

Preparing our Children for School - Social and Emotional Health

Our dedicated kindergarten teachers continue to tell us that children are coming to school unprepared. Yes, they know their colors and some children can even tell you their address, but they are still struggling when they arrive at school. Many children are coming to kindergarten having difficulty getting along with their peers and having trouble developing positive relationships with their teachers and other school staff. Frankly, the structure and rules of the school are often too foreign for some children to adjust to the routine. Unfortunately, many parents do not take much thought in preparing children for school besides the traditional “reading, writing, and arithmetic”. I challenge parents to do more, consider your child’s social/emotional health early in life, from birth.

Tips for supporting positive social and emotional health:

- Respond often to your infant. Research shows that attending to an infant’s cry will teach the infant that the form of communication that they are using is working, and the infant can feel secure to use it again. When we respond to our infant’s cry, we are communicating to our infant that “you can trust me”. Lots of smiles, touching, and talking to our babies are also so important.
- Just like how your child grows in their mobility, they are also learning about the many different emotions and feelings that they possess. In no way should a baby or toddler be expected to handle their emotions very well at this age. Throwing fits is inevitable and should be expected often. They are “learning”. Our example of how we handle our emotions, like how we act during a disagreement with our partner or if someone cuts in front of us in line, is just how our children will learn how to handle their own frustrations. So, if you model staying calm, talking it out, compromising, or just plain tolerating others, you will be doing your child a wonderful favor in teaching conflict resolution and anger management skills. Name feelings and talk about them often. Historically, boy children have been denied support for healthy expression of feelings. Boys with feelings are judged as being weak, but it is ok for girls to cry and have feelings. This double standard is both inaccurate, damaging to our sons, and often leads to adult relational problems with women. Allow your child the opportunity to feel their emotions and remember, they are learning.
- Give your child lots of opportunity to socialize with other children in a safe and supervised environment. Model to them positive social skills like saying to a child at the park “go tell him your name and ask him if he would like to play?” Intervene when your child is not playing nice and support positive play. Avoid letting toddlers play alone in another room- someone will be hurt and there is no one around to “teach” social skills. Beware of letting your child play alone with older violent siblings, cousins, or friends- my family therapy experience has taught me this is all too common and can be a very unhealthy form of socialization. Attending play groups are a great option for supporting social development- check out The Great Start Calendar for days and times.
- Make sure you provide a daily routine that expresses consistency. Be consistent with waking up at the same time each day, performing daily hygiene tasks, meal time, play time, and planned activities. If you work, make sure you secure child care with a consistent daily routine and nurturing staff. School is very fast paced and structured. Children who come to school who have never had consistency in their daily routine, really do struggle. These children go from having almost complete control over their day, to have very little to no control. This is when parents say “he has never had a behavior problem before”. Adjusting to the change in routine has to occur before any significant learning can begin.

Supporting your child’s social and emotional health early will pave the way for more advanced forms of learning and problem solving later.