

What is social and emotional competence?

Social and emotional competence involves successfully managing emotional arousal and engaging positively in social settings. It is generally thought to include:

- Emotion knowledge such as awareness of one's own emotions and those of others
- Emotional regulation (particularly understanding how to calm down in times of heightened emotion) and appropriate emotion expression
- Social skills including perspective-taking, empathy and social problem-solving
- Self-management and responsible decision-making.

Children's social and emotional competence varies with their age and developmental stage, and also according to the sociocultural expectations, values and norms of their whānau and community. As the expression of emotions varies across cultures, and as different groups use different repertoires of strategies for conflict resolution, children's social and emotional competence primarily involves adapting to a particular social group's ways of acting. This means there is no single model of appropriate social and emotional behaviour.

Children's social and emotional development also varies according to their temperament or typical way of approaching and reacting to the world, and learning how to manage emotion can be more challenging for some than others. Children who are prone to negative emotions (sadness, fear, anger and frustration) or have an impulsive temperament are more likely to have difficulties with emotions and social behaviours and a greater challenge in learning to regulate their emotions, whereas children with easy, more readily soothed temperaments will have less difficulty and are more likely to demonstrate social and emotional competence. Children are also at greater risk of difficulties when they grow up in families and communities that are characterised by stress, conflict, or negative emotion, and when there is a lack of support for children's emotional expression.

Emotional competence

Emotions are crucial to all kinds of cognitive and social activity and behaviour, and emotional competencies help children to accomplish goals, meet challenges, and engage effectively in social groups and environments. Emotion knowledge or emotional literacy enables children to identify, express and understand their own feelings and those of others, while emotional regulation involves having control over which emotions are experienced, as well as when and how they are experienced and expressed.

Emotionally competent children demonstrate culturally accepted ways of expressing emotion, which might involve masking or minimising emotions, or substituting one emotion for another. They can identify emotions that are helpful and retain, enhance or intensify these, while inhibiting less productive emotions and the negative behaviours that flow from them through strategies such as seeking support, reframing problems, reinterpreting situations, problem solving, and distancing or distracting themselves. Children can also utilise emotions for constructive purposes, such as utilising the energy that comes with anger for asserting themselves in a positive way.

Social competence

Social competence involves the use of a range of sophisticated skills for forming and positively managing social relationships and interactions with others. While these skills will vary according to the emphasis of children's home cultures, for example, in regard to behaviours such as self-assertion, independence and group participation, socially competent children are able to engage, sustain and elicit positive responses from other people. They are able to cooperate and work collaboratively in play and activity, with skills such as making suggestions for play and giving compliments, as well as sharing, turn-taking, and negotiation skills. Socially competent children are also able to solve social problems and manage conflict, through abilities to understand social situations, take other people's perspectives, and consider alternative solutions.

Self-management

Self-management refers to a set of cognitive skills that support learning, including focusing and maintaining attention, persevering, ignoring distractions, planning and decision-making, which work alongside emotional regulation (such as managing anxiety or boredom in relation to learning activities) and regulation of social interactions (such as seeking help when needed or avoiding invitations to negative behaviours). Self-management enables thoughtful behaviours and intentional decisions in a range of cognitive, social and emotional contexts.

Self-managing children pay attention to their own behaviour and employ appropriate and productive behaviours to engage in play, learning and interaction. They can suppress impulses long enough to consider the consequences of intended actions and possible alternatives, and engage in responsible decision-making by employing and reflecting upon constructive actions that take into account issues such as ethics, safety and social and cultural expectations. For example, self-regulated, self-managing children not only understand that they should use their words instead of hitting, but are able to do so in the heat of the moment.

How are social and emotional competencies interlinked?

These emotional and social competencies are linked and often viewed as one integrated construct because

- Emotions motivate the use of skills for social competence and self-management
- Children learn about how to manage emotions through their social experiences and appropriate emotional expression is socially and culturally determined
- Children's emotional literacy and emotional regulation influence their success in social interactions
- Emotional regulation is important for effective social problem-solving
- Self-management involves understanding the emotions that occur in diverse interactions, as well as an ability to handle emotions in productive ways
- Self-management skills lead to improved social behaviour

Social and emotional competence and self-management all draw on children's **executive function skills** for self-control, working memory and flexibility that give children 'executive' control over attention, emotion, thinking and action. For example, skills for paying attention, for keeping track of what they are doing, or for remembering rules or conditions of activities and tasks are crucial for self-management but also for children to be able to engage effectively in social activities such as conversation and collaborative play.

Why is social and emotional competence important?

Substantial research evidence links social and emotional competencies to better outcomes for children in a range of areas. For example, positive social interactions, self-control, emotion knowledge and regulatory skills, are associated with

- long-term positive social and health outcomes, including high self-esteem and positive mental health, wellbeing, happiness, higher rates of employment, quality of life and life satisfaction, as well as lower rates of school dropout, delinquency, criminal activity, substance abuse, and public assistance.
- positive peer relationships and better relationships with adults. Children with prosocial skills, self-regulation skills and good communication are more likely to be accepted and preferred by peers.
- health and wellbeing, as emotions influence physiological processes and interactions between neurological, endocrine, metabolic and immune systems.
- greater school readiness, positive attitudes and greater attachment towards school, and more positive transitions to school.
- greater success in learning and later school achievement, particularly in language, communication, literacy and numeracy. Five-year-olds' emotion knowledge predicts both social and academic achievement at age nine, and self-regulation skills more accurately predict reading and mathematics achievement in school than measures of IQ.

Children who struggle to deal with negative emotions and have difficulties eliciting positive interactions with others might not have the resources to focus on learning, and may avoid challenging learning activities. Difficulties regulating stress are related to mental and physical health issues such as a weakened immune system, depression and anxiety. In addition, feelings of stress or anxiety are found to reduce activity in areas of the brain responsible for higher-order thinking and learning and to disrupt cognitive processes such as focusing attention, problem solving, and social skills. Children who are unable to regulate their social and emotional behaviour experience greater peer rejection and social isolation, leading to low self-esteem and low motivation for learning, declining participation, a decrease in achievement, and later mental health issues and difficulties at school. However, there is strong evidence that **quality practices and effective interventions** in early childhood can help children improve their social, emotional and self-management skills.

Identifying social and emotional difficulties in early childhood

Children's social and emotional competencies are constantly evolving, and the development of social and emotional skills is not uniform. However, some children have more difficulty than others in identifying emotions, interpreting social situations, responding appropriately and solving social problems such as conflict with a peer.

Signs of difficulties in emotional and behavioural self-regulation include difficulties with concentration, being uninterested in daily play and activity, or experiencing such intense feelings of sadness or anxiety that they are unable to move on. Children may show externalising behaviours, such as **throwing tantrums, aggression, and non-compliance**, or internalising behaviours such as being withdrawn, turning away from caregivers, and failing to show emotion. It is important to address self-regulation difficulties as they can disrupt learning and relationships and affect school readiness.

Some children may require a well-planned and intensive approach to learning social and emotional skills, but most difficulties can be improved by changes to teacher behaviours and practices rather than

by singling out children for individual intervention. However, where children are at risk of developing negative social and emotional problems, it is particularly important to seek higher-intensity supports for the child and family and it may be necessary to seek professional help.

Further reading

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