
- **Offer positive acknowledgement and praise** when children demonstrate social skills, and help children to develop identities of themselves as helpful, caring and kind people. Attribute children with positive social abilities, for example, "I know you can tell him how you feel" or "I know you will be able to share".
- **Support children's language abilities**, such as the ability to express views and preferences, listen to and comprehend other children's ideas, and negotiate, which are found to be related to superior play skills and a range of social competencies. Similarly, supporting children's emotional regulation skills can help children with issues such as managing frustration and showing flexibility which underpin successful interactions with peers.

Friendships and collaborative play can be supported when teachers:

- **Foster children's social interactions** by drawing attention to and showing interest in what another child is playing, commenting on other children's strengths to their peers, and facilitating interactions. With infants, describe what other children are doing, wearing or holding which can help children to attend to each other. With older children, point out common interests or suggest that children talk with each other. Help children to understand the value of good relationships with peers.
- **Encourage children to use social skills as they play**, for example, "you could ask Sarah for a paintbrush", as providing children with cues, prompts and encouragement for social behaviours is found to lead to increased social behaviours. However, when scaffolding of social skills is highly directive (such as telling children what to do to play with each other, or directing children into teacher-chosen groups), research finds reduced sociability and increased peer avoidance in infants and toddlers over time. It is important then to focus on child-centred strategies such as following children's leads, talking about other children's feelings and behaviours, or helping onlookers to join groups of peers.
- **Look for the subtle cues that a child is interested in another's play**, and coach shy or withdrawn children about how to show their interest in playing with other children and to enter play. Infants demonstrate interest in others when they modify their actions to match those of other children, and can be supported to initiate and sustain interactions with peers. Look for ways to bridge children's play and encourage interaction, such as by giving children social tasks such as "can you ask Priya for some blocks?"
- **Help children understand the social behaviour of others** by engaging in discussion about the intentions and feelings of others. Help them to interpret being approached, touched or spoken to by other children in positive ways, and prime children with ideas about how they might respond.
- **Encourage empathy, kindness and tuakana-teina relationships**. Suggest that children teach, lead and help each other, or suggest a child should go to a peer for help, advice or support. Give children responsibilities that require social interactions such as handing out cups at snack time.
- **Support the complexity of play**, as complex and challenging play encourages children to develop more sophisticated social and emotional skills and extend their social repertoire. Play, particularly sociodramatic play, involves children in reflecting before acting, being aware of the emotions and perspectives of others, and cooperation, negotiation and compromise. Appreciate all kinds of social play, including exuberant play with others, as important for children's social development and for the development of children's peer culture.

Further reading

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