

HELPING YOUR CHILD BUILD SOCIAL SKILLS

What are social skills?

Social skills are the skills we use to interact and to communicate with one another. They encompass a wide range of interpersonal abilities including: **making and maintaining friendships, showing empathy, participating in group activities, sharing, being helpful, communicating with others, negotiating, and problem solving just to name a few.**

Social skills also involve the ability to both the use and understand verbal and non-verbal social cues

Examples of verbal social cues are the **tone and volume of our voices, or the words we choose when we are communicating with others**

Non-verbal social cues include: **body language, facial expression, our physical gestures, and eye contact**

Why are they important?

Social skills play a very important role in children's social and emotional health. They help kids create meaningful friendships, they facilitate communication with parents, teachers, peers, and others. They also help kids to "read" and react appropriately to social cues and social situations, they benefit learning, and build self-esteem.

Social skills are developed:

Kid's acquire and build upon different social skills throughout life. While all children develop at different rates, it can be helpful to know what social skills are developmentally appropriate for different age groups so you can determine when help might be needed:

4- to 5-year-olds: typical social competencies include being able to cooperate with other children more, use direct requests (like "Stop"), are more prone to tattling, and begin to try on different social roles--pretend to be a Mom or a Dad during play.

5- to 6-year-olds: are able to please their friends, say "I'm sorry," "Please," and "Thank you," understand bad words, are able to play competitive games, and understand what it means to play fairly and what being a good sport looks like.

6- to 7-year-olds: are able to empathize with others (like crying at sad things), are prone to sharing, use posture and gestures to communicate, wait for turns and accept when they lose during a game. They are also less likely to place blame, and listen to others points of view. At this age, however, they still can't understand the clear difference between right and wrong, and may not take direction well.

8-9 year olds: are better able to work in groups and group problem solve, and they can better appreciate and respect differences of opinions with others. They have better conflict-resolution skills and are more likely to solve peer conflict without the assistance or intervention of adults.

These are just some general guidelines and it should be noted that while there are some children who are better at socializing and making friends (just like some kids are better at math or reading), most kids will struggle in one or more areas throughout development.

For example, most kids will have difficulties when resolving conflicts with peers. Some kids may be more hesitant in social situations, or have some anxiety when meeting new people or in large groups. For kids with learning and attention issues or speech delays it is common to see some difficulties when communicating or socializing with others.

Like all things, these struggles occur on a spectrum with some kids having more difficulties than others.

The good news is that kids can and will continue to build these abilities throughout development, and even if they are struggling, these skills can be learned and improved.

So, how can we help kids build their social skills?

Services at the school:

Here at the school we've implemented several services to enhance student's social development:

- 1) Social skills groups-Friendship Circle
 - a. 2 groups-pre-K/K & 1-3
 - b. Specific topics each group where kids have the opportunity to learn concrete skills and to practice them en vivo with a small group of peers through instruction, read-alouds, games, and small group activities.
- 2) Pushing into classrooms to help address specific social struggles that are coming up within the classroom setting. For example, pushing in to the Jaguars, 2x/month to help the class work on skills together. Some of the topics have included, group problem solving, tone of voice, and volume of voice.

3) Individual one-to-one sessions with students who would benefit from extra support but who need individual attention first before working in a small group.

What parents can do to help:

1) If your child who is having difficulties making friends or sharing in a large group - Because it is often easier for children to make friends in their own space, one on one, it can be extremely helpful for parents to make connections with school friends at home. Planning playdates with one classmate can make a close connection to a new friend which can then carry over into the classroom setting.

Ask your child whom they would like to invite for a playdate. Write a plan beforehand that includes all the different things the kids can do together. You can also discuss ahead of time any situations that could be uncomfortable or that your child is worried about. You can even role-play and practice greetings and manners beforehand. During the play date have your child offer their guest three activities to pick from. Have them take turns picking activities from there, to avoid conflict and to help teach compromise.

Help your child build social skills:

- 1) Behavioral modeling is the most effective way that parents can help their kids build social skills. Modeling positive social skills includes showing confidence ourselves when we relate to others, being friendly to others, offering to help others, and also treating our kids with respect (no matter how much they might be pulling at our last straw). Make eye contact and give your full attention when speaking with your child and others.
- 2) Praise your child when they exhibit prosocial behavior
- 3) When interpersonal issues arise, help your child to brainstorm and or role-play possible solutions
- 4) When your child intentionally or unintentional treats someone else unkindly or disrespectfully, make sure to address either in the moment or afterward, if you are concerned it will embarrass your child
- 5) Activities and games can provide additional help in developing specific skills.

For example, if your child needs help with reading social cues:

- a. For children who have a difficult time recognizing and responding to facial expressions: Making verbal statements about your child's facial expressions, helps them to recognize their own physical expressions of emotion and the expressions of other kids
 - i. E.g. "Your eyebrows are raised, are you feeling surprised?" or "That's a big smile. Tell me what you are feeling so happy about"
 - ii. Play emotions charades or help your child draw different feelings faces
- b. Notice others body language and talk about it with your child helps them to understand that people communicate with their bodies. Or, when watching kid-

friendly TV shows turn the sound off and ask your child what the characters are doing and what certain movements might mean.

- c. Discuss ahead of time what is expected in different social situations—who might get a high five while others may get a more formal “hello”. Role play different scenarios for practice.

Social Skills Resources

1) Websites:

- a. understood.org (tech finder and parenting tool are excellent!)
- b. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL): <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

2) Books For Kids:

- a. It's My Turn! by David Bedford
- b. Too Loud Lily by Sofia Laguna
- c. I Can't Believe You Said That! by Julia Cook
- d. I Want to Play by Elizabeth Creary
- e. We are Best Friends by Alik
- f. But it's not my Fault! by Julia Cook

For a more comprehensive list of children's books visit the CSEFEL website: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/booklist.pdf>

3) Apps:

- a. Sesame Street-Breathe, Think, Do
- b. My Play Home
- c. Toca Kitchen
- d. Model Me Going Places
- e. Social Skills

4) The School:

For questions or concerns you have about your child's social, emotional or behavioral development, please contact me at melissab@thecoopschool.org