

Thinking About Promoting Social Skills in Preschool

Teachers sometimes consider children with limited interest in social play and peer interactions as enjoying their own company, independent in play or still in the solitary play phase of development. While this can all be true, it can also be part of a bigger picture, as some children need support to 'learn' how to engage in play with peers.

Social play, shared play and collaborative play all have a significant role in increasing a child's social skill development including cooperation, emotional self-control, turn taking, waiting and sharing. But to develop positive social skills, children need to learn from adults and older children, and then to be able to practice these learnt skills within their peer group. This is socialisation (the process of learning how to get along with others) and is different from socialising.

Adults within the kindergarten setting need to support children to strengthen their social skills by role modelling and offering feedback so that children can learn about emotions, empathy, conflict resolution and self-control. If adult guidance is limited, children will struggle. Because adults have well developed social skills, they can influence children to develop behaviours like understanding others' perspectives, cooperation, offering help, showing sympathy, extending forgiveness, making amends and observing social etiquette.

To support children to engage in social play and to strengthen social skills, educators can:

- Develop warm and nurturing relationships with children,
- Join in with children's play when appropriate to help extend and increase complexity and model appropriate play and interactions,
- Encourage and scaffold conversations between children,
- Acknowledge children's feelings and help children to label them,
- Show and teach children how to solve problems,
- Explain the reasons for rules calmly and sensitively when 'behaviour' occurs,
- Praise good choices and challenge children to think of ways they could do better (constructive approach).
- Model and discuss how to apologise, make amends, offer forgiveness and express gratitude.

Once children have settled into the preschool program, have become familiar with their peers, educators and the daily routine, most children will, over time show an increasing interest in some type of joint play with their peers. If you notice a child who consistently plays alone, it is helpful to support that child to engage in play with one other child or small group. There are children who just need a little encouragement to engage with others so that they can feel the enjoyment that comes with social play and develop confidence to enter play. For some children, this does not come easily or naturally and some targeted teaching and guidance is all they need to progress to being more social in their play.

Although a major part of your role as an educator is to supervise children to keep them safe, don't be afraid to become involved in children's play while keeping alert and mindful of all that is going on around you. We know that children learn best from having the opportunity to engage in long, uninterrupted blocks of free play, but play can be so much more meaningful and positive when there is some adult guidance as well.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of watching children play and only interacting with them when there is a problem e.g. putting out spot fires. Children will benefit so much more when adults share ideas and encourage children to share theirs, and where opportunities are taken for educators to specifically teach social skills.

Reference: *Preschool Social Skills: Evidence Based Tips.* G. Dewar