



**supporting social-emotional needs**





**Kit**  
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# supporting social-emotional needs

- Understanding Social-Emotional Disorders
- Exploring Emotions and the Brain
- Modeling Control
- Supporting Emotional Needs
- Resources

## UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DISORDERS

Social-emotional development is how children:

- Communicate
- Solve problems
- Make decisions
- Control their behavior
- Interact with others

Young children learn to control their behaviors and relate to others based on their early experiences. They learn to recognize and gain control of their feelings and actions through interactions with people. Children also learn through what happens to them. For example, a child builds a tower and it falls down. He may get upset and cry. This means he is learning to recognize his emotions. **Children will enter your program at all levels of social-emotional ability.** Many children develop social-emotional skills naturally. Some children need to be taught social-emotional skills by caring and patient adults.<sup>1</sup>

It is estimated that as many as 1 in 5 children are affected by a mental, emotional or behavioral disorder.<sup>ii</sup> Childhood social-emotional challenges can range from a child who has trouble controlling her behavior in a group setting to a child with any of the following diagnoses:

- Anxiety Disorder
- Attachment Disorder
- Bipolar Disorder
- Depression
- Conduct Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder

As you teach social-emotional skills, a child may need support in the following areas:

- Controlling their behavior during activities
- Coping with anger and negative emotions
- Handling their mood, energy and thinking
- Interacting with other children
- Solving problems and conflicts

## EXPLORING EMOTIONS AND THE BRAIN



SUPPORTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Children may feel out of control at times in a group setting. They may have needs that are not being met. They may also have a hard time complying with demands and get into conflicts with peers. As child and youth professionals, it is important to understand (and help children understand) that emotions control the brain. Whenever a person is angry or frustrated, the brain responds by going into "survival mode" or "fight, flight or freeze." As the brain concentrates on responding to the emotion, the person has trouble thinking rationally and solving problems. This is why children often hit or kick others or do not "think before they act".

As adults, we often try to talk with children when they are angry or upset and ask them to think about what they could do differently. Often, this is not the best approach. Children must learn to calm down and regain control before they are able to solve problems or make decisions. The first step to helping children calm down is to teach them to identify when they feel "out of control".

## EXPLORING EMOTIONS AND THE BRAIN

Children learn best when they are having fun. Here are some fun ways to teach children to identify when they need to calm down:

### Preschool

Point out the body language of characters that may be frustrated or angry in picture books. Ask the children to explain how they can tell the character is feeling mad (i.e. wrinkled eyebrows, frowns, hands in fists). Then ask the children what they look like when they are feeling mad.

Take pictures of the children making angry, sad, and frustrated faces. Post the pictures and talk about what it feels like when you are angry, sad, or frustrated.

### School-age

Freeze frame stories: tell a story about a character getting frustrated and “freeze” the story so the children can come up with ways for the character to regain control.

Make relaxation collages: have the children create a collage of pictures of people relaxing and talk about which ones they can use in their program.



## Teens

Encourage teens to write scripts about conflicts that focus on ways for people to relax and stay in control of their actions.

Show a popular teen show or movie that demonstrates characters dealing with anger or frustration. Lead a discussion about whether their coping strategies were positive or negative.

## MODELING CONTROL

Children have a lot of demands placed on them at a young age. They are expected to:

- Go along with the routine
- Follow directions
- Understand social cues
- Communicate effectively with others
- Switch from something they like to something they may dislike



All of these demands require a great deal of self-regulation, or control. Self-regulation is thought of as the ability to regulate emotions, behavior, and social interactions and to control cognitive processes, such as attention. <sup>iii</sup>

One of the ways children learn how to self-regulate and cope with negative experiences is by watching adults.

As child and youth professionals, it is important to model how they handle difficult situations by “thinking out loud”. For example, a teacher might say, *“What she just did makes me very angry. I am going to wait to talk to her later.”* Adults can also model how they look at the outcome of a difficult situation, *“I am glad I waited to talk to her when I was calm. I was able to listen to her reason and understand why she acted the way she did.”*

For younger children, professionals can be specific and intentional about pointing out the things they do to stay calm (*“I take 3 deep breaths”*), enjoy life (*“I love it when it’s windy”*), and laugh about themselves and the “hard times” (*“Oh my! I forgot our favorite CD! I wish I had a reminder button inside my brain”*).

## PROGRAM SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

There are supports and accommodations for children to help them successfully control their behavior. The following are some general tips for supporting social-emotional needs in your program:

**Follow a consistent routine and structure:** Children with social-emotional disorders often experience instability in their mood, energy, thinking and behavior. It is important to have a predictable environment to help them cope with the rise and fall in their mood and energy.



**Offer comfort items and small fidgets:** Fidgets can be a great way to help children focus on activities while providing an outlet for energy. Examples of fidgets include small koosh balls, pieces of felt or a smooth rock.

Allow children time for their brains to switch back to "thinking mode" after a meltdown or negative experience: Wait until the child has recovered and has come into a positive state of mind before talking about what happened and helping them solve the problem.

Allow children partial participation in activities that may be difficult or unpleasant: Many children have a hard time coping with stressful situations. Help them build skills and tolerance by limiting the time they must participate in an activity. For example, first, play one round of Uno, then read a book.



Prepare children for difficult times of the day: If it is free play that tends to disrupt the child, approach the child ahead of time. Spend time talking about free time and help the child develop a plan for when he becomes upset.

## Resources for Professionals

Videos and podcasts on supporting social-emotional needs are available at [kitonline.org](http://kitonline.org)

Printable tools and resources for teaching social-emotional skills at The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CEFEL), [vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://vanderbilt.edu/csefel)

Articles, activities, and videos on encouraging emotional awareness at Fishful Thinking: A Resource for Parenting Positive Kids, [fishfulthinking.com](http://fishfulthinking.com)

Social and emotional development activities at WINGS, [wingsforkids.org](http://wingsforkids.org)

The National Mental Health Information Center  
[mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)

Me, You, Us: Social-emotional Learning in Preschool by Ann Epstein (HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2009)

Unsmiling Faces: How Preschools Can Heal by Leslie Koplow (Teachers College Press, 2007)

## Resources for Children

A Walk in the Rain with a Brain by Edward Hallowell  
(HarperCollins, 2004)

Making Friends by Janine Amos (Cherrytree Books, 2000)

My Many Colored Days by Dr. Seuss (Knopf Books, 1996)

Sometimes I Feel Silly by Jamie Lee Curtis  
(HarperCollins, 1998)

When Sophie Gets Angry – Really Really Angry  
(Scholastic Audio Books, 2007)

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<sup>i</sup>McIntyre, T. (2003). *Teaching social skills to kids who don't yet have them*. Learning Disabilities Online: [ldonline.org](http://ldonline.org)

<sup>ii</sup>United States Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSA), 2010

<sup>iii</sup>Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2006). Self-regulation as a key to school readiness: How early childhood teachers can promote this critical competency. In M. Zaslow & I. Martinez-Beck (Eds.), *Critical issues in early childhood professional development* (pp. 203–224). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

