



Wee Learn

Wee Explorers
(18 months – 3 years):
Social Intelligence for
Toddlers



Any parent of a toddler knows it isn't easy to teach them social skills. That's because even though toddlers want to have happy, friendly, interactions with others, their own fears and desires get in the way. So the first step in helping toddlers develop social intelligence is helping them learn to manage their emotions, which is the foundation of interpersonal relationships. The second is helping them develop empathy for others. The third is helping them learn to express their needs and feelings without attacking. This skill set will be more critical to your child's happiness in life than academic success, financial success, or any of our other conventional measures. In fact, emotional intelligence -- defined as the ability to manage one's own emotions and relate well with others.

So how do you get your toddler started learning social skills?

1. Empathize, Empathize, Empathize. Kids who receive a lot of empathy for their own feelings from the adults in their lives are the earliest to develop empathy for others, and research has shown that empathy for others is the cornerstone of successful interpersonal relationships.

2. Stay close during playgroups. Many kids hit during social interactions because they get overwhelmed and they just don't know what else to do. If you're there, you can say, "Yes, Ryan took your bucket.... is that okay with you? No? You can say 'My Bucket!'" If your child knows you're there for backup, hitting won't become a habit.

3. Don't force toddlers to share. It actually delays the development of sharing skills! Kids need to feel secure in their ownership before they can share. Instead, introduce the concept of taking turns.

"It's Sophia's turn to use the bucket. Then it will be your turn. I'll help you wait."

4. Let the child decide how long his turn lasts. If kids think adults will snatch a toy away once the adult's random idea of "long enough" has passed, you're modeling grabbing, and the child usually becomes more possessive. If the child is free to use the toy for as long as he wants, he can fully enjoy it and then give it up with an open heart. If the same child uses the same toy every single time, you can either buy a duplicate toy since it's such a crowd-pleaser, or alternate turns visit by visit.

5. Help your child wait. If your child has a meltdown waiting for her turn, it's an indicator that she's got some big feelings to let out and is using this opportunity. Empathize: "It's hard to wait...You wish you could use the bucket now..." and hold her while she cries.

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