

Helping Children to Develop Social Competence

Competence in building and maintaining relationships with others involves a complex interplay of feelings, thoughts, and skills. While these components take a long time to learn, their foundations are laid in early childhood by responsive, patient, and supportive parents, teachers, and other adults, and in the context of a variety of opportunities to interact with peers. (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Social competence is made up of a number of components:

- Emotion regulation
- Social knowledge and understanding
- Social skills, and
- Social dispositions (enduring habits of mind or ways of responding in situations)

For example: a basic competence required for successful peer-group interaction is turn taking. To take turns successfully a child must:

- * **Be able to postpone her wishes (emotion regulation)**
- * **Understand that taking turns is expected and normal in the social context (social knowledge)**
- * **Behave appropriately when her turn comes (social skills), and**
- * **Respond this way each time turn taking is required (social dispositions)**

As with other areas of development, the components of social competence take time and practice for young children to master, but are essential skills for life and learning. Many school learning experiences are based on small and large group work. When children's social skills are well developed they engage more effectively in these activities.

Following are some thoughts about children's social development, and strategies that we use at kindy and which may be useful at home:

- Children are individuals and as with other areas of development and learning, their abilities to handle social situations may be different from another child's. Take care not to compare children and their social skills. They are all engaged in a lifelong learning experience. Some may need more time or practice in one area of development than others.
- Children will often come home with tales of woe regarding friendships: "So-and-so said they weren't my friend!" etc. Try not to over-react or to engage into lengthy discussions. Children can read your "vibes". If they sense you are worried or anxious or that you will solve their problems, they may well play on that for attention. A little tough (objective) love or "rational compassion" can help enormously.
- Young children generally see the world from their perspective only. It is very hard for them to see another's point of view. They may actually neglect to tell you how they excluded the same person from play the day before, or that they only wanted everyone to play their way. *There are usually two sides to every story.*
- Acknowledge your child's feelings. It is OK to feel sad or disappointed, but don't dwell on them. One of the most important attitudes we can help children to develop is resilience and the emotional perspective to distinguish between what is a tragedy and what is not. Being able to cope with, and move on from disappointments in life is a valuable skill. Young children should not be encouraged to think it is a disaster if they miss a turn with a toy or that they must always get what they want. Being able to face the disappointments in life with a sense of good humour is a special gift we can give children.
- Don't encourage your child to feel they are a victim when social problems arise. Rather than focussing on how someone may have treated them badly, concentrate on empowering your child. Problem solving is a **BIG** part of what we do at kindy and this is important in social situations too. Encourage your child to

brainstorm possible actions they may take: “What could you do if Mary won’t let you play?” Accept all answers without judging – (eg tell the teacher, cry, go and play with someone else, ask them again, ask another person to play, move to an activity you like to do) – and then help them to select the most appropriate one to try.

- Children may say “So-and-so hurt my feelings”. Encouraging this response places them at the mercy of someone else. It makes them a victim. It is important to acknowledge that instantaneous feeling of sadness or disappointment; “I bet you felt a little sad about that?” but then begin to empower them by reminding them that other people cannot make them feel one way or another – feelings are controlled by their own brain, they are in charge of their feelings. Help them to find ways to change their feelings – play with different people, move on to an activity they enjoy, have a cold drink and relax and then go back to play. As adults we should also avoid placing a child in the position of being responsible for how another child feels. Again it is OK to feel sad when you miss a turn or when your mum won’t let you go to play at someone’s house – that is part of life. Relying on another child to make you feel happy is an inappropriate response.
- It can be a good idea to try to avoid asking your child: “Who are your friends?” or “Which friends did you play with today?” Questions such as these can be hard to answer at the end of a busy day when children are tired. They can also create the expectation that children must have a friend, and can cause pressure when “friendships” run into trouble. In reality young children are just beginning to develop the skills of reciprocity, attachment and responsibility, that make friendships possible, so relationships with peers can be very changeable at this age. Rather it may be better to ask: **“What games did you play today? Who else was in the game?”**
- Difficulties can also arise when children have a reliance on one particular “friend” making it harder for them to manage when that person is away from kindy or school. While we want children to be interdependent, we have to balance this with independence and the ability to get along with a wide range of children. At kindy we regularly manage situations so that children are partnered with someone who they don’t usually play with – this may be at the lunch tables, when completing tidy-up tasks or in group activities such as transition games, music experiences or relaxation sessions. Initially this can be a big challenge for some children but participating in these experiences is great practice at getting along with different personalities.
- At kindy our group circle times are one strategy that we use to develop children’s sense of belonging to a group, that their contribution to the group is valued and that their actions impact on the people around them. At kindy we emphasise the idea that because we spend time together we should care for each other and support and respect each other. We deliberately avoid saying that we have to be friends with everyone in the group. Instead we talk about speaking to, and treating each other, in a “caring” way. Being friends with everyone is not realistic but being respectful and caring to everyone is.
- When social conflicts arise we are careful not to take sides. This avoids identifying either child as victim or aggressor – neither role is useful to a child’s development at this age. Often one child’s action may be a reaction to something that happened 5 minutes before, an hour ago, or the day before. Instead we approach this as a problem solving opportunity – helping the children to state the problem, think of solutions, implement and evaluate. Role playing ways to communicate with each other is another valuable learning tool.

Social skills are complex and children learn messages about how to relate to others from their parents. Mrs Curling (Karen) shares that the greatest lesson she learnt from her father and that she passes on to her own children is that **“optimism is the key”**. Early childhood is the ideal time for children to learn that:

- Mistakes are great because when we make mistakes we can learn something and we can always try things differently next time, especially if we have had our problem solving skills encouraged, and
- Disappointments won’t last forever, but they are important for us all. They help us to become more understanding, empathetic, caring and resilient.

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