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Supporting Children's Social Development

Positive Relationships in the Early Years

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Social development over early childhood

National early years frameworks around the UK give a prominent place to personal, social and emotional development (PSED), including patterns of social behaviour and the growth of empathy. The revised Early Years Foundation Stage (for England) has retained an emphasis on positive relationships through 'Making relationships'. This focus is present in descriptive material about two-year-olds and forms one of the early learning goals for PSED.

All the early years national frameworks imply that thoughtful practitioners, and their provision, will support children. However, there is not much detail about what actually helps babies and children to flourish socially – or what could undermine them. Young children do not make close, personal relationships with other children, unless circumstances are favourable to this development. Positive social development does not just happen. Certainly, adults do not promote friendly behaviour between children, or actual friendships, simply by announcing "We're all friends here".

What often seems to be missing in discussions about social development is a strong focus on the perspective of the young child. Best practice has a strong element of looking through children's eyes about how the seeds of possible friendship are sown and how friendships become strong – or fade. The starting point in looking at children's social development is grounded in the firm foundations of practitioners' knowledge about child development. There are plenty of pointers to help this process, and this section focuses on how babies and young children develop socially.

The social baby and toddler

In the normal course of events, babies are born social. Their ears are attuned to the sound of the human voice and their brains are poised to process spoken language. Human infants are physically uncoordinated and they need a huge amount of care in comparison with other very young mammals. They cannot scamper after their family like a little lamb, to insist on social and close physical contact. Instead, human babies use their eyes and other senses like touch to communicate. In particular, babies use a steady stare to communicate by locking onto the eyes and face of others. They also use their voice, in communication that steadily moves from crying to a wide range of sounds.

Responsiveness to familiar adults

Throughout the first year of life, babies are responsive to the sounds of familiar adults and children, including their siblings. Parents or early years practitioners should become uneasy when a baby seems unresponsive to a smiling face, affectionate touch or the sounds of human speech. Babies all have their own temperament, and some are by nature more lively in actions and sound making. However, there is good reason to be concerned when babies are unresponsive, rather than simply quiet, or slower to warm up than their peers within a playful exchange with a familiar adult or child.

The crucial beginnings of social interaction are established over the baby year. Babies become ever more social as the direct result of generous personal attention from a few adults, with whom they become very familiar. Suitable playthings are important for babies, but toys can never in themselves promote sociability in the very young. By the end of their first

year, older babies can be active participants in conversational-type exchanges because of all their experiences that support social learning over infancy. They become able to pay attention – looking and listening in the way that older babies and young toddler are able to – with familiar adults. They hold a mutual gaze and use pointing, as well as looking, to direct your attention towards something of interest. In a slightly different way, babies also gain social experiences from affectionate contact with siblings and other slightly older children.

Older babies and young toddlers can have the building blocks for conversation long before they speak recognisable words. The give-and-take of reciprocal communication is an essential part of social contact. Watch nearly one-year-olds, who have had sufficient personal interaction over the baby year. You see the looking, pausing and expectant expression that are just as much part of friendly contact as the sound making and speech-like flow that comes before spoken language.

Responsiveness to other children

Very young children do not only make friendly contact with familiar adults. Babies and toddlers show that they recognise familiar peers and, within their physical abilities, engage in social play with individuals. Even the very youngest children are aware of each other and alert adults can see those early social contacts. Babies and very young toddlers, who spend enough time together regularly, get to know each other on a friendly basis. You will see their face light up in recognition and even babies, who are familiar with each other, will stare or put out a hand to touch each other.

Walking older babies, and definitely toddlers, engage in social play by establishing a joint focus of interest. For instance, they make physical contact with an object that another young child (or an adult) is holding and manipulating. The action communicates non-verbally that 'I'm interested too'. There is also a lot of deliberate imitation of what the other child (or the adult) does. This copying action again sends a non-verbal message along the lines of 'I like this too' and 'how about we do it together?'.

Look closer: making contact through play

In Little Learners Nursery School the base room for older toddlers and young twos is called 'The Snug'. There are low mirrors fixed to the wall at child height. Mirrors are a valuable addition to any setting, as they are often used by children in joint activity: looking at each other as well as themselves in the mirror. On the day of my visit, the under twos were busily engaged in a range of activities (examples later) but I only saw them briefly at the mirrors.

The nursery shared with me two recent observations that showed this opportunity in action. James (15 months) loves dressing up and during this day he chose a hat and went to look in the mirror. Freddy (22 months) saw what James had done, fetched a hat for himself and joined James at the mirror. These two very young children spent time smiling and laughing at each other. They sat comfortably, both of them at the mirror, carefully observed and deliberately imitated each other's play movements.

In another observation Lizzie and Edward – both two years of age – were playing in the den that had been built. The practitioner turned the mirrored shelves around so that the mirror faced into the den. Lizzie and Edward (who are very close friends) sat in the small space, pointed to the mirror and laughed at each other. The practitioner joined the children and pulled a face herself. The children then copied her and had fun sticking out their tongues, seeing the reflection in the mirror and laughing loudly. The two children continued to track each other's actions. They imitated specific movements and sounds from the other child. The practitioner stayed with Lizzie and Edward and added her contribution by offering brief comments on what they were doing.

Toddlers' interest in mirrors has often started when they were much younger. The team in the 'Baby Nest' room regularly see babies, who are comfortable to lay on their tummies, looking closely at the wall mirror in that room. Individual babies often explore what they see with their hands by tapping the mirror. They look unsure, but also excited, by their reflection.

A very normal problem for the very youngest children is that sometimes their attempts to make social contact do not go smoothly. Babies' and toddlers' social moves are often more physical. They can hurt without any deliberate intention, because their strategy for gaining another's attention may be to seize hold of a fistful of hair or another little arm. A touch turns into an unintentional push, or a full body wrestle, which is not always welcomed by the toddler on the receiving end. A very vigorous

Links to your practice

Within their own family, babies make active contact with parents and other close relatives. Some babies spend considerable time in non-family care, in a day nursery or the home of a childminder. It is essential that the key person in the group setting, or the childminder, welcomes personal contact with individual babies, developing a close and affectionate relationship with them (Lindon, 2012b). Wherever they spend their days, babies and young toddlers – slightly older children too – need the emotional security that comes from a close attachment to a small number of familiar adults.

In what ways have you explored, and ensured, that your key person approach ensures babies and young children can make a personal, close relationship from which they can then choose to make broader social contacts?

Enabling social interaction between young children

There is a strong focus in guidance around the UK about the importance of personal and social development.

Such written materials are often less clear about how to create the favourable circumstances for children to make the social contacts which can lead to sustained friendships. The good news is that many aspects of what is regarded as best practice in early years provision work very well to support children's social interaction in a developmentally appropriate way. The main issues are a welcoming learning environment and well-informed, emotionally warm practitioners who understand the difference that their behaviour makes for young children's learning.

An environment for easy social contact

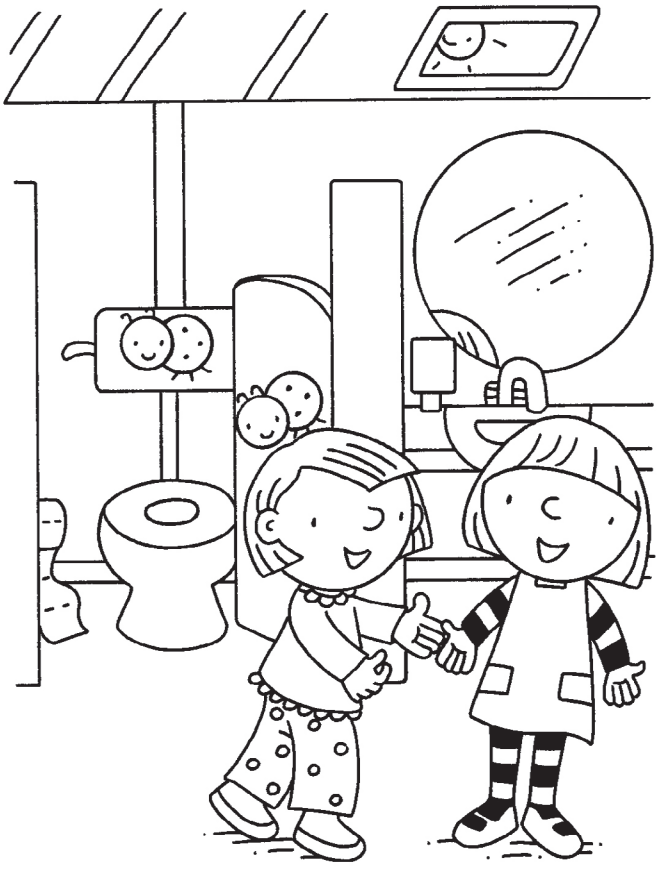
Early years practitioners have been given practical guidance and plenty of encouragement to look closely at the physical environment in which babies and children spend their days.

Thoughtful teams and childminders make the most of possibilities to create smaller, comfortable spaces, as well as more open areas and consideration for children's through routes indoors and outside.

Look closer: the importance of pleasant bathrooms

The design of Oakfield Nursery School included a lot of thought about the bathrooms. Young children spend a lot of time in the bathroom: using the toilet as well as washing their hands before meals and food preparation. The manager and team accept that young children also socialise in the bathroom, enjoying the company of another child during this practical task and having a chat with each other.

The bathrooms have been designed to have as much natural light as possible and to have taps and soap dispensers that are easy for older toddlers and young children to operate independently. The team at Oakfield ensure that children are safe and have learned to manage their own care. However, they have also recognised that bathrooms deserve attention, because they are part of the social environment for young children.



Space and equipment to suit babies and young toddlers

This attention to space and spaces starts with the environment for babies and young toddlers. In the settings mentioned in the examples, the whole team was confident to use the physical learning environment to the full. Careful attention was paid to the whereabouts of babies and toddlers, or any older child who needed more support. But the team leaders had ensured that practitioners did not feel every child had to be in full sight all the time. The environment was safe and had secure outer boundaries. So, even babies and toddlers could enjoy little spaces that felt hidden to them. The slightly older children moved confidently around their indoor and outdoor environment, relishing the temporary and more permanent structures in which they could play in some privacy.

Best practice for supporting social development

This section will explore the role of the manager and other members of the senior team to guide and advise early years practitioners. Some issues, from other parts of the book, are revisited here. The aim is to consider the positive impact of choices that practitioners, and entire teams, make. Best practice with young children is reflective: thinking about what you do and why, recognising the choices you make and checking assumptions.

Positive relationships within a small community

Over most of the 20th century, the majority of children younger than the age for statutory education, developed socially within the boundaries of their own extended family and immediate neighbourhood. Within the last couple of decades of the century it became ever more common that children experienced some kind of early years group provision before they entered primary school.

Young children really seem to enjoy their time in nursery when the emotional and physical environment is appropriate for their age and needs. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education research programme (http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/eppe/eppeintro.htm) has now followed a large number of young children into their secondary school years. The study found that good quality early years provision offered benefits in terms of some aspects of social development. Young children's social adjustment was assessed by a familiar early years practitioner and the research was mostly interested in patterns of pro- or anti-social behaviour, relevant to children's ability to cope in primary school. These are important issues for child development, but are less central to the immediate social world of children themselves.

Being able to listen in a group, the ability to focus on a given task, age-appropriate independence and understanding ground rules for behaviour, all make life considerably easier within the specialised environment of a primary school classroom (Lindon, 2012d). However, young children need to develop the social sensitivity that enables warm personal relationships, including close friendships. Some of the associated social skills will also be advantageous for interaction in the classroom. However, the social courtesies of large group life, led by an adult, are not the same as the intimacy of friendship. So, although frameworks like the Early Years Foundation Stage tend to emphasise the group social skills, these are only part of social learning for children.

Home-like early years provision

Time in nursery, pre-school or playgroup is so usual now, that there is sometimes the implication that children cannot develop socially without this experience. Yet, a significant proportion of the adult population in the UK developed successfully as social beings while spending their early childhood at home. We – this group includes myself – were not socially bereft; we made friends, and decided whom we did not like. We learned the social rules of give-and-take in a child's world and resolved disputes – or failed to do so – within the physical boundaries of our family home and immediate neighbourhood.

The message of this reminder is that young children need a homely environment wherever they spend their days. They have not started 'school' and they are not 'pupils'. Their social development should not be viewed exclusively through the lense of 'school readiness'.

Look closer: Feeling part of a small community

The owners of Red Hen Day Nursery have always aimed for a home-from-home feel to the environment and the flow of each day. The consequence is that children are able to be part of a wide range of shared events, not all of which would be classified as 'play'. It is a reminder that children's social awareness grows through different kinds of experiences and feeling a valued part of a small community.

Meals and cooking

The nursery kitchen is an ingenious design, which combines appropriate safety in terms of a working kitchen, with easy access for the children. The kitchen is open to the nursery by means of a substantial hatch area and worktop. On the children's side they can step up to the wide worktop to see what is happening in the kitchen and chat with the cook. She prepares food on her side of the worktop, so it is easy for children to watch as she makes puddings or food for teatime. Children who are the snack and lunchtime helpers are able to lift down plates or bowls from the worktop or tidy crockery back up.

Children engage in some kind of cooking or food preparation each day. They can chose to be busy directly on the work top or work on nearby tables and then place their bread or cakes onto the worktop