

Preschoolers: Social and Emotional Development



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Preschoolers

Using This Guide/Using This Video

- Before watching this video, ask students to recount a favorite memory from when they were a preschooler regarding a friendship they had with a peer.
- Use questions and activities for class discussion, small group activity, homework, or assessment.

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The Program

Summary

Between the ages of three and five, preschoolers learn about themselves and their world as they take on new roles outside of their homes and families. They become more assertive and try new things on their own. As they learn to play cooperatively, they begin to forge friendships. Once they learn to identify their emotions and realize that other people have the same kinds of feelings, they can begin to empathize and form meaningful relationships.

Key points:

- Preschoolers are children between the ages of three and five.
- They develop a social and emotional skill set that allows them to develop a self-concept and learn how to interact with others.
- Initiative is a crucial component to a preschooler's development.
- Culture and gender affect their social and emotional development.
- Children learn and progress through various stages of play.
- Some preschoolers have challenging conditions that can affect their social and emotional development.
- Children with special needs are often included with typically developing children in classroom environments.

Initiative

Developmental theorist Erik Erikson established stages of emotional development that individuals go through in their lifetime. In each stage, there is a struggle between two opposite emotions. Preschoolers struggle between initiative and guilt. Erikson cautioned that if this initiative is criticized or inhibited, children will develop feelings of guilt which can hurt their emotional growth. They might stop trying new and creative things and begin to think of themselves in a negative way. If caregivers create a safe environment in which risk taking and creative pursuits are encouraged, a child's sense of initiative will grow and she will view herself in a positive way.

Self-Concept

Self-concept is the overall opinion a person has about his or her abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and status. Preschoolers are often heard commenting about their successes, saying things like, “I built a really tall tower.” “I cleaned the toys all by myself.” or “Look at how high I can jump!” Even when failing to accomplish a difficult task for the first time, most preschoolers will try again with the confidence that they will be successful. They can lose this optimism, however, if they experience repeated failure, frustration, and disapproval.

An atmosphere of respect and acceptance with opportunities for success through open-ended activities can help promote a positive self-concept. Preschoolers also develop responsibility through weekly “jobs” and assisting adults and peers. Caregivers can encourage them to make choices, try new experiences, and feel ownership of their actions.

Culture and Gender

Not all cultures view initiative in the same way. Some Eastern cultures value restraint and cautious behavior in children and Mexican American culture values a low level of assertion. It is important for caregivers to be sensitive to cultural differences and not expect the same level of initiative from all children. Cultural differences can affect a child's self-concept. There are things that can be done to help children feel good about themselves as well as have positive feelings about children of other nationalities.

Most children have a strong sense of what it means to be a boy or a girl. They show gender differences in how they play and in their choice of preferred toys. By as early as eighteen months, boys and girls show a preference toward sex-stereotyped toys and adopt gender-stereotyped behaviors. There isn't a clear-cut reason as to why this happens. Whether it is parental reinforcement, media influence, or the way the brain is wired, preschool-aged children tend to have rigid expectations about male and female characteristics. As children mature cognitively, they become less stereotyped in their beliefs and behaviors.

Play and Friendships

So much of a preschooler's life is about play. Often, that means playing with other children. There are various levels of social participation. When preschoolers begin to play within the context of a group setting, a child will often progress through stages of interaction; from unoccupied behavior where there is no interaction with peers, to cooperative play where they interact with each other in games that share a common theme and goal.

More social interaction leads preschoolers to develop friendships that sometimes last only as long as a specific activity, other times for a few days, and in some cases, many years. These relationships can ease the process of separating from the family and becoming more independent. They provide great social opportunities, and are bridges from the individual to the rest of the world. Friendships can help a child see things from a new perspective and move away from egocentric thinking. Together, preschoolers and their friends discover new things, solve problems, and even squabble. Through all of this, they can safely try out new social skills, build self esteem, and learn to resolve conflicts.

Pro-social and Anti-Social Behaviors

In social interaction, children can behave in both pro-social and anti-social ways. Examples of positive behaviors are empathy and altruism. Negative behaviors are aggression and bullying. Both kinds of behaviors will contribute to a child's ability to make friends and affect how fully they participate in activities. In their interactions with peers, children commonly show kindness and compassion. They often help each other with tasks, share toys, and try to comfort someone who is sad. Aggression in preschoolers can be exhibited in physical ways like hitting, biting, or kicking; verbally, in the form of teasing, name-calling, and threats; and bullying, which is usually unprovoked aggression against a weaker peer. Parents and caregivers can redirect a child's aggression to positive outlets like art, music, or exercise; model and reward non-aggressive behavior; and use caution when exposing a child to mass media.

It is important not to mistake common play behaviors like arguments and rough and tumble play for aggression. Wrestling and play fighting where no one is hurt is normal and even considered helpful in preschoolers' social interactions. It is natural for children to have conflicts and arguments. They may get very angry and raise their voices at each other. If they are working through a conflict this way, and no one is getting hurt physically or emotionally, this isn't aggression.

Children With Special Needs

Children with special needs like visual and hearing impairments as well as physical and cognitive differences may need assistance with social interactions. Children with special needs are sometimes rejected by peers. Visually and hearing impaired students may be unable to respond to their peers' initiatives, and children with cognitive differences may not have the social skills to interact with children as well as their typically developing peers.

Teachers and caregivers can assist in the social interaction of children with special needs and their typically developing peers. They can insure that the physical layout of the classroom is conducive to allowing children with crutches or wheelchairs to fully participate in activities. Sometimes, adults can intervene and encourage parallel play and even collaborative play with their typically developing peers. They can teach language and social skills necessary for positive social interactions. Finally, they can guide both children with special needs and typically developing children in understanding the behaviors and motivations of each other.

Review

- The preschool years are a time of emerging independence and initiative.
- Children begin to discover their strengths and develop self-concepts.
- Friendships are helpful in developing social skills.
- The many stages of play are important to social and emotional development.
- Preschoolers learn how to interact with others, experiment with different roles, and develop friendships.
- Culture and gender play a part in a preschooler's development.
- Teachers and caregivers can implement strategies to foster pro-social behaviors, and help with anti-social behaviors.
- Children with special needs may need help with social interactions.

Interactive Elements

Questions For Discussion

1. Why might teachers and caregivers be reluctant to let a child take initiative?

Sometimes taking initiative might mean a child will try something new or unusual. Parents and caregivers might fear that a child will get hurt or messy and would rather avoid those possibilities.

2. What are some activities that could foster initiative in preschoolers, and what kinds of actions and words used by adults might inhibit initiative?

Building blocks, dramatic play materials, art supplies, and large motor free play are examples of open ended activities that promote initiative. Statements like, "Stop asking so many questions." and "You'll never be able to do that, so don't bother trying." are examples of statements that could inhibit initiative.

3. Why should caregivers be aware of a child' cultural background in terms of his social and emotional development?

Answers should touch on the concept that not all cultures view initiative in the same way. Caregivers should be aware of cultural differences and not expect the same level of initiative from all children.

4. What are some accommodations a preschool classroom teacher could make to assist children with special needs improve their social skills?

Answers should include:

- *Insuring that the physical layout of the classroom is conducive to allowing children with crutches or wheelchairs to fully participate in activities.*
- *Encouraging parallel play and even collaborative play with their typically developing peers.*
- *Teaching language and social skills necessary for positive social interactions.*
- *Guiding both children with special needs and typically developing children in understanding the behaviors and motivations of each other.*

Suggested Activities

1. Give students an opportunity to observe some preschoolers in a group setting (classroom or childcare facility). Have them bring notebooks and record some of the activities and behaviors they remember from the program. Ask them to pay special attention to how the children play and interact with their peers.
2. Put students in the role of preschool teacher. Ask small groups to create a lesson plan that could be used in a four-year-old preschool classroom. The plan should include activities that foster initiative and promote a positive self-concept.

Research Project

Research the stage theory of Erik Erickson regarding the development of preschool-aged children.

Preschoolers

Evaluation/Testing

Fill-In-The-Blank

Fill in the blanks with the correct words from the bank at the bottom of the page.

Social and emotional development is the _____ that gives children the ability to identify and understand their own feelings and those of others. It helps them feel _____, which is the awareness of and sharing of another person's feelings. They are able to manage and express their _____, regulate their own behavior, and begin to take _____, or try new things on their own. Between the ages of three and five, preschoolers form opinions about their own abilities and status- they develop a _____. So much of a preschooler's life is about play. Often, that means playing with other children. There are various levels of social _____, ranging from unoccupied play to fully interactive games with their peers. _____ can help a child see things from a new perspective and move away from _____ thinking. In social interactions, children can exhibit _____ behaviors like kindness and altruism, or _____ behaviors like aggression and bullying. In _____ classrooms, teachers can guide students with special needs and typically developing children to understand the behaviors and _____ of each other.

Word Bank:

pro-social

emotions

skill set

initiative

empathy

friendships

egocentric

anti-social

participation

self-concept

inclusive

motivations

Preschoolers

Fill-In-The-Blank Answer Key

Fill in the blanks with the correct words from the bank at the bottom of the page.

Social and emotional development is the [skill set](#) that gives children the ability to identify and understand their own feelings and those of others. It helps them feel [empathy](#), which is the awareness of and sharing of another person's feelings. They are able to manage and express their [emotions](#), regulate their own behavior, and begin to take [initiative](#), or try new things on their own. Between the ages of three and five, preschoolers form opinions about their own abilities and status- they develop a [self-concept](#). So much of a preschooler's life is about play. Often, that means playing with other children. There are various levels of social [participation](#), ranging from unoccupied play to fully interactive games with their peers. [Friendships](#) can help a child see things from a new perspective and move away from [egocentric](#) thinking. In social interactions, children can exhibit [pro-social](#) behaviors like kindness and altruism, or [anti-social](#) behaviors like aggression and bullying. In [inclusive](#) classrooms, teachers can guide students with special needs and typically developing children to understand the behaviors and [motivations](#) of each other.

Word Bank:

pro-social

emotions

skill set

initiative

empathy

friendships

egocentric

anti-social

participation

self-concept

inclusive

motivations

Preschoolers

Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) The ultimate stage of social interaction is:
 - a) unoccupied play
 - b) parallel play
 - c) cooperative play
 - d) onlooker behavior
- 2) The social and emotional skill set does **NOT** include:
 - a) feeling empathy
 - b) understanding language
 - c) managing behavior
 - d) establishing relationships
- 3) According to Erikson's Stage Theory, preschoolers fall into the stage involving:
 - a) trust and mistrust
 - b) autonomy and doubt
 - c) initiative and guilt
 - d) intimacy and isolation
- 4) The practice of unselfish concern for others is called:
 - a) altruism
 - b) initiative
 - c) collectivism
 - d) egocentrism
- 5) Aggressive behavior does **NOT** include:
 - a) rough and tumble play
 - b) bullying
 - c) name calling
 - d) hitting
- 6) Some babies show a preference toward sex-stereotyped toys by as early as:
 - a) two months
 - b) six months
 - c) twelve months
 - d) eighteen months
- 7) To foster initiative during an art project, emphasis should be placed upon:
 - a) the final product
 - b) the process
 - c) accuracy
 - d) neatness
- 8) A child saying, "I can do it myself!" is an example of:
 - a) scaffolding
 - b) empathy
 - c) irreversibility
 - d) initiative

Preschoolers

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- b) empathy
- c) irreversibility
- d) initiative**

Preschoolers Quiz

Match behavior described in the first column to the best available answer in the second column.

- | | | |
|-------|--|-------------------------|
| _____ | Marie is crying because her pet goldfish died, and her friend Asheli feels sad too. | 1) unoccupied play |
| _____ | Joey is building a truck and Oscar is building a skyscraper. They sit together and share blocks, but do not participate in each other's projects. | 2) onlooker behavior |
| _____ | Tyler is digging a hole in the sandbox. Peyton walks over and starts digging right next to him, but they do not interact with each other. | 3) parallel play |
| _____ | Billy is playing in a cardboard box. Susan brings over some markers. They decide to decorate the box together and pretend to be astronauts on the space shuttle. | 4) associative play |
| _____ | Ava sees that Daniel forgot his lunch, so she gives him her favorite granola bar. | 5) cooperative play |
| _____ | Nathan sits alone and traces lines in the sand with a stick. | 6) anti-social behavior |
| _____ | Margaret hits and bites other students when she doesn't get her way. | 7) empathy |
| _____ | Jack sits on a bench watching other children play tag. | 8) altruism |

Preschoolers

Quiz Answer Key

Match the words in the first column to the best available answer in the second column.

- 7) **empathy** Marie is crying because her pet goldfish died, and her friend Ashley feels sad too.
- 4) **associative play** Joey is building a truck and Oscar is building a skyscraper. They sit together and share blocks, but do not participate in each other's projects.
- 3) **parallel play** Tyler is digging a hole in the sandbox. Peyton walks over and starts digging right next to him, but they do not interact with each other.
- 5) **cooperative play** Billy is playing in a cardboard box. Susan brings over some markers. They decide to decorate the box together and pretend to be astronauts on the space shuttle.
- 8) **altruism** Ava sees that Daniel forgot his lunch, so she gives him her favorite granola bar.
- 1) **unoccupied play** Nathan sits alone and traces lines in the sand with a stick.
- 6) **anti-social behavior** Margaret hits and bites other students when she doesn't get her way.
- 2) **onlooker behavior** Jack sits on a bench watching other children play tag.

Glossary

Aggression

Behavior that is intended to harm or threaten another person

Altruism

The practice of unselfish concern for others

Associative Play

Stage of play characterized by children playing near each other, sharing materials and conversing, but not getting involved with each other's activity

Cooperative Play

Stage of play where children interact with a shared theme and goal to their activity

Egocentrism

The inability to take on the perspective of another person

Empathy

Awareness and sharing of another person's feelings

Inclusive Education

The practice that welcomes children with special needs into the classroom to learn alongside typically developing children

Initiative

An emotional state in which preschoolers become assertive, take social and creative risks, and try to do things on their own

Onlooker Behavior

Behavior in which a child watches closely what other children are doing, shows interest and even circles or stands on the sidelines of the action but does not get involved

Parallel Play

Stage of play where children will play side by side with their peers, sometimes copying one another with little or no interaction with each other

Self-concept

The overall opinion a person has about his or her abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and status

Social Participation

The level of a child's interaction with his peers

For More Information...

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