

Fact Sheet

Fostering Children's Social Competence

General Overview

Building and maintaining relationships is complex and an important need for all humans. This development of social skills in young children takes a long time to learn and relies heavily on the patience and understanding of adults. According to Willard Hartup (1991) "The single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, school grades nor classroom behaviour but rather the adequacy with which a child gets along with other children."

Emphasis on strengthening social competence in young children does not imply that all children become "social butterflies" and are popular with all children. Assessing the social development should be based on the quality not quantity.

Children need several kinds of social knowledge to form friendships. This includes knowledge of the norms and social customs, sufficient mastery of language and opportunities for participation in various peer-group play experiences.

Food for Thought

There are many underlying causes in which young children can have difficulties being accepted socially such as:

- Developing use of language
- May have difficulty in stating their own feelings and desires
- May be shy or withdrawn
- May behave as though they do not want to interact with their peers
- May be frightened of their peers physical appearance e.g. taller, larger
- May depend on their home environment i.e. child may have more contact with adults rather than peers
- May not yet have achieved the developmental milestones of sharing, turn taking or co-operative play
- May be the first time the child is in care
- May be still highly dependent on the adult and continually interrupting the adults interaction with other children.

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- The number of children with a group in which the child must interact may be too large for the child's social development.

Strategies to support parents and childcare workers

The following strategies are just some examples which may be applied to support children's social competence. This list is only the start and it is dependent on a variety of factors such as environment, length of time child is in care, child's interest, likes, dislikes and skills already achieved.

- Create personal space boundaries e.g. rug/mat, hula hoop
- Allow children to contribute in making their own personal space
- Help children express and understand their emotions by asking questions e.g. "tell me more", "how do you feel about that?"
- Help children to understand other children's feelings by asking questions. E.g. "how do you think Billy feels about that?"
- Assist children to understand how it feels e.g. "Robin has been waiting a long time and you know how it feels to wait".
- Acknowledge the child's feelings/emotions "I can understand that you are sad"
- Encourage alternative interpretations of other's behaviour e.g. children may be using nicknames that are inappropriate such as "weirdo, cry-baby, sissy"
- Cultivate a constructive environment to discourage labellers by asking the child to consider other ways of interpreting the labelled child's behaviour.
- Find "common ground" interests of each child to foster friendships
- Create "feelings" books/pictures/posters that show different emotions e.g. sad, happy angry.
- Provide words to help children talk about how they feel.
- Provide activities/group time experiences that allow children to practice identify emotions/feelings e.g. emotion face masks with sad, happy etc
- Use mirrors for children to show different emotions
- Read stories about emotions and feelings.
- Use music and movement to identify differing emotions.
- Set and clarify non-negotiable limits e.g. "it's okay to be angry but it is not okay to hit/pinch.
- To help children recognise other people's feelings ask questions such as "How do you think Jane feels? How can you tell she is angry, sad etc".



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- Provide opportunities for children to work in pairs. This helps with their self worth and self esteem.
- Utilise the dramatic play area for children to learn and understand about emotions and feelings and co-operative play.

References

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