

# How parents can help their young children develop healthy social skills

December 28 2018, by Laurien Beane

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As the new year dawns, parents likely turn their thoughts to their child and new beginnings they may experience as they enter an early childhood education and care centre or preschool. Naturally, it's a time of reflection on the previous year, and excitement about the possibilities for the new year to come.

Parents might reflect on friendships their child makes in the coming year. Making friends is not always instinctive for a young child. Learning to make friends is part of the [social development curriculum](#) in early childhood.

Social [development](#) skills are just as important as [cognitive skills](#) when learning. In [recent studies](#), positive social skills are highlighted as key predictors for better outcomes in adulthood. It's important for parents to be aware of ways to ensure positive social development skills in their young child.


Parents can begin by looking for interpersonal people skills, such as empathy, listening and communication skills. This will help your child transition into the next stage of their educational journey.

## **Is your child's social development on track, at risk or vulnerable?**

The [Australian Early Development Census](#) (AEDC) researches longitudinal data about the [five important learning domains](#) for a young child. The domains are:

1. social development
2. physical health and well-being
3. emotional maturity
4. language and cognitive skills
5. communication skills and general knowledge.

**Table 2** – Social competence domain descriptors.

Icon	Children developmentally on track	Children developmentally at risk	Children developmentally vulnerable
	Almost never have problems getting along, working, or playing with other children; is respectful to adults, is self-confident, and is able to follow class routines; and is capable of helping others.	Experience some challenges in the following areas: getting along with other children and teachers, playing with a variety of children in a cooperative manner, showing respect for others and for property, following instructions and class routines, taking responsibility for their actions, working independently, and exhibiting self-control and self-confidence.	Experience a number of challenges with poor overall social skills. For example children who do not get along with other children on a regular basis, do not accept responsibility for their own actions and have difficulties following rules and class routines. Children may be disrespectful of adults, children, and others' property; have low self-confidence and self-control, do not adjust well to change; and are usually unable to work independently.

Credit: Australian Early Development Census

Each domain is essential for learning how to build friendships, though social development is the central one. The following table outlines what is considered developmentally on track, at risk or vulnerable in the social competence domain.

After reading this table, if you feel your child is developmentally at risk or vulnerable, there may be several reasons for this. Be guided by the educator at your preschool or [early childhood education](#) and care centre centre when deciding which service might best support your child to develop healthy social skills.

To help you, there are a broad range of services available. These include art and music therapists, dietitians, occupational therapists, speech therapists, physiotherapists, audiologists, and child counsellors.

## **Making friends through the stages of play**

There is a range of research about stages of play a young child engages in when they're learning to make friends. According to brain

development [research](#), a young child begins to develop pathways in their brain for social skills from birth.

According to [research](#), there are six stages of play with associated social skills. These are assessed in the early childhood curriculum. The following stages and social skills are approximate and to be used as a guide only:

## Progression of play

### Birth to three months

#### Unoccupied play

Social skills in this age group include: smiling and laughing, making eye contact within 20 cm, preoccupation with faces, and moving their head to the sound of voices.



### Four to eighteen months

#### Solitary play

During this period social skills should also include: reacting when approached by another toddler, responding to own name, showing excitement, recognising familiar people, and reaching hands to be picked up.

### Eighteen months to two years

#### Spectator/onlooker play

During this phase children will begin to notice other children's play. They may begin to cooperate with each other but will look to adults to model social skills and help negotiate play.



### Two to three years

#### Parallel play

When children parallel play, they will play alongside another child. They may have the same equipment and will be in the same area, but seemingly without interacting with each other.

### Three to four years

#### Associative play

During associative play, children will begin to develop their social skills by playing in short interactions. This may include simple make-believe play, however adults may be required to assist with sharing props.



### Four to five years

#### Cooperative play



The cooperative play stage heralds the beginning of long periods of uninterrupted constructive play. Children develop friendships with particular children, and will jointly manipulate objects with a peer or small group of peers.



Credit: The Conversation

Understanding some of these key indicators of social skills required to for play will help you consider their ability. Take time to observe your young child's social interactions in a range of settings. Watch them at home, with family and friends, as well as in their preschool or early childhood education and care centre. This may help you determine if your child is engaging socially during play to make friends.

## What's next?

When a child moves from one educational setting to another, we call this movement a [transition](#). Positive social development skills are an asset for your child during this time. Educators at both educational settings will work in partnership with you, and each other, to make sure the transition is as smooth as possible.

Essentially there are some [key indicators](#) which will help children during transitions: self-care, separating from parents, growing independence, and readiness to learn. As [parents](#) you can:

- familiarise your child with the new environment
- engage in active listening as your child expresses their thoughts and feelings about starting in a new learning environment
- ensure children start the new year with all required equipment recommended by the centre or school
- arrange to meet other people starting in the new year and practice turn taking, listening, asking questions and asking for help before the [new year](#) begins.

This will support development of social skills for your young [child](#) and help them make new friends more readily.

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