**Developing Interpersonal Skills in Children**

**Source**: [www.skillsyouneed.com](http://www.skillsyouneed.com)

Babies start to develop interpersonal relationships as soon as they are born.

Infants ‘bond’ quickly with parents and siblings making eye-contact and recognising faces, voice sounds, tone and pitch.  Smiles usually follow from about two months old and as any parent will know babies have a way of communicating that something is wrong from a very early age - if they are tired, hungry, in pain or need changing.

As children develop so do their **interpersonal and social skills,**around siblings and peers children learn to share and also to be assertive and persuasive.

As children learn language they learn how to communicate in increasingly complex ways.  At still relatively young ages children know how to communicate differently to different people - parents, siblings, grandparents, teachers and other people.

Children learn interpersonal and social skills based on their experiences – by what worked in the past.  Young babies may scream to let their parents know they are hungry, a baby learns that when it screams it gets fed and therefore continues with this behaviour.  Of course screaming for food becomes less acceptable the older you get – once some simple language has been learned it is more acceptable to ask for food.  Later, with the right encouragement, children will learn that using sentences including the word ‘please’ to ask for food maybe their best strategy for success.

Interpersonal skills, however, go far beyond social niceties such as being polite and civil.  As children develop communication skills so their interpersonal and social skills also mature.  Many parents worry that their child (especially a first or only child) is lacking social or interpersonal skills – in most cases this is not true.

**A child may be having difficulties with social interaction if:**

* They have problems making and keeping close friends
* They are the victim of bullying or excessive teasing (a certain amount of teasing is normal)
* They are the culprit of bullying or excessive teasing of other children
* They are generally too domineering or too passive in problem solving and conflict resolution
* They do not behave appropriately in group situations, teachers may pick up on such traits
* They misunderstand conversations frequently and make irrelevant or inappropriate comments
* They misunderstand facial expressions and other non-verbal signs and make inappropriate comments or gestures
* They find it difficult to understand humour and/or use humour in conversation
* They interrupt conversations frequently and inappropriately.

Although the list above contains potential warning signs of a child struggling with good social and interpersonal skills it must be noted that most children will show at least some of the behaviours listed above at some time.

If you are worried about your child or a child you know then you should seek some professional advice and help, it may be a good idea to start by talking to teachers and other parents.  In rare cases children who struggle socially may be suffering from Autism or Asperger’s Syndrome.

## **Social Skill Development in Children:**

As children develop and mix with other children at school and in other social situations they develop a range of interpersonal skills that will become the foundations of their personality in later life.

Children often need help or guidance interacting with others appropriately, to overcome shyness or to manage and understand their emotions and feelings, for example.  However it is important that parents and guardians maintain a good balance of help and encouragement, correcting and disciplining as appropriate.

**Aim to teach children good practice in areas including:**

* The use of appropriate greetings.
* The ability and willingness to initiate activities with peers and other people.
* Willingness to join an activity with peers and other people.
* The ability to begin and continue a conversation without too many distractions.
* The use of an appropriate amount of assertiveness to communicate needs, desires, beliefs and ideas.
* Resolving conflict and accept conflict resolution appropriately.  Realising and understanding a concept of what is fair and what is unfair.
* Using negotiation and compromise appropriately as tools to achieve a desired goal and resolve conflict.
* Understanding non-verbal signals from others, body language, facial expressions etc.
* Displaying appropriate non-verbal communication.
* Participating appropriately in group situations, being neither too passive or aggressive.
* Being aware of the personal space of others.
* Understanding different styles of language in different situations and to different people.

One of the most difficult interpersonal skills for children to adopt is [**conflict resolution**](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/conflict-resolution.html).  This is an advanced interpersonal skill as it requires prerequisite skills such as good listening and understanding of verbal and non-verbal communications.

## **Learning Conflict Resolution:**

Conflict in play and day-to-day activities can be very commonplace with children.  A lot of the time conflict is over sharing or the perceptions of fairness, although it may feel natural to remove a child from a conflict situation, and sometimes this may be appropriate, sometimes it may be more appropriate for the child to learn how to negotiate resolution for themselves.

As ironic as it sounds, it can be desirable - some arguing and conflict in childhood can lead to positive ways of resolving disagreements. When learned well, conflict resolution skills will help at home and in the workplace throughout life.  It is a lot easier to learn effective and respectful conflict resolution skills as a child than it is as an adult.

Fundamental to teaching children to handle conflict is helping them to identify and control their emotions.  Children need to learn that they have choices and therefore decision-making powers over their behaviour.  Furthermore children need to learn how to interpret the emotions of others – this is a recognition that others have emotions and feelings, sometimes a challenging concept for younger children.

* Encourage children to empathise watching and translating the body language of others: “George is upset; he is crying because Natalie snatched his toy and he wants it back.”
* Set standards and enforce limits, share your beliefs and goals and identify behaviours that are acceptable and those that are unacceptable. “It is unacceptable hit your brother.  Tell me what’s wrong.”
* Explain to children they can feel any way they wish, but they must control what they do. Help them to cope with feelings and emotions constructively. Illustrate the behaviour you expect.  Encourage your child to talk about strong emotions and how they feel.
* Encourage and demonstrate the power of language as a problem solving tool. Ask children to tell you what they want or need. “Tell me if you want to go to the park.” Show children how to address problems without aggression.
* Do not stand for physical or verbal aggression, try to stop it immediately.
* Resist solving problems for older children; instead guide with questions that encourage them to analyse the situation and available options.  After exploring possible solutions examine the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution together. Remind children that they have choices.
* Explore different ways to make amends after conflict. Sometimes a simple “sorry” may be all that is required.