



## Social-Emotional Development

Research has shown that **relationships** are the foundation for all future learning and are at the core of quality care for infants and toddlers in group care settings. Responsive, nurturing relationships with caring adults provide safety and support for infants and toddlers, allowing them to develop a sense of security and discover the world around them. Relationships also help build resilience in times of increased stress and trauma. These foundational relationships support healthy brain development and social-emotional wellness in infants and toddlers.

### What Is Social-Emotional Development?

Our emotional development (how we feel about ourselves) has a significant impact on our social development (how we feel about and interact with others). The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning defines social-emotional development as “the developing capacity of the child from birth through 5 to form close and secure relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture” (Yates et al., 2008, p. 2).

One of the primary goals of a quality program for infants and toddlers is to foster social-emotional development. There are four aspects of social-emotional health:

- ◆ Development of self
- ◆ Emotional regulation
- ◆ Impulse control
- ◆ Empathy

### Why Is Social-Emotional Development Important for Infants and Toddlers?

Strong, positive, and secure relationships are the key to young children’s healthy social-emotional development. Infants and toddlers need consistent, nurturing adults who are supportive and responsive. Caring adults provide safe, stable, and predictable environments that give infants and toddlers the opportunity to freely explore, interact with others, gain a sense of who they are, and develop confidence in themselves as individuals.

- ◆ **Healthy relationships:** Early relationships are vital to brain development because they help wire the brain to trust others, love, and feel safe and secure.
- ◆ **Positive experiences:** New brain connections are formed and modified through verbal and physical interactions.
- ◆ **Consistent and secure environments:** The brain develops gradually in response to experiences and environments.



## What Are Some Strategies for Working with Infants and Toddlers?

Our interactions with infants and toddlers profoundly shape their sense of who they are and how they respond to events, experiences, and interactions with others. How we respond to the needs of infants and toddlers is important, and we should practice intentional, responsive care in all our interactions with them, as these experiences help their brain grow and set the foundation for self-regulation skills. As we support infants' and toddlers' development of social-emotional skills, we also think about embedding opportunities throughout the day in all aspects of the curriculum.

Some strategies that caregivers can use to support healthy self-regulation skills in infants and toddlers are listed below:

- ◆ Reading cues and signals
- ◆ Responding with sensitivity and support
- ◆ Supporting language development
- ◆ Giving advanced notice of changes in activities
- ◆ Offering appropriate ways to express intense feelings
- ◆ Suggesting ways to manage intense emotions
- ◆ Giving choices
- ◆ Being consistent
- ◆ Being available and observing
- ◆ Allowing children to take the lead in their learning

## Planning to Implement Social-Emotional Development in Diverse Child Care Settings

The meaningful interactions that caregivers have with young children during everyday moments provide natural opportunities to shape social-emotional development. Some implementation opportunities that may be present during the day are listed below:

- ◆ Supporting social-emotional skills requires intention.
- ◆ Caregiving routines are the primary opportunity to enhance social-emotional development.
- ◆ The physical environment, particularly in group care, plays a major role.
- ◆ Social-emotional literacy is a prerequisite for more advanced social skills and the continued maturation of emotional self-regulation.

To request support from the Child Care State Capacity Building Center's Infant/Toddler Specialist Network, please email [SCBC\\_InfantToddlerNetwork@icf.com](mailto:SCBC_InfantToddlerNetwork@icf.com).



## Reference

Yates, T., Ostrosky, M. M., Cheatham, G. A., Fettig, A., Shaffer, L., & Santos, R. M. (2008). *Research synthesis on screening and assessing social-emotional competence*. Child Care Bureau, Office of Head Start, The Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Learning.  
[http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/rs\\_screening\\_assessment.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/rs_screening_assessment.pdf)

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### **State Capacity Building Center, A Service of the Office of Child Care**

9300 Lee Highway  
Fairfax, VA 22031

Phone: 877-296-2401  
Email: [CapacityBuildingCenter@ecetta.info](mailto:CapacityBuildingCenter@ecetta.info)

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