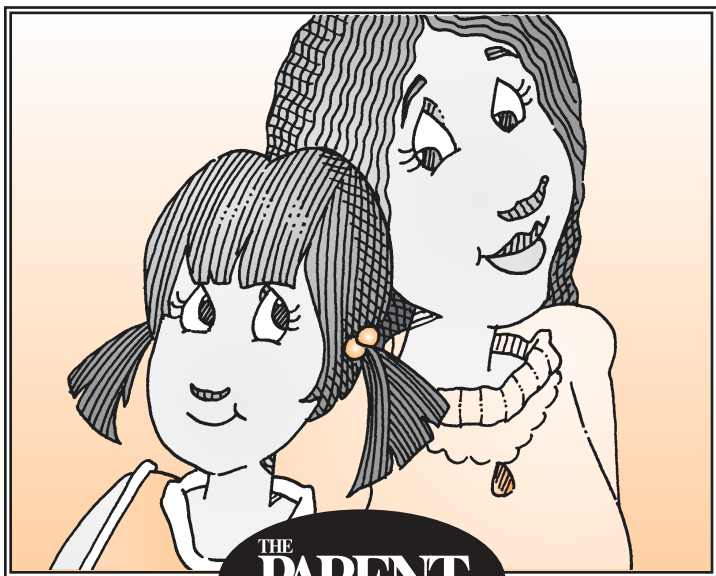
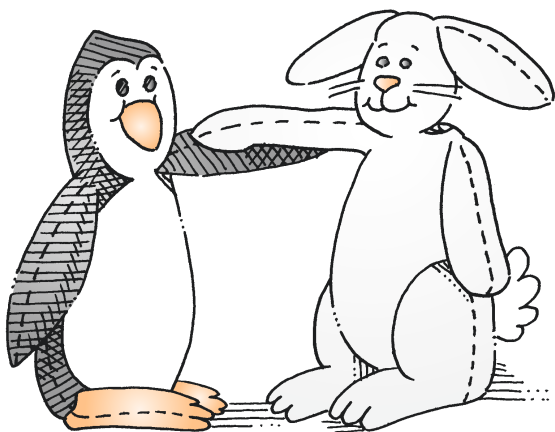




Developing **Social Skills**



One of a Series of Booklets for Parents



Why Is Developing Social Skills So Important?

Most parents wonder what their children will be like as adults. Will they be happy? Will they be successful? There's no way to tell exactly what the future holds, but experts say one factor predicts success better than anything else: social skills. Children who get along with others are more likely to do well in school—and throughout life!

Thankfully, there are many things you can do to help your child develop strong social skills. Being a good role model is key. It's also important to give your child lots of opportunities to interact with you and others.

Using this booklet will help. It describes some of the most important social skills for your child to learn. And it explains how you can teach her these skills through simple and fun activities.



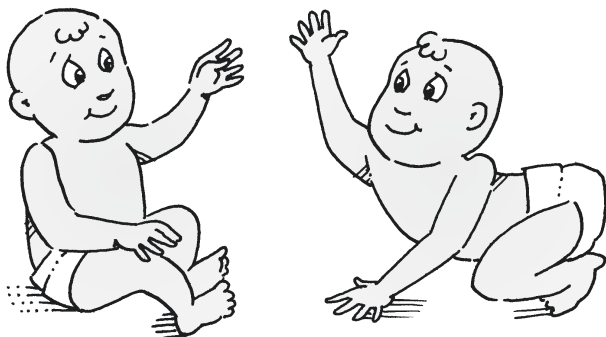
**Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun.*

We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.

Socializing Begins at Birth

Your baby's first social relationship is with you—and he learns a lot from this experience. Every way you communicate with him—from kisses to conversations—teaches him something about socialization. Here are some of the things he'll learn from you:

- **At about three months,** babies learn to smile with meaning. It's their way of saying, "Hi, I'm happy to see you!"



- **Between six and eight months,** babies can enjoy social games like "pat-a-cake." They also use lots of sounds and gestures to express themselves.
- **By one year,** children may say "bye-bye" with encouragement. And they may be affectionate, seeking lots of hugs and cuddles.
- **At two years,** children start learning to share. It's a difficult skill that will improve with time.
- **By three years,** toddlers begin learning about sympathy. It helps them to discuss how other people feel.
- **At age four,** kids love conversations. And they especially enjoy using humor and being silly.
- **Five-year-olds** like helping others. And they're good at asking lots of questions.

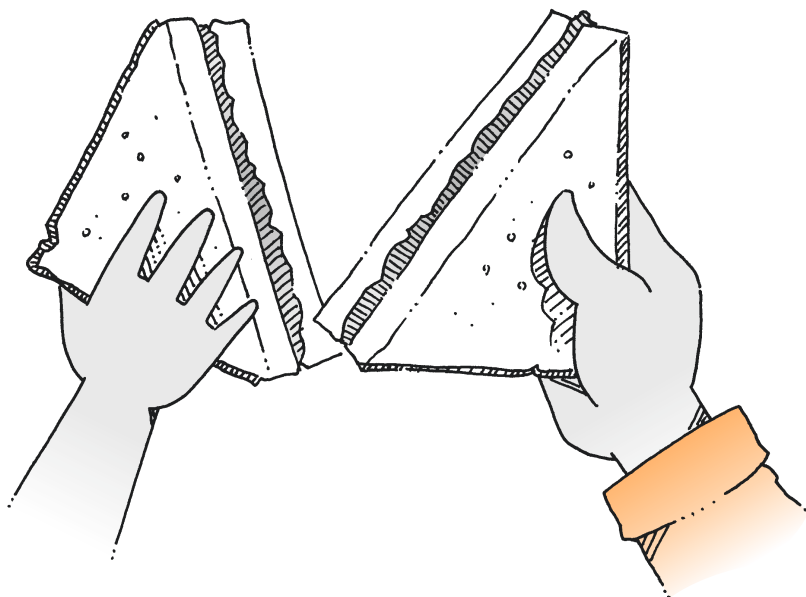
Practice Playing and Working Together

Social skills are just like other abilities—it takes time and practice to get them right. Try working on the following skills with your child—first alone, and then with playmates:

- **Cooperating.** Think of ways you and your child can work together to get something done. Say, “Can you help me sort this laundry so we can leave for the park sooner?” When your child is with a friend or sibling, suggest projects that involve them both. For example, one child might cut pictures from a magazine while the other uses them in a collage.



- **Taking turns.** Play games that involve turns, such as board games, cards and tag. You can also encourage turn-taking during other activities: “Let’s give Amy a turn with the ball.”
- **Winning and losing gracefully.** Winning feels good, and losing helps children learn from mistakes. But kids shouldn’t be overly concerned about either. When playing games that have winners and losers, tell your child that doing her best is what matters most.



- **Sharing.** Toddlers have just learned what “mine” means, so sharing is hard for them. Start by setting a good example: “Would you like half of my sandwich?” or “One for you, and one for me.” Then ask your child to share: “May I have one of your cookies?” As your child grows older, suggest that he share with friends. And when he gives someone a toy, make sure he has something to play with.
- **Communicating.** Use various kinds of communication with your child throughout the day, such as smiling, waving, singing and talking. As your child learns these skills, encourage him to use them with others. Wave at the mailman, sing a song to Grandma or talk with a neighbor.

Help Your Child Make Friends

Making friends is fun for kids—and an important part of their social development. But it's hard to meet friends without parents' help! Here's what you can do:

1. **At six to eight months**, introduce your child to other babies. Although they won't be able to "play" together, they may reach out and touch each other or simply enjoy seeing a peer.
2. **At 12–15 months** enroll your child in a play group. At this age, children like being with others, but still need parents close by. You may notice that many kids "parallel play." This means they play *next to* each other, but not *with* each other. This is normal, and it often changes by age four or five.
3. **By age two**, your child will enjoy playing with others. At first, invite only one child. Once your child builds a small circle of friends, they can all play together.
4. **At age four**, your child will probably enjoy more lengthy play times with other children. She may even have a "best friend." You can encourage interactive play by suggesting joint activities, such as putting together a puzzle.
5. **By age five**, most children have a favorite playmate. Providing props (such as dress-up clothes) for dramatic play is a good way to help kids play together.



Self-Esteem Improves Social Skills

It's easier for children to make friends if they're self-confident. You can help your child feel good about herself with these techniques:

- **Expect your child to succeed.** If *you* believe your child can do well, *she'll* probably think so, too.

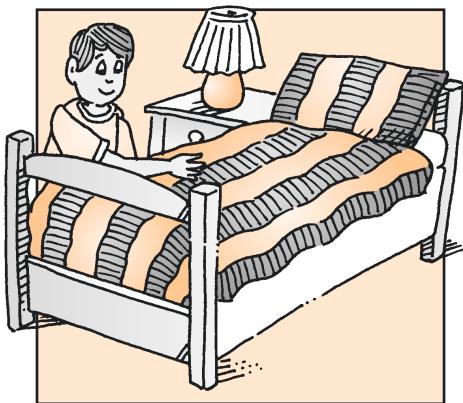


- **Let your child make choices.** For example, you might pick out two outfits and let her choose one. Be sure to support the decision she makes.
- **Help your child learn from mistakes.** You might ask, "What would you do differently next time?"
- **Encourage your child to learn new skills.** Succeeding will give her an "I can do it!" attitude.
- **Praise your child's achievements.** And praise her efforts, even when she doesn't reach a final goal.
- **Tell your child that you will always love her.** All children need to know that they're loved, even when they fail.

Teach Your Child to Be Responsible

Knowing how to follow rules and accept responsibility will help your child get along with others. Here are some ways to teach these skills:

- **Be firm.** Find a balance between being too easy and too tough. A firm parent is very much in charge, but willing to listen.
- **Be fair.** Talk with your child about family rules and why they're important. Make sure rules match your child's abilities.
- **Be consistent.** Children will test you to find limits, so it's important to stick to rules. Bending good rules confuses kids.
- **Give your child responsibilities** he can handle. Completing tasks on his own, such as picking up toys, will give him a sense of independence. And if a job isn't done properly, don't redo it. Instead, explain how your child can improve his work.

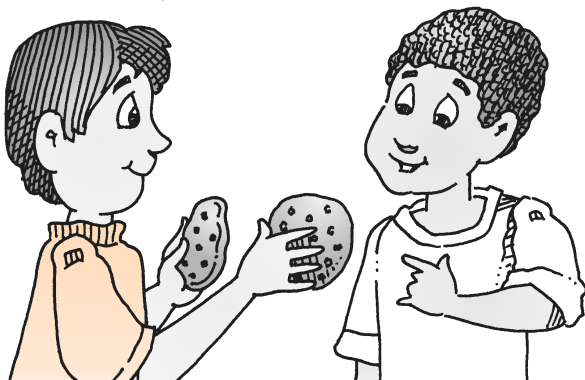


- **Use consequences.** Whenever possible, let your child see the results of his actions. For example, a child who refuses to eat dinner will be hungry later.
- **Use routines.** Routines make it easier to remember what should be done when. For example, every morning your child gets up, makes his bed, gets dressed and eats breakfast.
- **Be positive.** Praise your child when he's behaving well. Praise about three times as much as you criticize.
- **Be a role model.** Make it a priority to complete your own responsibilities and follow rules that apply to you.

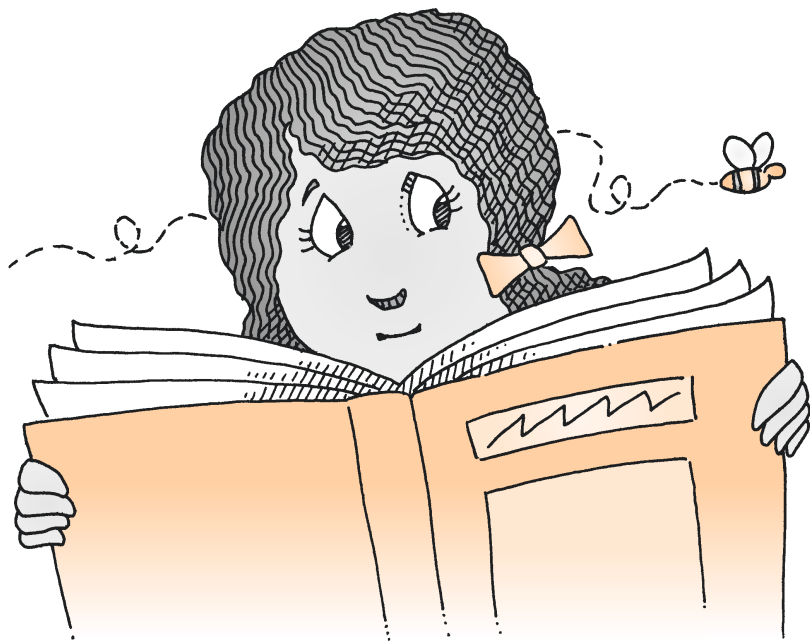
Kids Can Learn to Be Kind

Children (and adults!) have a responsibility not only to themselves, but also to others. Society works best when people treat each other with care and consideration. But kids aren't born knowing how to do this. So teach your child how to:

- **Be polite.** At age two, children can begin learning phrases such as "please," "thank you" and "may I." Use these expressions often in front of your child and encourage your child to use them, too.



- **Do nice things.** Go out of your way to help others with your child. For example, shop together for an elderly neighbor. Or let someone in a hurry get ahead of you in line. As a family, take part in volunteer activities.
- **Give compliments.** Show your child how to look for the good in people. Say, "You look nice today" or "You are fun to play with!"
- **Be tolerant.** It's important for kids to accept and enjoy people's differences. Be sure not to criticize others in front of your child.
- **Empathize.** Understanding how others feel will help your child become more caring. You might practice this by saying, "Todd lost his toy. How do you think he feels right now?"



Paying Attention Pays Off

At school and at home, children need to be able to pay attention. It takes concentration to follow directions, finish tasks and participate in group projects. These activities will help:

- **Read aloud** to your child. Spend at least 10 to 15 minutes a day reading books you both enjoy. Ask your child questions during the story, such as “What do you think will happen next?”
- **Involve your child** in family discussions. Talk about topics that interest her and ask what she thinks.
- **Pick a topic**, such as food or animals. Then see how many items your child can name in that category. You can take turns naming things and picking categories for each other.

- **Have your child** look around the room, paying close attention to what she sees. Then ask her to close her eyes and name everything she remembers. Play again and see if she can remember more.
- **Hide an object** and tell your preschooler how to find it. Give her easy-to-follow steps, such as “Go to the living room, walk to the couch and look under the cushion.”
- **Ask your child to close her eyes.** Then make a sound, such as snapping your fingers or jingling keys. Ask her to guess what you’re doing.



- **Have a mini scavenger hunt.** While outside, ask your child to find certain things. For example, a brown rock, a small twig and a green leaf.
- **Decide to do something for a specific** amount of time. For instance, you might play a favorite sport for five minutes. Then, each day, extend the time by a few minutes.

Problems Are Opportunities to Learn

Sociable kids are good at getting along with others—and disagreeing with them. This doesn't mean they enjoy conflicts. But when problems arise, they know what to do. Here's how you can help:

- **Talk about the Golden Rule:** "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This helps kids put themselves in others' shoes.
- **Role play.** Act out difficult situations with your child, so he's prepared when he faces them. For example, "What would you do if a friend made fun of you?"

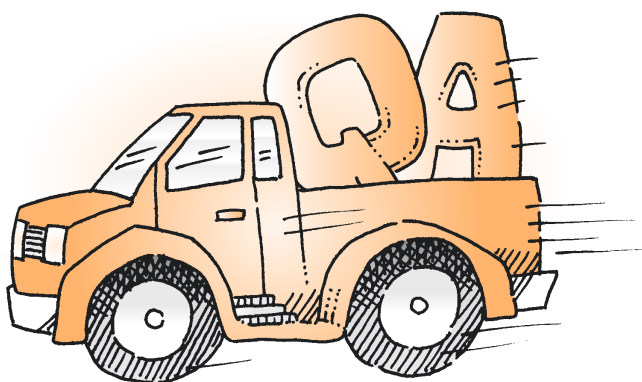


- **Discuss ways to express anger.** Hitting is never okay for parents or kids. But talking, exercising and drawing are all good ways to let out feelings.
- **Solve problems as a family.** Include your child in talks about minor family problems. Take turns listening to each other, then choose a solution together.



- **Practice problem solving.** When your child comes to you with a problem, see if he can solve it first. Say, “What do you think you should do?”
- **Encourage persistence.** When your child is working on a problem, don’t let him give up easily. Make sure he tries his best before you help.
- **Compromise.** When you disagree with your child about something, see if you can meet him halfway. For example, you might let him stay up later if he spends the time looking at books.
- **Admit mistakes.** When you apologize for errors, your child learns that he can, too.

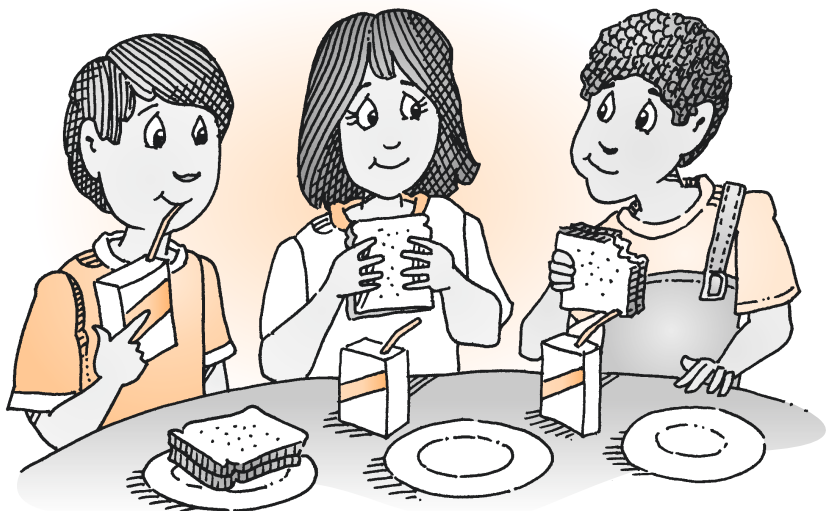
Note: Children should be encouraged to work out disputes themselves. But sometimes conflicts can’t be resolved by kids. For instance, if your child ever feels she’s in danger of being hurt, he should tell an adult right away.



Questions and Answers

- Q. I have a baby boy, but most kids in our neighborhood are girls. Will he mind playing with girls when he's older?**
A. Probably not. Most preschoolers don't consider gender when picking friends.
- Q. My child is outgoing with relatives and friends, but shy around strangers. What should I do?**
A. It's normal for children to withdraw around new people, so don't criticize your child's shyness. Instead, introduce her to others and be patient. Most children become comfortable in new situations if they're given enough time and gentle encouragement.
- Q. My child is having trouble making friends. Kids his age always seem to leave him out. How can I help?**
A. Try having him spend time with a slightly younger child. This can be a confidence-building experience. You can also pair him for an activity with an especially outgoing, popular child. This may help other kids view him in a more positive light. Or consider a smaller play group (of no more than four children), where he's less likely to be ignored.

Good social skills help people in almost everything they do—from enjoying school, to getting jobs, to making friends, to caring for families. Teaching children to get along with others will make their lives—and the lives of those they meet—much more rewarding.



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