

Shaping
US

ROYAL FOUNDATION
Centre for
Early Childhood

THE SHORT GUIDE TO

The Shaping Us Framework



Understanding the social and
emotional skills that matter most

Introduction

Social and emotional skills lie the heart of human flourishing. These two groups of closely related skills shape who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate with and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us.

Our ability to develop social and emotional skills starts in pregnancy and continues from birth, all the way through to adulthood. A particularly important phase of skill development occurs in early childhood (i.e. from pregnancy to 5), where our experiences and environment play a significant role, helping to shape the adults we become.

Over recent decades, academics and practitioners in different fields have been working to understand and define what social and emotional skills are, and how they develop. But people from different disciplines can understand social and emotional development in different ways: as a result, the language used to describe them can be complex and sometimes confusing, especially for people without professional expertise in the subject.

The Centre for Early Childhood recognises the need for a shared and accessible language to talk about social and emotional development, so that we can work together to drive action on this vital area across society.

The Shaping Us Framework aims to provide an accessible approach to talking about social and emotional skills that cuts across disciplines and engages a broad audience. The framework was created through a global listening exercise involving academic, clinical and practitioner experts. The aim was to develop consensus on the universally relevant skills and capabilities that matter most throughout our lives and across diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts. The final framework comprises thirty social and emotional skills grouped into six clusters, as shown in the diagram on [page 4](#).

The strength of the Shaping Us Framework lies in its universality and flexibility: diverse organisations might use it as a foundational structure to inform the development of resources, interventions, programmes, and policies. It employs concepts and language that have been tested with members of the general public, to ensure it can be used with a range of audiences, including families and communities.

Each of us has a different role to play in supporting social and emotional skills, and we can all use the Shaping Us Framework in our own way. Early childhood educators, for example, may use the framework to review their activities and understand where there are opportunities to do more to strengthen different areas of children's development. Health visitors and parenting practitioners could use it to talk to families about children's early development, and what parents might do to support social and emotional skills. Employers could use the framework to think about the skills of their workforce and how these can be enhanced through professional development.

At The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, the Shaping Us Framework will underpin our collective work with partners across society, to raise awareness and understanding of social and emotional development in early childhood. This will, in turn, enable us to inspire greater commitment, action and investment in developing these skills during early childhood and beyond.

By nurturing the social and emotional skills in the Shaping Us Framework, we can all help to build flourishing communities, and a society in which every individual can thrive.

2 The Shaping Us Framework



Know ourselves

Who we are as individuals

- Understand our own thoughts, feelings and beliefs
- Take charge of our life
- Have hopes for our future

Manage our emotions

How we understand, process and manage our emotions

- Understand our own and others' emotions
- Have ways to manage our emotions

Focus our thoughts

How we effectively learn, work and manage in life

- Focus our attention
- Be aware of and direct our thoughts
- Weigh up information
- Make decisions that are right for ourselves and for others
- Solve problems
- Pause before we act
- Be flexible
- Keep going
- Bounce back

Communicate with others

How we receive and share feelings, thoughts and information

- Listen to and understand others
- Express ourselves

Nurture our relationships

How we get along and build relationships with others

- Accept others for who they are
- Understand and feel someone else's emotions
- Understand what someone might be thinking
- Be kind
- Give freely
- Get on with others
- Build positive relationships
- Love and be loved
- Work well with others
- Set and respect boundaries
- Manage conflict

Explore the world

How we explore and discover the world around us

- Be creative
- Be curious
- Feel joy

3 The skills

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Know ourselves:

Who we are as individuals

The skills in this cluster are:

- Understand our own thoughts, feelings and beliefs
- Take charge of our life
- Have hopes for our future

What does this look like by the end of early childhood?

By the age of five, most children will begin to develop a basic understanding of themselves and their preferences. They may express personal likes and dislikes such as favourite foods, colours, music, or activities. At this age, children are unlikely to be able to fully understand or reflect on their thoughts or beliefs – these abilities develop later. Children are also still developing the ability to set and achieve goals.

By five, many children can identify basic feelings and have a simple understanding of how these might be influenced by their experiences and the people around them. This can be harder for children who have more limited language skills and vocabulary because it takes words to describe how we feel, even to ourselves.

Young children may begin to talk about their future dreams, like wanting to be a doctor, footballer or artist, although at this age these aspirations are unlikely to be grounded in an in-depth understanding of what those goals look like and how to get there. There will also be cultural differences in the extent to which children are encouraged to express and articulate individual goals.

Why do these skills matter for a happy and healthy life?

Understanding our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs allows us to reflect on, and understand why we feel a certain way in various situations. If we know our strengths and the things that sustain us, and our vulnerabilities and the things that challenge us, we can make informed decisions about our lives and protect our own health and happiness. This self-awareness helps us to manage emotions, make informed decisions, and improve relationships with others.

Taking charge of our lives involves setting goals, making choices aligned with our values, and taking responsibility for our actions. This leads to a sense of empowerment and purpose. It can also reduce the risk that we get distracted by less helpful societal pressures.

Having hopes for the future motivates us to pursue our dreams, creating a sense of direction and fulfilment. These things help us to keep going, even in the face of challenges. When we have hopes and ambitions, we are more likely to reach higher levels of attainment and satisfaction throughout our lives.

Together, these skills contribute to a more meaningful life, as they allow us to build a clear picture of who we are, what we want, and how to achieve our desired future.



Manage our emotions

How we understand, process and manage our emotions

The skills in this cluster are:

- Understand our own and others' emotions
- Have ways to manage our emotions

What does this look like by the end of early childhood?

By age five, most children begin to understand and express their own emotions more clearly. They may recognise basic emotions like happiness, sadness, anger, or fear and can label these feelings, such as saying, “I feel sad.” This can be harder for children who have more limited language skills and vocabulary and so struggle to talk about their feelings. There might also be cultural differences in the extent to which children are encouraged or discouraged to show emotions in different communities.

Children of this age will also be able to identify simple emotions in others, to think about what might have caused these emotions, and to respond appropriately. For example, they might notice another child is sad and offer to share toys or play with them.

Regulating our emotions can be difficult for anyone. At times, all five-year-olds will still find it difficult to manage their emotions in challenging situations. These skills take time to develop. Some children, such as those who are neurodivergent, may find more situations and experiences challenging and therefore may have more experiences of big emotions at this age.

By the end of early childhood, children will start to notice how certain situations affect their emotions, like feeling upset when they lose a toy. While they may not yet have fully developed strategies to manage intense emotions, five-year-olds might calm themselves by using simple methods like taking deep breaths or even learning simple mindfulness meditation.

Children often need help from adults to calm them down, but by age five a child might know that getting a hug from a parent or reassurance from a teacher will help them with big feelings and might seek out this support.

Why do these skills matter for a happy and healthy life?

Understanding, processing and coping with our emotions are all crucial skills for living a healthy and happy life. These skills are particularly valuable in challenging situations. Identifying and addressing strong emotions can help us to find ways to calm down before emotions escalate to intense levels or overwhelm us. These skills also help us to respond to difficult feelings (such as anxiety and stress) in healthy

ways. Managing our emotions and having healthy coping techniques helps to reduce stress, with positive impacts on our physical and mental health.

Being able to communicate our emotions to others, and being able to understand others' emotions, can foster stronger relationships. These skills help us to communicate effectively and avoid misunderstandings, and to respond to each other in sensitive and supportive ways. Strong relationships bring a wide range of benefits throughout our lives.



Focus our thoughts

How we effectively learn, work and manage in life

The skills in this cluster are:

- Focus our attention
- Be aware of and direct our thoughts
- Weigh up information
- Make decisions that are right for ourselves and others
- Solve problems
- Pause before we act
- Be flexible
- Keep going
- Bounce back

What does this look like by the end of early childhood?

By five years old, most children can focus their attention on simple tasks, such as following a short story or completing a puzzle. Focusing is hard for children and it is common for them to find it difficult to stay still, focus for long periods, or ignore distractions. Neurodivergent children might find it particularly challenging to focus or to shift attention when needed.

At this stage children will still find it difficult to deal with complex tasks, manage their frustrations when things are challenging, or adapt to unexpected changes. These skills develop as children get older.

By the age of five, children are developing early skills for managing daily tasks and problem-solving. They may begin to make basic decisions, such as choosing between two toys or deciding what to wear based on the weather. They are also learning to adapt to changes, such as finding a different toy if their first choice is not available. While they may still need support with complex decision-making and problem-solving, they are beginning to practice these skills in everyday situations and will improve over time.

Why do these skills matter for a happy and healthy life?

The ability to focus our thoughts and manage tasks effectively is essential for day-to-day functioning and achieving longer term goals. By focusing our attention we can prioritise tasks, stay organised and make informed decisions. For example, when grocery shopping, we can stick to a list, make adjustments when needed, and ensure that we stay on track. These skills also help us to navigate more complex social challenges, such as disagreements between friends and family.

These skills also help us solve problems and stay resilient in the face of obstacles. The ability to pause before acting allows us to consider options carefully, while being flexible helps us adapt when plans change. Persisting through difficulties, keeping our attention focused on our goals, and bouncing back from setbacks are key to maintaining a sense of control and direction. These skills help us to avoid stress and frustration, to make healthy choices, and to achieve the things that matter to us.

Communicate with others

How we receive and share feelings, thoughts and information

The skills in this cluster are:

- Listen to and understand others
- Express ourselves

What does this look like by the end of early childhood?

By the age of five, most children have developed a basic ability to express their feelings and needs through words and actions. While their communication skills are still developing, and they can still struggle to communicate or understand abstract or complex concepts, children at this age are beginning to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas with others more effectively.

Children communicate in different ways. Some children may be non-verbal and some may use sign language. Children who are bilingual may develop language skills at a different pace, often slower, compared to their monolingual peers. Neurodivergent children might experience and interpret non-verbal cues, like body language or facial expressions, differently from neurotypical children. There may be cultural differences in how children are expected to express themselves, and how non-verbal communication is used.

By the age of five, most children have the skills they need to listen and understand basic communications and will start to recognize and respond to non-verbal cues about others' feelings, such as when a friend is sad. These skills help them to develop friendships, to play and learn, and to seek the support they need from adults.

Why do these skills matter for a happy and healthy life?

Effective communication is essential for building strong relationships. Communication is about 'give and take', i.e. understanding others and sharing our own thoughts and feelings clearly. Being able to do both fosters empathy, trust and mutual understanding in our relationships.

By listening attentively and observing non-verbal cues, we can better grasp what other people want and need: this might be a friend explaining plans, a partner expressing emotions, or a colleague sharing important information. Listening to and having a shared focus with another person connects us to them. It helps people to feel understood and valued. It is also important to recognise communication differences and to appreciate variations in norms. We should take steps to be inclusive when communicating with others, especially with people whose style may be different to our own but just as valid.

Expressing ourselves is equally important, as it allows us to share our emotions, ideas, and needs with others. Whether through conversation, writing, or other forms of expression, being able to articulate what we are feeling or thinking helps us feel heard and validated. These communication skills enable us to connect with others, resolve conflicts, and collaborate effectively, which are vital skills in both our personal and working lives. Communication skills improve our social connections, which enhance our health and happiness.



Nurture our relationships

How we get along and build relationships with others

The skills are:

- Accept others for who they are
- Understand and feel someone else's emotions
- Understand what someone might be thinking
- Be kind
- Give freely
- Get on with others
- Build positive relationships
- Love and be loved
- Work well with others
- Set and respect boundaries
- Manage conflict

What does this look like by the end of early childhood?

By the age of five, most children will have started to cultivate the foundational social skills that help them get along with others. They start to understand that people have different emotions and needs and can show empathy by comforting a friend who is sad or helping when someone is struggling. They are learning how to cooperate in group activities, share toys, and take turns. While they may still struggle with conflict resolution and respecting boundaries, they are starting to practice these skills. They may also express affection for family and friends, understanding the importance of kindness, love, and positive relationships.

Children with more limited language skills might find it harder to build relationships with others. Similarly, neurodiverse children might find it difficult to interpret social cues, and some may find peer relationships and social play more difficult. Social expectations around relationships, cooperation and conflict resolution can also vary between cultures, which can affect how children negotiate conflict or express their needs.

Why do these skills matter for a happy and healthy life?

Positive relationships are vital for our health and happiness. Being kind, giving freely, and setting healthy boundaries enable us to build relationships based on trust, respect, and mutual care.

The ability to build and maintain positive connections with people in various situations, from casual acquaintances to close family and friends, helps us to function in day-to-day life, and contributes to having a meaningful life. These skills help us work well with others, in both personal and work settings, and contribute to a sense of belonging and shared purpose

The skills in this cluster help us to develop and maintain positive connections with others, even when we have disagreements or different perspectives. By accepting others for who they are, we foster an environment of respect and understanding. The ability to manage conflict in a constructive way ensures that disagreements don't damage relationships but rather strengthen them.

Nurturing relationships where we feel loved, supported, and connected is key to living a fulfilled and happy life.



Explore the world

How we explore and discover the world around us

The skills are:

- Be curious
- Be creative
- Feel joy

What does this look like by the end of early childhood?

Throughout early childhood, children are naturally curious and eager to explore the world around them. By age five, most children will engage in creative play using their imagination to create stories, build structures, or invent games. They often ask questions about how and why things happen, and express wonder at new experiences. Children at this age are also beginning to find simple joys, such as in the beauty of nature, a favourite song or playing with friends. Children at this age can learn at a very high rate, as they experience the world. While they may still have limited understanding of complex concepts, their curiosity and creativity are growing, and they actively seek out new experiences that bring them joy.

Some children may be more reticent to engage fully with new experiences. Neurodivergent children might be more cautious or resistant to change and unfamiliar experiences. Cultural attitudes toward exploration and curiosity can vary. Cultural views on risk and safety can shape the extent to which children are allowed to take risks or explore on their own. In some cultures, children may be encouraged to explore their environment freely and independently, while, in others, children's experiences will be more structured.

Why do these skills matter for a happy and healthy life?

These skills help us to seek out and connect with the world around us, and engage with and appreciate the world in a deeper way. Curiosity drives us to ask questions, seek knowledge, and discover new things about people, places, or ideas. These skills help us to seek out new experiences and take on new challenges. An open-minded and curious approach supports continuous learning and growth, allowing us to understand the world in new and enriching ways.

Creativity plays a key role in how we interact with the world, enabling us to approach challenges with fresh perspectives and find innovative solutions. It is increasingly recognised as important in work environments. Creativity also allows us to express ourselves and enjoy the beauty in nature, music and the arts.

Expanding our capacity for joy allows us to find moments of joy in all aspects of our lives and to connect with our deeper sense of contentment and hopefulness – even if we are not feeling happy in a specific moment. Recognising and feeling gratitude for the small wonders around us – like a beautiful sunset or a kind gesture – helps us to embrace life's experiences, and contributes to our happiness and sense of fulfilment.

Shaping US

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Company No. 7033553.

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