



# When Parents Should Be Concerned About Their Preschool Child’s Social-Emotional Development

As a parent, you are in a great position to track your child’s physical growth and development of age appropriate skills. It is just as important that you track their social-emotional development. When parents begin thinking about preparing their child for kindergarten, they often focus on helping them learn pre-kindergarten skills. There’s no doubt that it’s important for a child to recognize letters, numbers, and colors, but research now shows that a child’s social-emotional development is also critical to their ability to learn and be successful in school.

Parents play a critical role in their child’s social and emotional development. Creating a warm and nurturing environment and relationship with your child gives them a sense of security and predictability. When you are responsive to your child’s needs, you are helping your child to learn to react appropriately to their emotions. In an Individualized Education Program (IEP), this is often referred to as the ability to self-regulate. Self-regulation is important in helping them learn to recognize and manage their own emotions and understand the emotions of others.

It is also important to remember that each child has a unique temperament and personality. Your child may be even-tempered or feisty, outgoing or shy. Their temperament and personality impacts how they react to their environment. Understanding your child’s temperament will help you to support them and provide the safe, nurturing environment they need.

Your child’s disability may also impact the development of their social skills. A child with communication delays may have difficulty talking to or being understood by peers. As a result, the child may avoid interacting with other children. A child who has difficulty with attention and staying on task might struggle to focus on playing a game or finishing an activity with peers. A child who has a delay in their ability to self-regulate may struggle when they are frustrated or are not allowed to control an activity or conversation. These types of delays can be dealt with through your child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) by developing goals and objectives to help your child increase their social and emotional skills.

The following chart is designed to assist parents in understanding some of the markers for typical social and emotional development in preschoolers. While it is not comprehensive, this chart can help you identify behaviors that are a concern over a period of time. If concerns continue, you should contact your child’s health care provider or make a referral through [Help Me Grow](#), a resource that will help you with a referral to your home school district.

Typical Behavior for Children Ages 3-5	Behavior of Concern	Suggestion for Parent Action
Adjusts to new situations without an adult being present	Becomes anxious when separated from parents even in a familiar location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support your child to develop trust in other consistent adults</li> <li>Help your child prepare for something new by pretend playing about what they might be nervous about such as going to preschool or staying overnight with grandparents</li> </ul>

*Chart continued on next page*

Typical Behavior for Children Ages 3-5	Behavior of Concern	Suggestion for Parent Action
Recognizes and responds to others' emotional expressions	Seems unaware of the feelings of others and how their actions might impact those around them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use books and videos to talk about the feelings of others. Ask about how a character in the book or video might be feeling</li> <li>• Identify feelings and emotions that you see in your child and talk about them</li> <li>• Talk about your own feelings and why you are feeling a certain way</li> <li>• Show your child that their thoughts and feelings matter. Allow them to express both positive and negative feelings</li> </ul>
Is beginning to understand when to use social/emotional resources such as adults, peers, or things for support	Becomes frustrated and has a hard time maintaining self-control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urge your child to use words to ask for help</li> <li>• Help your child learn strategies to deal with frustration</li> <li>• Teach your child ways to calm themselves when they are feeling strong emotions</li> <li>• Help your child learn problem-solving skills</li> <li>• Praise your child when they handle frustration in an appropriate way</li> </ul>
Is learning to take turns, share, and cooperate with others	Is unable to join in and play with other children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach your child how to play games, understand the rules, and be a gracious winner or loser. This is also an opportunity to teach your child to cooperate with peers, resolve conflicts, and build and maintain friendships</li> </ul>
Uses words or signs to express emotions instead of acting out physically (such as when angry or frustrated)	Has meltdowns or throws tantrums when angry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support appropriate expression of feelings</li> <li>• Gently and consistently help your child manage feelings and control behavior. Help your child learn the words or signs to express their feelings</li> <li>• Teach your child ways to deal with different emotions. Talk about appropriate and inappropriate ways to deal with them</li> </ul>
Shows increasing ability to initiate and join in positive interactions and activities with peers and adults (easily joins in with others in an activity)	Is unusually withdrawn or seems sad. Has difficulty joining in and getting along with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure your child has regular social contact with other children their age, both one-on-one and in a group</li> <li>• If your child is shy, give them time to observe the group for a while. Explain to them what is going on and help them join the group</li> <li>• Support your child in learning how to join in activities with others</li> <li>• Teach your child how to invite another child to play with them</li> </ul>

### Additional resource

Read the PACER Center handout, [“If You Have Concerns: When and How to Request a Special Education Evaluation for Your Preschool Child”](#)

If you have questions, please call PACER Center at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak to an early childhood advocate or email [PACER@PACER.org](mailto:PACER@PACER.org).