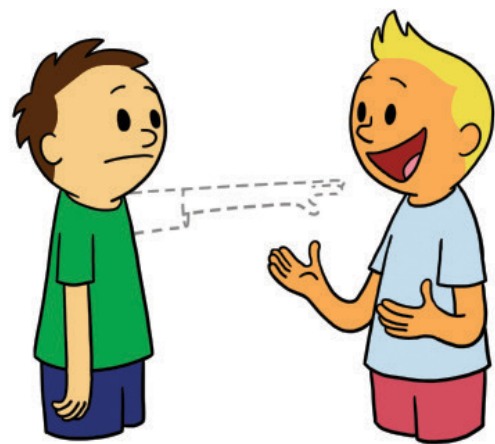



# A guide for developing social and emotional skills



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# Introduction

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Many families wonder what the difference is between play and social skills. The answer is that social skills encompass all the skills people use to communicate and interact with other people, both verbal (what we say) and non-verbal (our gestures, body language and facial expressions). Play, however, is the medium through which children learn, practise and utilise their social skills.

For young children, play is a platform where they learn about themselves and the world around them, and develop their cognitive and motor skills, and their relationships with others. As a person develops, play gives way to other important social skills such as social rules and conversation.

This guide for Developing Social and Emotional Skills is for children who can play collaboratively with adults (taking turns, directing play, and allowing an adult to direct play) and are showing an active interest in interacting with their peers.

For children who are currently being supported to work on these skills, you may be interested in starting with the guide for Developing Play Skills. You can find this resource on our Aspect website at [shop.autismspectrum.org.au](http://shop.autismspectrum.org.au).

Throughout this guide the term 'parent' will be used to describe a child's parent, carer or guardian.



# What are social and emotional skills?

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## Social skills

A social skill is any skill that is involved in interaction and communication with others. This includes verbal and non-verbal skills. Although many people think of social skills in terms of play skills, talking with others, adhering to social etiquette and the negotiation of friendships, many other skills form the foundations for social situations. Some of these include the ability to identify, understand and respond to emotions in others and also to regulate one's own emotions (see below section on Emotional skills), resolve conflict, and learn about the hidden rules that exist in social situations.

Social skills begin to develop in early infancy with the first exchanges of eye gaze, smiling and babbling sounds occurring between a parent and infant as they feed and play. A child may then use this eye gaze and non-verbal body gestures such as to share an exciting experience with a parent or to alert them to something that they see in their environment.

During early childhood, social skills begin to develop with the negotiation of play with others. This includes being able to play with others in their play space, take turns, and be able to both direct play and follow the lead of others. Children typically develop these skills by watching their peers, experimenting through copying them and adapting to changes as they go.

During the primary years, social skills start to revolve around the development of a friendship group. Some important skills may be understanding the natural give and take of friendships in terms of what games they are playing, winning and losing, and managing frustration and anger.

As a child gets older, sarcasm and joking around begin to enter the social atmosphere. These go hand in hand with a whole set of hidden social rules about what is okay and not okay in different situations, such as when to report something to a teacher, and what to talk about in conversations. Children typically learn these rules by what they are told by others, by watching others and through trial and error.



## Emotional skills

Emotions are a natural instinctive state of mind arising from a person's circumstances, mood or relationships with others. This state of mind is characterised by feelings such as happiness, anger or sadness. The processing of emotions is two-fold; processing others emotions and processing one's own. There are three steps in the process; identification, understanding, and responding/regulating.

Identifying emotions in oneself and others is based on past experience of visual and auditory cues. These cues can include sounds such as crying and laughing, the intonation of voice (either raised or quiet), eye gaze, mouth position, body language, and other visual clues such as tears on the person's face.

The process of understanding emotions is enabled by placing the identified emotion in the context of the circumstances or the person's relationship with others. Contextual events can include falling off a bike, hurting oneself, having a toy taken away or not being able to have a toy, enjoying an activity, having an upcoming exciting event, being at a birthday party, or receiving a gift.

The process of responding to emotions in others in an appropriate way follows from understanding the context and matching appropriate responses while considering their relationship to the person. Examples include asking if they are alright if someone is sad because they hurt themselves or joining in smiling because you are happy that the person likes the present you have given them.

Regulating one's own emotions follows from identifying and understanding what emotions one is experiencing and why. Once a child can do this, they can match their actions accordingly. An example of a child being able to regulate their own emotions can be seen when a child who is known to lash out when they "get out" during an activity, instead approaches an adult to ask for help, plays with a fidget toy to help them regulate, or does some deep breathing and self-talk about it being okay.





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**Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)**

ABN 12 000 637 267

Tower B Level 5, 821 Pacific Highway

Chatswood NSW 2067

PO BOX 697

Chatswood NSW 2057

1800 ASPECT (1800 277 328)

[customerservice@autismspectrum.org.au](mailto:customerservice@autismspectrum.org.au)

[autismspectrum.org.au](http://autismspectrum.org.au)