

What Is Social Intelligence and Why Is It Important?

(page 1 of 2)

by John Hoffman

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt your energy, emotions, thinking skills, social skills, and the ability to care about others according to the needs of a situation or problem.

One important aspect of self-regulation involves what some psychologists call social intelligence. That's the ability to

- understand and respond to social cues such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body language
- “read people’s minds,” in other words, understand that other people may see a situation differently than you do
- adjust the way you communicate depending on the situation (for example, speak softly to someone who is upset or shout to warn someone who is about to step into the path of an oncoming car)
- take turns in conversations ensuring that the other person gets his or her say
- understand your own feelings, other people’s feelings, and how your feelings affect other people
- repair communication breakdowns

It's not hard to see that children who develop these skills, at an age-appropriate level, will be more successful in school. Social intelligence will help children get along with people and will reduce the amount of mental energy they have to put into dealing with stressors, such as feeling anxious in a group or having trouble reading other children's social cues.

How do children develop social intelligence?

Social intelligence develops very gradually. Even very young children have certain kinds of social skills. Babies can smile back at someone who smiles at them and focus their attention on people who love them. Toddlers can ask for what they want and respond to simple requests and questions. Preschoolers can tell someone is angry from their tone of voice or facial expression.

(page 2 of 2)

But many social skills, such as “mind reading” or picking up more subtle social cues, take longer to develop, through long years of practice interacting with many different people: parents, siblings, other family members, friends, and strangers such as store clerks.

Some of the most important social intelligence lessons are learned through interaction with parents. Parents are more likely to be patient, listen carefully, give children chances to say what they have to say, and take the time to make sure children understand. One of the best ways to help children develop social skills is by getting down on the floor and playing with them. Playing make-believe games, building obstacle courses, and playing games like I Spy or Hide-and-Seek, aren't just a lot of fun for children, they are also terrific ways to help children develop “mind-reading” skills.

Children also need many opportunities to have social interaction with other children. These days, more and more of children's leisure time involves video games, television, and activities directed by adults. But some of the best experiences for developing social intelligence come from those moments of free play. This way, children can develop their imagination and mind-reading skills on their own, without the involvement of adults.

One important stage of social development starts at about age 8, when children start comparing themselves to other people. Ask a 5-year-old how good of a runner she is and she might say, “I'm awesome.” By the time she's 9, she might say, “I'm faster than Erin, but not as fast as Jasmine.” At this age, children can really start to benefit from short conversations where we share our observations about social situations they've been in: “Delia looked pretty unhappy when you wouldn't let her play with your doll.”

No single conversation will help children understand all the subtleties of social intelligence, but if we talk to them regularly about why people reacted or felt a certain way, it will reinforce the social experience they get every day and help them to become socially intelligent.