

How to Support Young Children's Social-Emotional Skills

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I have another rant.

[Last time](#) I focused on how adults underestimate children's cognitive skills. This time, I'd like to talk about how **adults tend to overestimate children's social-emotional skills**. Young children have big emotions. It is simultaneously a beautiful and frustrating thing. How many of you can relate to one (or more) of these experiences?

- We love to listen to their giggles ... *except* when it is at nap time and they are supposed to be sleeping.
- Their sense of wonder is so exciting ... *until* it derails our carefully planned lesson.
- Their sad cries are painful to hear ... *but* those cries show their desire to be in connection with others.
- We don't want them to scream in anger at a friend ... *but* we want them to know how to communicate their needs and desires.

It can be hard as a teacher (or a parent for that matter), to understand, acknowledge, and support children as they learn to regulate their emotions and behaviors. It takes a lot of energy and our own emotion regulation.

I think we sometimes forget how important emotion regulation (or [emotional intelligence](#)) is as well as **how long it takes to develop**. Neurological research shows that the part of the brain that regulates emotions and behaviors (the frontal lobe) isn't [fully developed until young adulthood](#). Even older children and teenagers have trouble identifying their emotions and deciding how to behave appropriately.

Nevertheless, we expect children as young as two or three to remember the rule the first time we say it. We expect children to be able to keep their emotions in check and not get upset when someone else takes a toy. We expect children to be happy at all times, even during stressful situations.

But these expectations are not realistic and may even be harmful for kids, depending on how harshly we react to their big emotions.

“So often children are punished for being human. Children are not allowed to have grumpy moods, bad days, disrespectful tones, or bad attitudes. Yet, us adults have them all the time. None of us are perfect. We must stop holding our children to a higher standard of perfection than we can attain ourselves.” - Rebecca Eanes

Thankfully, if we can keep our expectations in check, there are ways to start supporting children’s emotional and social development. Here are some ways that we can support young children’s developing emotions.

- We can **enjoy genuine, positive relationships** and **share in activities** with children.
- We can **acknowledge their emotions**, remembering emotions are different from behaviors. (Emotions are about our state of mind; behaviors refer to our actions. So a child can feel mad, but not act on that anger.)
- We can **model language** and provide them with the words to name their emotions, desires, and needs.
- We can **encourage peer perspective taking** and [build their natural capacity for empathy.](#)
- We can **provide clear expectations for their behavior** and **offer gentle reminders** when they forget the expectations.
- We can **demonstrate warm, respectful relationships** with all adults and children in the classroom (because monkey see, monkey do).

So, let’s start taking a step back and expect humanness rather than perfection from the children in our care. And let’s find ways to respond with sensitivity and support to children as they develop crucial emotional and social skills.

What about you? How do you have appropriate expectations of children’s emotional development? How do you support children’s emotion regulation?