

# GROWING IDEAS

## Friends & Feelings: Social-Emotional Development in Young Children



### What is social-emotional development?

Social-emotional development involves the ability to form close, secure relationships and to experience, regulate, and express emotions. Social-emotional growth is affected by a variety of factors, such as an individual's unique biology and temperament, as well as life experiences.

- “Social” refers to how individuals interact with others.
- “Emotional” refers to how individuals feel about themselves, others, and the world.

### Why support young children's social-emotional development?

When children feel good about themselves, have positive relationships with others, and know how to regulate their emotions, they are more likely to:

- Succeed in group situations, such as school or community settings.
- Be able to concentrate and learn.
- Effectively communicate their feelings.
- Develop confidence and self-esteem.
- Develop attachment.

### What is attachment and how is it related to social-emotional development?

Attachment refers to the caring relationships that develop between a child and important people in his or her life. These special relationships help a child feel safe, as well as develop trust and independence. Secure attachments to primary adults provide the foundation for social-emotional development.

### Early childhood educators can support the development of attachments by:

- Making sure every child has a primary adult who is there daily to provide support and help develop strong, positive relationships.
- Responding promptly and appropriately to children's verbal and non-verbal messages.
- Getting to know children's family members, beliefs, and family culture in order to understand, appreciate, and honor family perspectives.
- Using observations, reflection, and actions to ensure every child is cared for, respected, and develops positive self-esteem.
- Encouraging emotional self-regulation.

## What is emotional self-regulation and how is it related to attachment?

Emotional self-regulation refers to a child's ability to control emotions and impulses. It is influenced by the quality of attachments and by developmental level.

- As infants, children need adults to help them deal with strong emotions; but as they grow and learn, children develop self-control.
- Children begin to develop an awareness of their own emotions and to understand that other people have emotions, too.
- Interactions with family members, caregivers, peers, and other community members influence a child's emotions and ability to cope with feelings.

### When needed, provide extra support to help children build relationships by offering:

- Guidance to learn how to make friends.
- Extra hugs and positive comments during the day.
- Opportunities to help or do something special with one adult.

- Having pictures, photos of familiar people, and artwork created by children displayed at child's level.
- Offering a variety of materials and toys that are developmentally appropriate and support interactions, such as blocks, wagons, puppets, and balls.



### Plan the curriculum to include social and emotional learning activities, such as the following:

- During group time, use puppets, books, and stories to name, describe, and learn about feelings.
- Provide opportunities for children to express feelings and ideas through play, art, music, movement, sensory, and other activities.
- Offer activities that match children's interests, preferences, and learning styles.

## How can adults support the social-emotional growth of young children?

- Respond to each child's needs with warmth and respect by smiling, touching, or talking.
- Model appropriate behaviors by interacting with other adults and children in ways that create a climate of kindness and generosity.
- Recognize and respond to pro-social behavior.
- Acknowledge and identify children's feelings.
- Understand and adapt for each child's body rhythms, temperament, and personality.

## Early childhood educators can design an environment that helps children feel supported by:

- Creating routines that are predictable but flexible.
- Designing learning spaces that are orderly and allow for quiet alone time, small group time, and busy, active play.
- Providing learning materials that are stored and organized so that they can be used by all children.

### Where to learn more:

Katz, L.G., & McClellan, D. (1997). *Fostering Children's Social Competence*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education for Young Children.

*Social and Emotional Development*. (2002). Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://www.zerotothree.org/tips/social-emotional.html>

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. (n.d.) Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://csefel.uiuc.edu/index.html>



Maine's Network of Child Care  
Resource Development Centers

C E N T E R F O R

COMMUNITY INCLUSION & DISABILITY STUDIES

Maine's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service

<http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/>



A Member of the University of Maine System

Revised: 07/27/2006