

What you will learn in this module

How to help children with disabilities become socially competent

Inclusive early childhood programs add a new dimension to the lives of children. Those with disabilities get to participate in age-appropriate activities. Playing with peers helps them acquire social skills. They learn to regulate their emotions so they can become socially competent. Learning conversation skills encourages social interaction.

How to use peer helpers to support social competence

Peer helpers, planned playgroups, and classroom buddies teach children how to play together. Typical children learn to support their peers with disabilities. In turn, children with disabilities develop the skills needed to successfully join in play.

How to promote friendships among children with disabilities and typical children

Inclusive early childhood programs encourage friendships among all children. Program activities help children discover common interests. Children with disabilities and typical children learn to enjoy each other's company. They give one another support. When teachers make parents aware, friendships have a chance to develop outside of the classroom — during play dates and other social activities.

You already know a lot about the social development of children

You know that it is important for children to acquire age-appropriate social skills before entering Kindergarten.

Social competence is important to children's mental health. Children who enter Kindergarten without basic social skills are at risk for school failure. Preschool play teaches children how to cooperate and get along. Playing with other children helps them learn to manage social situations.

Children with disabilities haven't always had the same social opportunities as their peers. Sometimes they need support to play. Their behavior can be hard to deal with. Typical peers often need help learning to communicate with them. Making the right accommodations helps children learn to play together.

You know that children help one another become socially competent.

The give and take of play helps all children acquire social skills. Play lets children try out different social roles. They learn how to get positive responses from peers. They learn to read facial expressions and body language. This helps them adapt their behavior to meet their own needs.

Some children with disabilities face serious obstacles in learning how to play. Physical disabilities interfere with movement. Language delays or cognitive limitations make play difficult. Being around typical peers makes it easier for a child with a disability to overcome these problems. Typical children model skills she hasn't yet acquired.

You know that friendships are important to all children.

Friends give children the confidence they need to learn and grow. Friends share companionship and affection. They give emotional support. Children make friends with those who like what they like.

An inclusive early childhood program gives all children the chance to make friends. Children with disabilities are seen as valuable playmates. But they are unlikely to have as many play dates as their peers. Teachers can encourage friendships outside the classroom between children with disabilities and their typical peers. A good way to do this is to bring their parents together.

 **What do you think?**

Ms. Hamilton knows it is very important that children learn to use words to communicate. But some children seem to have trouble remembering to do this. She wonders what she can do to help them.

What would you tell her?

- (a) Keep reminding them to use their words. Eventually they will.
- (b) Let them know that if they don't use their words they can't expect others to know what they want.
- (c) Use role-play and retelling stories to help children practice using words to communicate.

The correct answer is (c). Role-play and retelling stories give children practice using the words they need in real-life situations.

Emotional regulation

Becoming socially competent requires children to regulate their emotions. This means they can recognize their emotional state and control it. It helps if they have vocabulary to describe how they are feeling. And ways to deal with feelings that are frightening or unpleasant.



“When my sister Maureen was a child she had a terrible time learning to regulate her emotions. It was because she has autism,” said Ms. Creegan. “If she got upset about anything, she would cry and scream uncontrollably. And it didn't matter where she was. She'd yell just as loud in church as in her own bedroom.”

“Didn't she frighten other children when she acted that way?” asked Ms. Hassan. “I always worry that others will avoid children who have outbursts.”