

Helping Children to Understand Others and How They Affect Others (page 1 of 2)

by John Hoffman

Social intelligence refers to the ability to understand, communicate, and get along with other people.

A crucial aspect of social intelligence is understanding how one's actions, words, tone of voice, and facial expressions affect other people. When children don't understand this, it's harder for them to play with other children and develop friendships, so social interaction becomes stressful.

Children start learning about how they affect others from the day they are born. A baby cries and someone comes and picks him up. A toddler makes a silly noise and her brother laughs. A four-year-old grabs a toy from a classmate and watches him become upset.

As these kinds of scenes play out over and over again, children's brains are processing the information and using it to develop an understanding of how people affect each other.

As children grow, we want them to use this information in a positive way to help them build and enjoy relationships and develop a sense of empathy for others.

There are three main ways parents can help children develop these skills:

- By having close and positive parent–child relationships
- By giving children opportunities to interact socially with others
- By talking to them at times about their experiences

Parent–Child Relations

The parent–child relationship is the model for all other relationships. Young children learn more about how they affect other people from their interactions with parents than from any other social experience. If the parent–child relationship is built on love and trust, children will have a foundation of many positive social interactions to learn from, and also develop confidence about interaction with others.

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Interactions with Peers

Everyone knows that children want to make friends and play with their friends. But it's not just fun. Even though playing with friends (and siblings) doesn't always go smoothly and sometimes involves conflict, children still learn from these interactions, particularly if they see the adults around them modelling the skills and sensitivity involved in understanding and being kind to others.

Talking About Social Experiences

It is not necessary, or even a good idea, to analyze every social interaction that our children have. But from time to time it can be helpful to look for “teachable moments” when we can help children learn from social situations they have been in. “I noticed that Jesse was really upset when you said his picture was lousy. Did you see that? Is there something kinder you could say to someone if you think their artwork isn't very good?”

It's important to keep these conversations non-judgmental. There will be times when you feel the need to show strong disapproval: “Don't hit your brother, you're hurting him!” But keep in mind that being emotionally upset (or even just tired) can really interfere with children's ability to use their social intelligence. Sometimes it may seem like your child doesn't know or care about how his actions are affecting others, when the real issue is that he is overstressed. If we can help him calm down he'll be more able to think about how his actions affected others. Later, when everyone has calmed down it can be helpful to have a non-scolding conversation where we help children see the impact of their actions and get them to think about how they could have acted differently.

We tend to focus on trying to correct children, and all parents do a lot of correcting. But it is even more important to talk about times when our children had a positive impact on someone and to do it in an instructive way. For example, if a child shares with a friend, a common parental response might be, “It was really nice of you to share your granola bar with Kelsey.” There's nothing wrong with saying that, but children learn more about how they affect others positively if parents say something like, “I could see that Kelsey was really happy when you gave her a piece of your granola bar.”

These conversations help children develop a language for understanding, thinking about, and talking about how their behaviour affects others. This builds their ability to show empathy and influence other people in positive ways.