Accentuating Positive Child Interactions

Social emotional behavior begins with a child responding to adult interactions. These behaviors include an infant smiling in response to a familiar adult’s face or cooing in response to hearing a caregiver’s voice. Infants and toddlers learn to recognize social cues through interactions with adults. Adults support this by responding to child social cues and providing lots of opportunities for the child to engage in social play. Older toddlers use behavior such as holding a hand out to request “more” of something, or by saying “my turn” during a social play activity.

Learning Guide: Promoting Children’s Social Emotional Development

- Engaging children in everyday social play activities provides adults opportunities to watch the children and understand social emotional behavior the children are using. It also helps the adult identify the behavior she needs to teach the child to use.
- Social play activities include your-turn-my-turn interactions such as rolling a ball back and forth; joint attention activities with a child; following his lead during shared storybook reading; and social games such as songs, finger plays, and pretend play.
- Be sure to identify how each child plays and responds to you and other adults during everyday social play activities. Notice when the child is happy, sad, or angry. Does he laugh and smile, or cry and express his feelings?
- Encourage all children to participate in different types of social play activities. This helps them develop many opportunities to use their social behaviors.
- Facilitate children’s use of different types of social behavior to begin and continue interactions during adult-child play activities. For example, you might begin a game of bouncing a toddler on your knee when she says “bounce” and by continuing the game when she laughs and squeals or says “do it again.”
- The behaviors the child uses to let you know they are happy, sad, or angry can vary. Think about how you respond to the child. What are some ways you could encourage the child to participate in social play? What behaviors will you teach the child to successfully participate in social play?
- Remember that a caregiver’s positive response is enjoyable and motivating for a child. This can be as simple as encouraging the child to wave hello and the teacher waving back, or giving a toddler a pat on the back when he turns the page during shared storybook reading.

Ms. Tasha is a classroom teacher of older toddlers. She has observed an increase in children hitting and screaming over the past two weeks during play time. She noticed the behavior most often when children want to play with the same toy. She decided to provide more opportunities during the day to teach the children turn-taking skills. For example, she showed two of the children in the class how to take turns feeding the baby doll rather than fighting over it. She began inviting the children to participate in brief turn-taking activities throughout the day, such as passing a wand back and forth to blow bubbles. Eventually she noticed children using more of the positive social behaviors she had been teaching them to use, such as taking turns.

More resources about child social emotional competence:
- TACSEI Teachers and Service Providers Community information and collections of downloadable resources.
- Zero to Three Tip Sheets related to early childhood social emotional development.

You’ll know the practice is working if...

- Children are asking you to engage in social play activities.
- Children are participating in different types of social play activities.
- Children are excited about participating in social play.

Learning Guide Video: Watch a video of this Learning Guide.

A Quick Peek

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