A parent's guide to...

social skills

From empathising with others' feelings and needs to winning and losing games gracefully, *Penny Tassoni* provides some top tips for encouraging social skills in young children

Social skills are the conventions and actions that children need to learn in order to make and keep friends, but also to flourish as they move from home into other social situations. Children who have strong social skills often have an easier journey through childhood before going out into the wider world.

FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

Here are five things that all parents need to know about supporting their children's social skills:

1. Moving from 'me' to 'us'

Many aspects of social skills are linked to how easily a child can think about what others might think, feel and need. The ability to think about others as well as oneself takes time to develop in young children, and skills such as not expecting others to immediately meet and prioritise your needs if they are already busy are very difficult. Many social skills are linked to other areas of development including cognition, language and emotional development.

2. Language matters

While children are born to enjoy being with others, in terms of learning the social skills of being co-operative and patient, the development of language seems to play its part. This is because language seems to help children to control and regulate their own behaviour. This is sometimes called self-regulation and is needed in order for children to do simple tasks such as wait their turn.

3. Adults act as navigators

Parents and other key adults in children's lives play an essential part in helping children to learn social skills. First, children learn a lot from simply watching and listening to how the important adults in their lives behave and talk to others in daily life.

Everything from holding a door open for someone to taking a turn in a queue is unconsciously noted by children. Later such social acts, along with an explanation of why they are important, become powerful roadmaps for your child to navigate with in social situations.

4. Opportunities to enjoy thinking of others

Very early on, children need to learn that thinking about others can be rewarding. Babies and toddlers, for example, may spontaneously try to feed their favourite adults at mealtimes or as part of their play. Such actions need to be greeted with pleasure so that children learn to associate helping and thinking about others with positive response.

5. Three: the magic age!

In many ways the real breakthrough in children's social skills comes at around three years old. Providing that children have good language and have been guided to show skills such as turn-taking and helping out, they can often of their own volition play co-operatively with others and wait for their turn. Of course, all bets are off if they are tired or if this is done over an extended period of time.

PHOTOS ADOBE STOCK

SKILLS TO ENCOURAGE

While some aspects of social development are linked to children's overall development, there are a few tangible skills that are worth encouraging:

Asking before touching or taking

One of the skills that children need to learn when they venture into early years settings or other people's homes is that they cannot touch or take anything they want. Children under three find this particularly hard as they are naturally impulsive, but it is important to teach children this as they become older.

There many ways in which children can practise this skill, including when you are out shopping or having in your home some cupboards or areas where your child learns that they need to ask first.

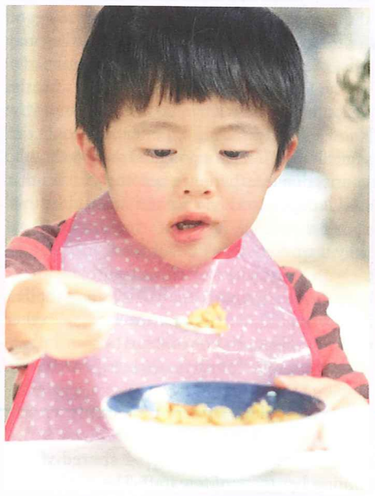
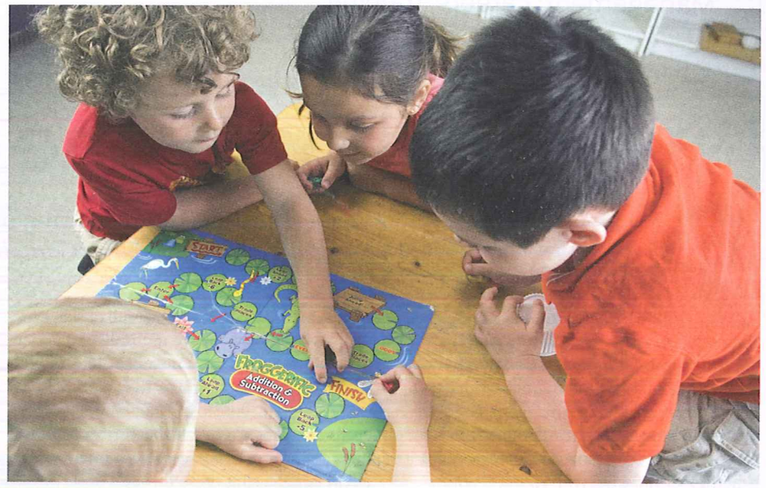


Table manners have their own conventions



Children need to learn how to win and lose games well in order to avoid unpopularity

Table manners

While many families have their own set of conventions when it comes to eating, it is important that your child can adapt to the conventions that are in place in their early years setting or school. These are likely to involve sitting down when eating and waiting for food to be served.

Children need also to learn how to say in an appropriate way that they have eaten enough or that they do not like the taste of a food. Pushing a plate away and saying 'it's horrible' rarely endears a child to the adult who has prepared the meal. Over time, you should also make sure that your child can use cutlery appropriate to their age and learn to eat with their mouth closed.

'Please' and 'thank you'

There are very strong conventions in relation to when 'please' and 'thank you' are used. Interestingly, these conventions are not universal in all languages. In English, 'please' will often be added after 'yes' when something is being offered. 'Would you like more banana?' 'Yes, please'. Similarly, anything that has been received is usually acknowledged by a 'thank you'.

When children do not use these conventions, adults will often pick up on them and may perceive a child as being impolite. It is therefore helpful if you help your child to use these conventions so that they become automatic.

Learning to win and lose well

From around the age of four, games where there are winners and losers are often part of children's play. Such games may also be used to help groups of children learn or practise concepts.

Children who have not learnt how to win and lose gracefully are likely to be unpopular with their peers. While it can be tempting to always let your child win when playing a game, learning how to cope when you do not win is an important skill and best practised with people who love you.

Finally, it is worth remembering that learning social skills will be a journey for your child. There will be times when your child forgets to say 'thank you' or is impatient to have their go. Don't despair or panic. Instead, just keep on reminding, praising and at times giving a few cautionary words. ■