



Social Development

Your child began the process of socialization very soon after he or she was born.

As your child acquires language and learns about the culture of your family and community, they also begin to learn the values, norms, behaviors, expectations and social skills that are appropriate for their “world.”

Social skills allow us to communicate our thoughts and feelings to others in both verbal and nonverbal ways. They are the skills we need to make and keep friends and they are necessary for school and life success. Good social skills require good communication skills.

Most children learn social skills naturally, that is they overhear social conversations between their parents, caregivers and other family members; they observe facial expressions and body language that communicate emotions such as happy, sad, angry, disappointed; they hear the changes in tone of voice that provide important information about how the person who is talking feels about what he or she is saying.

Exposure to a variety of interesting social and emotional experiences during the critical period of brain development early in your child’s life will provide an important foundation for their social success later in life.

Just as every word you say builds your child’s brain for language and impacts his or her future, so too do the social skills to which your child is exposed.

When you talk to your child, you may use exaggerated expressions, a sing-song voice, make faces, and use different voice sounds. All of these activities are foundational social skills and are imprinted on your child’s brain for future reference.

Children who are deaf or hard of hearing, may experience difficulty acquiring social skills.

Because language is an integral component of social skills, children who have a loss of hearing are at an increased risk for language deficits.

Additionally, social communication contains nuances, such as tone of voice, that may be missed by children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

It is therefore essential that you give your child’s social skill development the same amount of attention as you devote to their language development. The goal for your child’s language to be



equal to their same age peers by the time they reach kindergarten should also be the goal for their social development. There are many important social skills for your child to learn. You will find it helpful to know what milestones to expect as your child grows. You can find a variety of social skill milestone charts on the Internet.

For example, by six months of age, babies can maintain eye contact, respond to the emotions of others, especially their parents, respond when their name is said, and play peek-a-boo.

By one year, children imitate simple actions, express emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. They can feed themselves small bites of food, and react to unfamiliar situations or people with shyness or nervousness.

By three years, children are more self-assertive, and demonstrate personal preferences. They may have rapid changes in mood and may be defensive about their own possessions.

By six years, children show increased self-control and independence, they develop friendships with other children, understand difference between right and wrong, and empathy emerges.

As you learn what social skills to expect at different ages, you may find yourself surprised that such things as making eye contact and smiling spontaneously are social skills. Eye contact is important during conversations with friends and lets them know you are listening and paying attention,

and being able to feed and dress yourself allows you to be an independent doer and thinker.

Smiling when you see a friend tells your friend you are happy to see them.

Children who are deaf or hard of hearing are vulnerable to social problems. They may have difficulty keeping up with the pace of a conversation, especially when a group of children are talking. Or they may have difficulty jumping into a conversation.

One of the biggest challenges your child will face is listening in noisy places—classrooms, playgrounds, skating rinks, sporting events, and birthday parties. In these settings, your child may miss important information that is said or have difficulty following a conversation. Your child may benefit from having a “listening buddy” identified to help him or her “hear” all the important things the teacher says.

Make sure your child knows how to tell others about his or her hearing loss—even at a young age your child should be able to say “I don’t hear as well as you do; my hearing aids/cochlear implants help me hear; I like to read, swing and go swimming.”

When important information is missed, your child risks making a comment or responding inappropriately to a question or situation. As a result, other children might laugh or make fun of



your child. They might not understand that your child's loss of hearing makes it difficult to hear in noise.

Help them practice what they might say in this situation. For example, "You are my friend and it is important to me to hear what you said. Please tell me again."

The ability to initiate, maintain and end a conversation is essential for making friends. Your child must be able to read social signals, solve problems and resolve conflicts—skills that are essential for getting along with others. It is critical for you to teach your child how to cope with difficult hearing situations so that he or she maintains positive self-esteem and learns to become his or her own advocate.

As the parent, you play a major role in teaching your child social skills. Many of the activities you naturally engage in with your child are opportunities to teach social skills.

When you coo to your baby or talk with your child, you are modeling facial expressions, language and behaviors important to social success.

When you read books together, you use intonation to convey emotions and attitudes and you can discuss how a character did or did not do something in a socially acceptable way.

You can role-play and practice new skills or those that are difficult for your child.

You can help your child practice listening in noisy situations and how to follow rapid-paced conversations. Most of all, you can make sure your child is acquiring the skills they will need to experience social success.