

# How to Improve Your Child's Social Skills

Are you concerned your child's social skills may not be up to scratch?

In this booklet you will find some strategies, tips and activities to help your children improve their social skills. You will also learn where to look for online programs and professional help. And if you want to dive deeper into the topic, there are some links to resources from around the world.

But first, what are social skills anyway, and why should you care about them?



## Social skills include behaviours & emotional competencies

Social skills include a range of behavioural and emotional competencies such as:

- Ability to relate to others
- Self control (self regulation) – controlling their emotions
- Ability to set goals & be self motivated to achieve them
- Self esteem & confidence
- Understanding the feelings of others
- Capacity to make & keep friends
- Responsible decision making
- Feeling and showing empathy for others

These skills are sometimes referred to as a person's EQ, or emotional quotient. EQ is distinct from their IQ, or intelligence quotient.

The Australian school curriculum calls social skills “personal and social capability”. This encompasses “students’ personal/emotional and social/relational dispositions, intelligences, sensibilities and learning”. Elsewhere, EQ is often referred to as “social and emotional learning (SEL)”.

## Good social skills contribute to life success

Researchers have shown that our success at work or in life depends 80% on EQ and only 20% on IQ.

So you should care about your child's social skills. They are a strong contributor to their future life success both in and out of school. And good social skills help with learning progress and achievement.

Of course there is more to life success than just competent social skills. Life success is a result of many factors, including EQ, IQ, and abilities such as memory and attention.

## Can social skills be taught?

Yes, they can. Some schools provide Social and Emotional Learning courses. So do learning support professionals such as speech pathologists and psychologists. Also, there are some online programs which children can use at home.

But parents themselves can do a lot to help their kids.

# How parents can support social development in young children – building their basic social skills

Like any developing skill, social skills need support, practice and repetition. The desired behaviours are learned and taught through a variety of accumulating experiences. This process starts during their first years of life – from birth to 6.

Children rely on adults and other caregivers to help them develop social skills. Positive and caring experiences in a child's early years build the brain connections for learning and feeling good. Their self-esteem and confidence rises, and children are more equipped to cope with life's challenges.

Whether you're a parent or an educator, the following strategies will help promote social development in young children.

## Model appropriate social behaviour

Use everyday routines to “show and tell” children your expectations for appropriate behaviour. For example, how to greet someone new or how to share a toy during play. Talk about what you're doing as you're doing it. Then the child will better understand how to manage the situation and replicate it, even when you're not there.

## Support self-esteem

Positive self-esteem is critical to healthy social development. Compliment children on their behaviour, and progress they have made toward goals. When you acknowledge these successes, children learn how to act on their feelings in a healthy way.



# Build problem solving skills

A child needs to use reasoning, creativity, inhibitory control and decision making skills to solve problems. Children do not have fully mature executive functions. So they are prone to making mistakes until their brain's frontal lobe develops. Explore solutions to problems by asking children “What would you do?” Or offer alternative strategies. These will help them develop effective reasoning skills and mental flexibility.



## Encourage exploration

Infants and young children explore their environment through movement and interaction. As a child develops confidence and control over her body, she becomes more eager to venture into the world around her.

Aid her natural curiosity by organising activities that promote safe exploration, both at home and while out. Examples include asking children for help while preparing a meal. Or tasking them with finding an item at the grocery store. Children will rise to the occasion when you give them opportunities to take part in more complex activities.

## Play

Time spent playing with children can be one of the best investments you make in their educational future. One of the easiest ways to help children develop socially is by the simple act of playing.

Playing with your child builds relationships in a climate of fun. Play puts you in a great position to teach skills for sharing and cooperation. You can introduce concepts like winning or losing. Play also gives children a chance to learn about more subtle social cues, like body language and vocal intonations.

So don't be afraid to turn up the music for a little song and dance, put on a puppet show, or pull out some favourite board games and have fun!

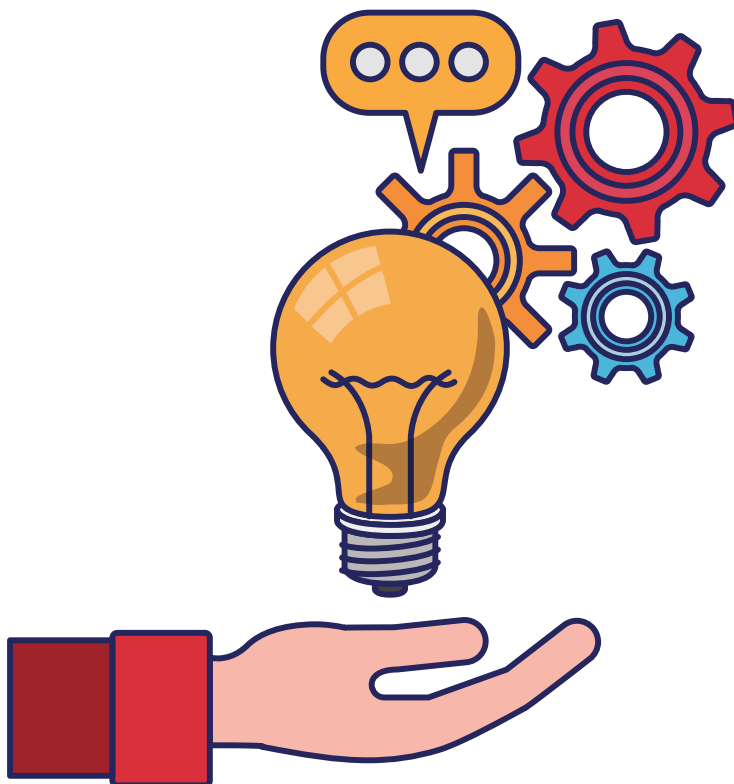
# How parents can support social skills development for older children – including those with learning disabilities

## A note about students with learning disabilities

When a child with a learning disability struggles academically, it's logical to think that the issue is related to the deficit in a specific ability. And while that may be true, there might be more to it.

Students with learning disabilities often encounter academic difficulties, at least in part, because they don't have effective strategies for working through challenges.

Here are several strategies for parents (and teachers) to help build social skills for older children, including those with learning disabilities:



## Setting goals

Goal setting is an important part of self-regulation. It can be the foundation for other self-regulation strategies.

When they set goals, students can get an opportunity to observe their own behaviour. This observation can help them pinpoint areas for improvement.

Learning how to set goals helps them identify what they need to do, lets them see how they are progressing, and motivates them to act productively.

Parents can help children set goals for themselves. The goals need to be specific and challenging, but not too hard. A goal should be quickly attainable so students can experience a sense of accomplishment and move on to tackle the next one.

For example, a student struggling with homework might identify time management as a problem. So they decide to cut out a leisure activity to allow them to achieve the goal of completing homework that day.

Another student may not be doing any homework at all. Their goal may simply be to do just 15 minutes one night.

If they achieve that goal, celebrate it with them as soon as you can. It's the timely celebration of achievement which releases the feel good chemicals in their brain which help lock in good habits.

## Notes for parents when helping your child with goal setting:

1. The goal setting process: Set a goal. Achieve the goal (or not). Celebrate achieving the goal as soon as they have done it. Reflect on what worked and what they could do better next time
2. It's important that kids feel that you're authentic - you don't have to be right all the time. The power of social and emotional learning comes from reflecting on the events. Discussing the learnings - what worked, what could be done better next time.



## Self-monitoring

People self-monitor by asking themselves whether they have engaged in a specific, desired behaviour.

Building on the goal-setting example above, a student might ask herself: Am I using my time in the right way to complete my homework by dinnertime? Or, did I put all my homework assignments in my backpack to take home?

Students may find it helpful to self-monitor for behaviours like paying attention, staying on task, following strategy steps, and meeting performance expectations such as completing all homework problems or spelling 8 of 10 spelling words correctly.



## Self-instruction

Self-instruction is also sometimes called “self-talk”. It is part of normal development for many younger children. It can also be quite powerful when used by students of any age to self-regulate and direct their learning behaviour.

For example, someone who is struggling to comprehend a challenging text might think, I need to look up the definitions of these unfamiliar words and read this page again.

Students can use self-talk to remind themselves to focus their attention, to take positive steps when faced with difficulties, to reinforce positive behaviours, and more. Parents can model effective self-talk, but should allow their child to create and use their own statements.

A little advance planning can be helpful here. Coming up with the right phrase in the heat of the moment – when focus has been lost or frustrations are running high – is unlikely to help. But taking a little time to write out some useful statements before starting a new project or beginning a homework assignment can enable students to get themselves out of a tight spot.

## Self-reinforcement

Self-reinforcement occurs when a student chooses a motivating reward. And then awards it to herself when she achieves a milestone. Self-reinforcement can be used over shorter and longer timeframes and can tie into goals. Lets look at our student who has identified time-management as an issue. She might decide, "I can go to the movies on Sunday because I finished all my homework every night this week".

Once she has met the criteria for a reward, she can award it to herself . For example, by selecting a sticker for her journal after completing the day's writing assignment.



## Purposeful learning

Self-regulation is an effective tool students can use to improve their academic performance. Self-regulation is the process by which students take charge of their own learning, monitoring their behaviour and progress and making adjustments along the way to get from idea to execution. It's the transformation of thought into purposeful action.

Becoming a better self-regulator isn't a panacea for academic difficulties, but students with learning disabilities who learn effective self-regulation strategies will have some advantages.

They will have tools they can try out in a variety of situations before seeking outside help, or when help is not immediately available. They will understand how their behaviour influences their results. And they will understand that their learning is a purposeful, active process in which they play the leading role.

Best of all, these self-regulation strategies can benefit all learners, not just those who are struggling.



# Professional help & online programs

Where do you go if you feel you need professional help for your child?

Well first, talk to your child's teacher or school. See what help they can provide. You may find your school runs SEL programs. Or they have a staff member experienced in teaching social and emotional skills.

If you can't find what you need at school, there are professionals who specialise in SEL. Some speech pathologists, psychologists, and counsellors will be able to help.

Plus there are some online programs available to help your child develop their social and emotional skills at home. These programs can be quite effective. They use interactive video animation exercises which are generally quite engaging for children.

One of the online programs combines social skills exercises with cognitive (thinking), language, and executive function development. This means your child can develop their thinking, reading and social skills in the same session. [To learn more, watch this video.](#)



# More information

If you would like more information on the often overlooked third domain of SEL (cognitive skills), [go here](#).

For age appropriate social skills benchmarks, [go here](#).

For more information about EQ & IQ in learning success, [go here](#).

For an OECD paper on Social & Emotional Skills, [go here](#).

For a discussion of the benefits of SEL, [go here](#).

# More Information

