

What you will learn in this module

How to use what we know about children's social development to teach social skills to infants and toddlers

Children learn social skills by seeing behavior modeled and talked about.

How to model social behavior for children with disabilities

Children with disabilities may need extra help relating to and learning from their peers.

How to encourage friendships in a childcare setting

Friendships develop when children recognize each other as social partners with similar interests and needs.

How to use what we know about children’s social development to teach social skills to infants and toddlers

Social models

Children learn social skills by seeing behavior modeled and talking about it. This modeling and learning take place in the everyday situations children find themselves in.

“Charles and Keesha are the perfect example of that,” laughed Ms. Lazard. “Charles was fascinated when we enrolled Keesha. Every morning he came and hit her over the head with a book. After the third day, she shrieked and ran when she saw him coming. So I took Charles aside and asked him why he was hitting her over the head with his book. ‘Because I want to read it to her.’ he said.”

“So, okay, it was a social invitation. ‘Well, Charles,’ I told him, ‘that’s not the way you tell her. See her face — she doesn’t like to be hit. It hurts.’ Then I went to Keesha to talk for Charles. ‘He doesn’t want to hurt you. He likes you, but he doesn’t know how to ask you to play.’”



“Next day I took Charles by the hand and said, ‘Let’s see if Keesha wants to look at your book with you. You come over with me and ask her, “Do you want to look at my book?” And if she says yes, go over to the corner and sit down, and you can talk instead of hitting.’”

“So Charles got the chance to see that Keesha would play with him when he asked her.”

Teaching social behavior

We now know that both the structure and the chemistry of children's brains are shaped through social interaction. This means that our behavior towards children determines to a large extent how they develop and what social skills they acquire — how they interact with one another, how they set goals, how they regulate their emotions. Modeling the behavior we want, and offering alternatives to behavior that is unacceptable, help children develop socially.



Teaching social behavior begins at birth. Infants relate first to the people who take care of them. Babies are attached to a tiny circle of parents, grandparents, and teachers. These primary relationships instill in a baby the feelings of security, love, and self-esteem that are the foundation of his understanding of cause and effect — “when I act, others respond.” When a baby is given consistent, loving care he becomes capable of trusting other people. He learns to enjoy being with other people, and relies on his relationships with them to get his needs met. These responsive interactions that teach him the benefits of being with other people are his first lessons in social behavior.

“I love being in the infant room,” said Ms. Chen. “The babies are so interested in you when you walk in. They look up and start making all these little noises to get your attention. Then when you start playing with them, they are so pleased with themselves. Like the other day when I was playing peek-a-boo with Jake — he got this grin on his face that said, ‘aren’t I great? I can play this game!’ ”

“And they love to help! They are so serious about carrying their diapers to the changing area. I think it makes them feel that they’re part of what’s going on and have something to contribute.”