

Fostering Success: Supporting Social Skills

Naomi comes to school and goes off on her own for much of the day. She often stares off into the distance and doesn't answer when people talk to her. She complains to her therapist that she doesn't have any friends.

Coming in from play, Tyson races to the dinner table, grabs a meatball and stuffs it in his mouth, sauce dripping from his lips.

Often kids like Naomi and Tyson have not learned how to interact with others, both verbally and non-verbally, in a way that we see as socially acceptable. For a variety of reasons, they haven't learned such skills as being respectful, having "good manners," or controlling their emotions and behavior. It might help to know a bit about what kids have experienced before they've come into care and how that affects their development of social skills. Doing so can often help you take the most helpful approach.



How children learn social skills

Kids learn social skills in many ways, including:

- From their parents and others in their lives, such as teachers and peers
- By "reading" other people through their nonverbal behavior
- By recognizing their own emotions and being able to name those feelings and

manage them

The child in your care who has been removed from his birth family has had this learning interrupted. The first thing to do, then, is learn about the child's social strengths and challenges.

Start by observing

Watch the child when they interact with others and think about the following:

- Does the child identify and express feelings in particular circumstances?
- Are they considerate of others' feelings and do they get along with others?
 - Do they express frustrations and anger appropriately?
 - Do they interpret or "read" other people's behavior and unspoken messages?
 - Is the child friendly and helpful to others?
 - Are there specific social situations (school, playground, dinner table, shopping mall) where the child is unable to control his or her emotions and/or has poor judgment?

If any of these areas are challenging for the child, think next about how you might best support them so that they can learn and grow to navigate the social world. This may be a mix of actively seeking ways to enhance skills and simply being patient while the child heals from the trauma that interrupted this skill-building to begin with. Following are some additional thoughts for consideration:

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- If the child has trouble managing feelings, it may be a sign of trauma. Kids who have experienced trauma often have trouble regulating their emotions. For example, a child who has just been tucked into bed may cry inconsolably from feelings of fear.
- If the child is unable to name their feelings, they may be out of touch with their emotional life and how it affects their interactions with people. How can we expect a child to show empathy when he or she doesn't understand when they themselves are sad or hurt?
- A child who reacts in unexpected ways to eye contact, personal space, body posture, tone, and volume of voice may not know how to read body language. It has been said that nonverbal behavior is 90% of the message, so kids with this challenge are missing much of what friends and family are trying to communicate.
- Sibling interactions—a child that is part of a sibling group may give some clues about the child's social habits. For example, an older child who has had to care for younger brothers and sisters may talk excessively as a way to fend for younger siblings.



The role of culture and development

It may also be helpful to remember that “manners” are somewhat relative and, dependent on our lens, which includes family culture. For example, while “please” and “thank you” might be heard often in your

home, maybe the child in your care comes from a home where this wasn't seen as important. How much of what you're seeing is a deficit in skills and how much is simply family culture?

Remember, too, that kids in care may be developing at different rates. Their developmental age may not match their chronological age, meaning the 12-year-old in your care may have the social skills of an eight-year-old, and no one may have formally assessed that. If assessments are being done

on the child, it may help to share what you've seen in the way of social skills.

Supporting children as they develop social skills

The best approach may be to involve everything who helps care for the child. Once you have an idea of where the strengths and

challenges are, you can bring this information to the table with:

- **Birth parents.** Sometimes just sharing your observations about the child with the birth parents, in a nonjudgmental way, will encourage a conversation that will help you understand how and why the child interacts with others the way they do.
- **Case worker.** Ask what the child experienced in their birth home that could have impacted their social skills.
- **Child's therapist.** The child's therapy provider may be able to shed some light on the child's experience of the world, and offer tips on how to either work on social

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skills, or simply help the child heal first from the trauma they have experienced.

- **Child's care team.** Collaborate with the child's team. Teams can offer perspectives that will give you food for thought. It will also give them information they need to make good decisions for the child's care plan.
- **Other foster parents.** While confidentiality must be front and center, you may be able to bounce some general ideas off foster parents in your network.

Practical suggestions

If trauma is behind some of the things you've observed, then practicing acceptance, patience, and trauma-informed parenting are the first steps in helping the child in your care grow his or her social skills. If you're thinking the lack of skills are simply the child not having had an opportunity to learn, are there things you can do to boost the child's skills? Here are some suggestions:

- Show kids what personal space means and how not to invade others' personal space.
- Practice making eye contact during conversations.
- Read storybooks about friendships and social interactions. Discuss if there were successful interactions and why.
- Role play various social situations (teasing at school, talking to a clerk, calling someone on the phone).
- Practice good manners within the home (please, thank you, excuse me) and praise your kids when they display them.
- Practice how to meet others, including starting and ending a conversation.
- Discuss facial expression and body language between actors on TV.
- Practice use of different body language and the different messages it gives.
- Practice negotiation—how to get what you want appropriately.
- Practice “out to eat” behavior at the home dinner table, using table manners and

etiquette.

As a parent, you're aware of good social skills and being a mentor for the kids in your care. You may find that there will be times when re-evaluating your expectations makes a big difference. Keep in mind that kids who have experienced trauma have a lot of healing to do before they're ready to take on many normal developmental tasks. Patience will sometimes be your best tool.



Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Group Exercises for Enhancing Social Skills and Self Esteem*, by SiriNam Khalsa
- *Be Polite and Kind*, by CJ Meiners
- *Manners for the Real World: Basic Social Skills* (DVD)
- *Kids Good Manners, For Kids Sake* (DVD)