ROYAL FOUNDATION
Centre for
Early Childhood

Foundations for Life:

A Guide to Social and Emotional Development

Shaping A Future Where Love Can Flourish

In a world which feels increasingly distracted, fragmented and digital, where life's pace, noise and interruptions can be overwhelming, I believe it is more important than ever to invest in what truly helps us to thrive: human connection.

While our society often focuses on academic or physical milestones, research consistently shows that it is our earliest relationships, experiences and environments which lay the foundations for our future health and happiness. The quality of our connections – with ourselves, with others and with the world around us – shapes how safe we feel, how we relate, and how we process experiences throughout our lives.

What the science also demonstrates is just how *early* these foundations are laid. By age five, our brains have already grown to 90% of their adult size, a period during which they form more than a million new connections every second. This makes early childhood a critical window for developing the social and emotional skills that become the bedrock of lifelong wellbeing and opportunity.

Children experience the world in an integrated way, where thought, feeling and physical experiences are deeply intertwined. Loving relationships, play, creativity and attentive presence create nurturing environments in which children feel safe to explore and grow. When children are supported to remain connected to their feelings, their bodies, and their curiosity, they develop not only social and emotional skills, but also an inner sense of stability and resilience that strengthens all their relationships and carries them into adulthood.

The Centre for Early Childhood's *Shaping Us Framework* identifies the key social and emotional skills that enable us to thrive. These human qualities, such as self-awareness and managing emotions, become the golden thread connecting childhood to adult wellbeing. The *Framework* offers a shared language to strengthen understanding across sectors and communities. This *Foundations for Life* report builds on that work, providing essential, evidence-informed knowledge about how social and emotional skills develop in early childhood - translating the science into accessible, practical guidance.

Embedding this understanding into training and ongoing professional development across the early years will help to ensure that parents, carers and practitioners receive consistent and accurate support in nurturing this vital part of human development.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone working with the youngest members of our society today. Your work has a profound and lasting impact. You are not just helping to raise the next generation; you are shaping a more connected and resilient future. Because childhood is not just a beginning - it is our lifelong reference point.

Now is the moment to place care and connection at the heart of all we do, and to shape a future in which love can truly flourish.

Her Royal Highness,
The Princess of Wales

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood was set up by Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales, in recognition of the importance of early child development as the foundation for a healthy, happy, and connected society.

The Centre works to ensure that babies and young children have the relationships, experiences, and environments to develop social and emotional skills. These skills are vital to all of us throughout our lives. They enable us to be happy in ourselves and to develop deep and meaningful connections, both to other people and to the world around us.

Many people work with and support babies, children, and their families in early childhood – the period between pregnancy and when a child reaches age five. All these people can nurture children's social and emotional skills and help to create the conditions in which they can thrive and go on to lead happy and healthy lives. Supporting children's social and emotional development will, over time, help to create a nurturing and thriving society.

This guide has been designed to give anyone working in early childhood a shared, foundational understanding of social and emotional development. It has been written primarily for practitioners and volunteers, whether that be in education, health, family support, or other services.

Our goal is to create a strong shared knowledge about social and emotional development, working with system leaders to embed it more explicitly into universal health practice, as a foundation for action across society.

Working together, armed with a good understanding of child development, we can all help more children to develop the skills they need for a happy, healthy life – creating a better world now and in the future.

Introduction

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1

Why social and emotional skills matter.

Key takeaways

from this section:

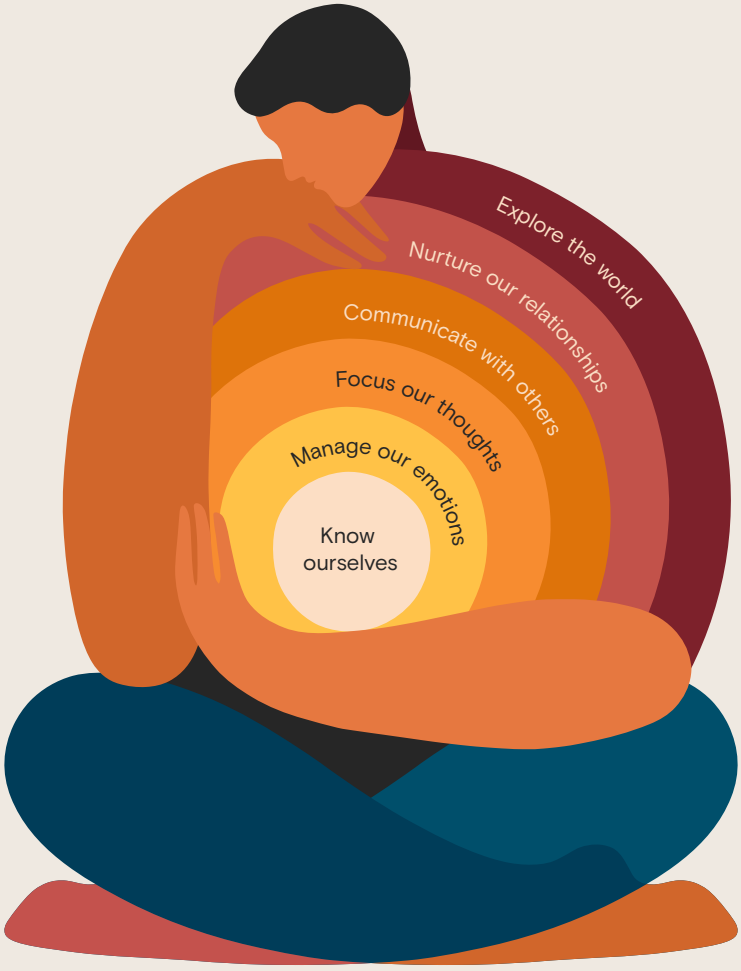
- Social and emotional skills are two groups of closely related skills that shape who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate with and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us.
- The Shaping Us Framework describes the thirty social and emotional skills that matter most for a happy, healthy life.
- Social and emotional skills help us to function and flourish in all aspects of our lives, at every stage of life – from infancy to old age.
- Social and emotional skills are linked to a range of outcomes including better health, success in work, stronger relationships, and reductions in offending. They bring benefits to us as individuals, to the economy, and to wider society.

Social and emotional skills are two groups of closely related skills that shape who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us. These are skills which are enhanced and refined throughout our lives, but their foundations are laid in early childhood.

Evidence shows that social and emotional skills are vital to all of us. They enable us, as individuals, to live a happy, healthy life. Collectively, all our social and emotional skills contribute to a more connected, nurturing, and thriving society.

At the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, we recognised the need for a shared, accessible way to talk about social and emotional skills. The Centre worked with experts to develop the Shaping Us Framework, which was launched in 2024. It describes the core social and emotional skills that matter most. The framework uses language that everyone can understand, so that we can work together to drive action across society.

The Shaping Us Framework comprises thirty social and emotional skills grouped into six clusters.



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

The impact of social and emotional skills on outcomes

Social and emotional skills are fundamental to wellbeing and development. They enable us to be happy, to build strong and loving relationships, and to do the things that fulfil us. They help us to be healthier and to achieve better outcomes in education and work.

Social and emotional skills matter at every stage of our lives. Skills such as the ability to manage emotions, get on with others, and focus attention during the pre-school years are important in supporting children to enjoy early childhood and be ready for school. They enable children to make friends, play, and learn. Social and emotional skills help children and young people to be mentally healthy. They support a positive sense of self, success at school, and the development of positive, nurturing relationships. As adults, social and emotional skills enable us to form lasting friendships and healthy intimate relationships, to be nurturing parents and carers, and to succeed in the workplace.

Social and emotional skills set us up well to cope with whatever life throws at us. If we can respond well to stressful situations, we can cope better in adversity. If we can build healthy connections and relationships, we can maintain strong networks of people who see us through good times and bad.

Longitudinal cohort studies – research studies that follow people throughout their lives – have shown that well-developed social and emotional skills are associated with a range of positive outcomes. Two examples of findings from these studies are explained on the next page.

- In America, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has followed adults for over eighty years and has conclusively demonstrated that the quality of relationships is a better predictor of a long and happy life than IQ, income, or even our genes. Studies have found that people who have, and draw on, social support have better physical health outcomes[i].
- In New Zealand, the Dunedin Study has tracked over a thousand individuals since the early 1970s and has found that self-control – being able to regulate our emotions and behaviour – is robustly associated with a wide range of outcomes including good physical health and personal finances, and a reduction in substance dependence and criminal offending[ii].

Social and emotional skills have economic benefits to us as individuals, and to our society. Children with stronger social and emotional development are more likely to contribute to the economy, and less likely to incur costs to the public purse through using public services like health and social care or being involved in the criminal justice system.

Employers have long recognised the importance of social and emotional skills[1] for productivity and workplace success. These skills help us to collaborate, think critically, and be creative in finding new solutions. In recent research by Deloitte, business leaders recognised a growing need for employees to have social and emotional skills to adapt and thrive in the quickly changing work environment. This research also emphasised the importance of these uniquely human skills, which will be important to distinguish employees in workplaces of the future where AI is likely to play a more dominant role[iii].

[1]Employers might call these skills "human skills", "soft skills" or "21st Century skills"

How social and emotional skills help us throughout life

Toddler

Know ourselves:

I am getting to know myself and what I like and do not like. I know I like animals, and I like looking at books about them. I choose books with animals to read with my mum at bedtime. I like looking at books because they have pictures that I find interesting and fun.

Primary aged child

Manage our emotions:

I am getting better at dealing with big feelings. My mum and dad help me to notice and understand when I start to feel upset and to talk about it. I try ways to manage big feelings by taking a deep breath and blowing out slowly, just like my parents have shown me. I'm also better at telling my friends how I feel. I have more fun with other children because I can keep playing, even when things do not go the way I wanted them to.

Teenager

Focus our thoughts:

With positive reinforcement from my coaches and teachers, I am getting better at focussing my attention, prioritising, and staying organised. This helps me to achieve good grades in my schoolwork and to improve at the sports and hobbies I enjoy. When things are difficult, I know it's worth persisting, practicing, and trying to get better. I stay focused even when things are difficult and frustrating.

The vignettes below show how social and emotional skills can help us at different stages throughout life. These are just illustrative examples drawing out particular clusters of skills. Skills from every cluster of the Shaping Us framework will help us to thrive in many different ways at every stage of our lives.

Young Adult

Communicate with others:

As I get older, I am becoming a better listener. I spend more time talking, observing, and reflecting so I can understand other people's points of view, thoughts, and feelings. This has helped me at work where I encounter a more diverse range of people. I am better at connecting with people, collaborating, and avoiding conflict.

Middle Age

Nurture our relationships:

I've always had lots of good friends, but I am still finding ways to improve my relationships. I've spent more time considering my partner's desires, needs, and why they behave the way they do. I am also better at articulating my own needs and boundaries. This has helped us to develop a deeper connection.

Older Adult

Explore the world:

Recently, I have tried to be more curious about the world around me. When I'm outside, I notice more about the plants, sky, wildlife, and green spaces, and feel more connected with the natural world. I feel a sense of wonder and joy in things I did not even notice before, and I feel more grateful for the world around me. It helps me feel more fulfilled.

When things go wrong

Because social and emotional skills help people to understand and manage emotions and behaviours and to form positive, trusting relationships, they can reduce risky, antisocial, and harmful behaviour. Conversely, particularly poor social and emotional development, without the right support, can have serious lasting and damaging effects. The impacts of extremely poor social and emotional development caused by significant and/or prolonged adversity in early childhood might include:

- Violent or destructive emotional outbursts and impulsive behaviours.
- Difficulty in forming and maintaining healthy relationships, leading to social isolation.
- A higher tendency to internalise emotions, leading to depression, anxiety, and/or other mental health difficulties.
- Risky behaviour, such as harmful sexual behaviour and substance misuse.
- Long-term problems dealing with stress, leading to self-destructive behaviours and increased likelihood of physical health issues.
- Increased likelihood of offending and involvement in the criminal justice system.

The effects of social and emotional problems do not just impact individuals but have ripple effects for other people and wider society.

2

The importance of early childhood.

Key takeaways

from this section:

- Children's brains and bodies develop rapidly in pregnancy and the first five years of life. This development is shaped by their relationships, experiences and environments.
- What happens in early childhood can have lasting impacts on how we function, form relationships, and react to the world around us throughout our lives, especially in times of stress and adversity.
- Although our bodies and brains change throughout life, what happens early in life has a disproportionate effect on how we develop.
- The social and emotional skills we develop in early childhood are foundational skills which influence many other aspects of development.

Understanding early child development

Our early experiences shape our brains and bodies.

Early childhood - the period from pregnancy until a child is five - matters in its own right. It also matters because what happens during this period lays the foundations for our lifelong health and wellbeing.

Early childhood is a period of rapid development. More than one million connections develop between a baby's brain cells every second[iv]. By shaping this early development, we have the chance to shape a child's future.

Many factors shape early development. While genes guide development, they do not determine how children's brains and bodies develop. Relationships, experiences and environments, in the womb and after birth, also influence development in profound and lasting ways.

Early relationships, experiences, and environments change our biology.

Early relationships, experiences, and environments do not just change how we think and feel. They shape our developing biology and biological systems and can even influence how genes are expressed.

Our biological systems, such as our brains and nervous systems, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, immune, and metabolic systems, are all shaped by what happens in early life.

Our social and emotional skills and capacities as adults are dependent on these biological systems - particularly our brains, hormones, and nervous systems. These systems shape how we respond to emotions and stress, and how we feel around other people.

Toxic Stress

When a baby or young child's needs are not consistently met, they can experience prolonged, high levels of stress.

Experiencing abuse and adversity is stressful for children, particularly if they do not have a caring adult to soothe and protect them. It is also stressful for babies and young children to experience neglect and not have an adult who consistently responds to their emotional needs.

Some stress is normal for a child, but chronic, unregulated stress exposes their developing body and brain to high levels of stress hormones, which can be damaging. High levels of stress, sometimes called toxic stress, can have lasting impacts on health and wellbeing.

Exposure to chronic, unregulated stress can influence how children's brains are wired and how their stress-response systems develop. This will then impact how they respond to stress in the future. It might be harder for them to respond to stress in a calm and rational way.

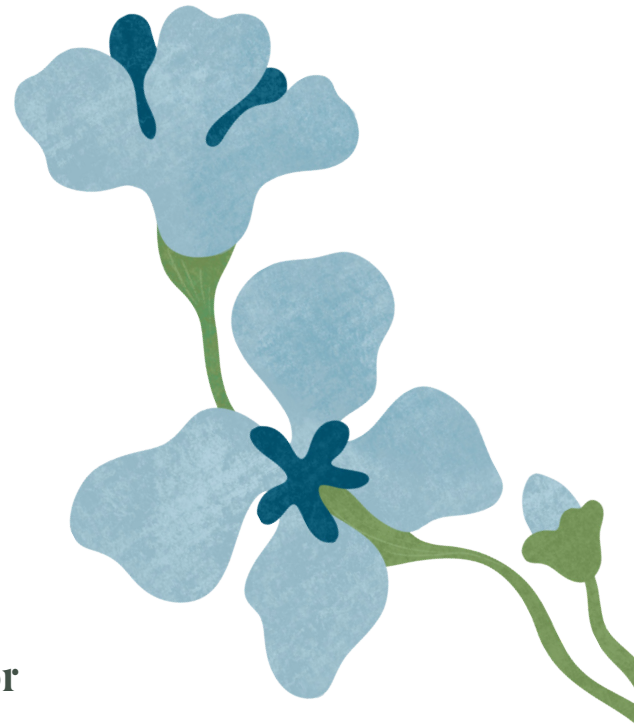
The impact of high levels of stress on the body has been likened to a car constantly having its engine revving[v]: constant activation of the body and brain can have damaging effects on mental and physical health. Stress weakens the immune system and increases inflammation in the body - increasing the risk of illness throughout life.

We adapt to our environments.

Our brains and bodies are **adaptive**. This means we are shaped by our experiences so that we develop to be better suited for the environments we live in. For example, we are born with millions of neurons (brain cells) in areas of the brain which can process language. The words and sounds we hear determine which of these neurons connect to each other. Hearing the same sounds regularly strengthens connections between neurons. This makes our brains better at processing sounds in the languages we hear regularly. We have an innate capacity to learn language, but the language we learn depends on the words we hear. This is just one example, but our brains adapt to many different sensory inputs and experiences in early childhood too.

Our brains and bodies start to adapt to our environments even before birth.

Adaptations in the brain may not always be helpful to us. For example, a child who lives in a dangerous and stressful early environment in the womb (if the mother experiences high levels of stress in pregnancy) or after birth, may develop to be more vigilant and have a heightened response to threat. This is adaptive in the moment, making a child better able to cope with their experiences and stay safe. However, this is less helpful in safe, predictable environments. It may lead to responses that are seen as an overreaction, and it can also have negative impacts on their health and wellbeing as their body is exposed to increased levels of stress.



Early development is the foundation for what happens next.

When a house is built, things happen in a sequence. Strong foundations are necessary to support the next stages of a building. If foundations are weak, this can impact the strength of the later structure, even if we build it carefully. Brain development is similar. Brains are built over time from the bottom up. In pregnancy and early childhood, neurons in the brain start to form new connections and circuits. Simple neural connections develop first, followed by more complex circuits which enable our brain to do more sophisticated things (as in the example of language, where we learn simple words to start with and then more complex sentences and concepts).

The early connections made in a baby's brain form the foundations for the more complex connections that form later. This means that disruptions to development early in life can have a disproportionate impact on children's later development and outcomes. Problems that affect the foundations of development can have a bigger impact on children's lives than problems that might happen later, when a child already has firm foundations.

Just as a house built on unstable foundations might require reinforcement, so too a child who has had a difficult start in life may need extra support later. If there are significant challenges in a baby's life that influence their early brain development, it can have harmful effects on later development and functioning, even if the child goes on to live in a healthy and nurturing environment. This is known as **latent vulnerability**.

Latent vulnerability might not always be obvious but could play out at times of stress and challenge, for example through a child or adult exhibiting unexpected emotional outbursts or social struggles. This can have negative impacts on their wellbeing and relationships which accrue over time.

Early childhood is a time of significant change, but we can always learn, develop, and heal.

Our brains are particularly malleable (open to influence) in the earliest years of life. It is easier to shape brain connections and circuits as they are forming, rather than to modify them once they are mature. This makes early childhood an age of opportunity, and of vulnerability: if we get things right it can have lifelong benefits, but early adversity can cast long shadows.

However, our future is not entirely determined by what happens in the first years of life. Our brains and biological systems can always develop, grow, and change throughout life. Humans continue to need positive relationships, experiences and environments to build on an already positive start. And, with the right support, children who have faced early adversity can go on to thrive.

What happens early matters most - but it is never too late to improve a child's life and life chances.

Social and emotional development in early childhood

Social and emotional skills begin to develop from before birth and can be strengthened throughout our lives.

Social and emotional development in early childhood is critical for later outcomes: children are developing skills that will enable them to seize opportunities for learning and development and support them to thrive throughout life.

The social and emotional skills developed in early childhood are foundations for the development of a wide range of other abilities, functions, and behaviours. They are the basis of what is known as **developmental cascades**. This term captures how one basic skill underpins a wide range of other skills across life, so developing one skill unlocks a wide range of other outcomes. For example, being able to communicate underpins many other more specific and complex skills, such as academic abilities. Conversely if a child struggles to communicate, it can have broad and significant impacts on their wider learning.

Whilst early childhood is vital for social and emotional development, many social and emotional skills are complex and will not develop fully until later in life. As we encounter new situations and experiences we continue to refine and enhance our social and emotional skills and capabilities throughout our lives.

3

How social and emotional skills develop.

Key takeaways

from this section:

- Social and emotional development is complex. Children do not progress in a uniform way through a set of clear milestones.
- All child development is interconnected. Social and emotional development is linked to other aspects of development, such as language skills.
- There can be differences in the social and emotional skills of healthy children of the same age due to the expected differences between individuals. The same child can also exhibit different levels of functioning in different circumstances.
- A child will display their social and emotional skills differently depending on a range of factors such as their personality, culture, and wider levels of development.

How social and emotional skills develop

Early relationships, experiences, and environments shape children's social and emotional skills. Later sections of this guide discuss in more detail the array of factors which impact on social and emotional development – for better or worse. It covers the critical role of early relationships and how love and connection shape an emotionally healthy brain.

This chapter discusses what social and emotional skills look like in children themselves, and how we might identify any delays in development. These delays might occur for many reasons – they might have biological underpinnings or occur as a response to trauma or adversity in the child's life.

Children do not all develop in the same way at the same time.

It is important to remember that social and emotional development is complex. Children do not all acquire these skills in the same way. Each child's social and emotional development can happen in different ways and at their own pace. This is not a sign of deficits in some children, but simply a result of the complexity of development and the expected differences between individuals, which bring richness to our society.

Social and emotional skills do not develop in a simple set of steps or in a straight line. There are not clear milestones in social and emotional development, as there might be in other aspects of early development.

At any specific age, there are high levels of variability in children's social and emotional development, including among healthy and typically developing children, with differences both between individuals and in the same child across contexts

Children do not simply progress from not having a skill one day to mastering it the next. They might demonstrate varying capacities to use skills in different environments and contexts. A child might be confident communicating at home with a parent, for example, but might not demonstrate the same communication skills in a less familiar environment or when feeling stressed or uncomfortable. Even as adults, sometimes our own wellbeing, mental and emotional state, and context influences our social and emotional skills – many of us cannot always regulate our emotions all the time, however healthy and well-developed we might be.

How children act can be impacted by their personal preferences, skills, and temperament as well as their experiences and cultural expectations. Some children, for example, might find different environments or social circumstances more challenging than others. Some might express discomfort in ways that are obvious to the people around them (such as having an emotional outburst or shouting), and others might do so in quieter and less obvious ways, by withdrawing.

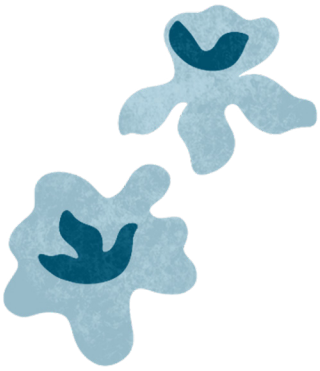
Some behaviours may be seen as more or less acceptable depending on families, cultures, and communities. This can influence how a child expresses themselves and how their development might be viewed by adults in their lives. Some behaviours, such as confidence in expressing individual views, might be seen as strengths in some cultures, and challenges in others. The impact of culture on development is discussed more later in this section.

Importantly, there is a difference between good social and emotional development and being consistently compliant, calm, and easy to parent. During early childhood, healthily developing children are likely, at times, to behave in ways which can be challenging to adults who care for them.

Social and emotional development is connected to other aspects of development

Social and emotional skills are not distinct from other aspects of child development. The development of these skills is influenced by other skills and capacities a child may have. For example, language development and emotional regulation influence each other. A child with better language development might be less likely to experience strong emotions, because they can ask for help in challenging situations. Language skills also help children to describe their feelings to themselves and others, which supports emotional regulation.

> A child's level of social and emotional development and functioning is also linked to their wider health and development. All aspects of child development are interrelated. Social and emotional skills are supported by other cognitive and language skills, so children with delays or difficulties in these wider skills may also have delays in their social and emotional development. Children with disabilities or physical health conditions might have fewer opportunities to develop their social and emotional skills and/or might exhibit these skills in different ways. A child who is deaf or non-verbal, for example, may communicate with others in different ways to a child who is hearing and able to talk.



Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity describes how people experience and interact with the world in different ways. We all have our own different “neurotypes” or ways of thinking, perceiving, behaving, and processing information. Neurodiversity leads to differences in how children develop and display their social and emotional skills. The differences between us can be a strength in society, and there are not necessarily “right” or “wrong” ways of being.

Children whose neurotypes are less typical can be called neurodivergent. This can include children with autism, ADHD or both. Some neurodivergent children have specific difficulties with some social and emotional functions. Being neurodivergent can also mean children’s strengths and skills go unrecognised because they present in a different way to other children. Neurodivergent children may be less likely to flourish because environments and settings designed for neurotypical children are less likely to meet their needs. With love, connection, and understanding, we can create the relationships, experiences, and environments that help these children to thrive.

Stages and signs of healthy development

This section describes some of the stages of social and emotional development in early childhood, themed by the six clusters in the Shaping Us Framework. This is a broad guide to development, recognising that development is not linear or uniform. In this section we describe what typical development looks like in children themselves; later in this document, we describe the factors that might support or hinder this development.

When we describe how skills develop in this section of the guide, we describe what can be observed in the child themselves. Later in the guide, we describe how loving adults can support this development.

Know ourselves

How development happens...

Young babies are consumed by their feelings and experiences in any given moment, and unable to differentiate themselves from the world around them. In the first year of life, typically developing children start to develop a sense of themselves and of other people as separate individuals.

During early childhood, children start to develop a capacity known to psychologists as **theory of mind**. This means understanding people as beings with their own individual mental states, including thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Children also start to develop the capacity to **mentalise**, which means explaining behaviours and actions in terms of the mental states that might underlie them (for example “I stamped by foot because I was cross about having to leave”, “My friend is crying because she wanted an extra biscuit and couldn’t have one”). Developing theory of mind and the ability to mentalise are important in understanding our own minds and those of other people. These things underpin skills in both the knowing ourselves and nurturing our relationships clusters in the Shaping Us Framework.

Children’s theory of mind develops gradually, and it is likely that children intuitively understand and respond to others’ thoughts and emotions before they can reflect on and talk about them explicitly. Scientists have used different experiments to understand when and how children develop theory of mind at different ages. However, this can be difficult because the demands of experimental tasks might sometimes mask children’s natural skills.

At age three, typically developing children start to show some understanding about other people’s feelings, desires, thoughts, and beliefs. However, it takes longer for them to understand that people’s knowledge or beliefs might be different, or false, because they have had access to different information.

What we might see by the end of early childhood...

By the age of four or five, typically developing children have a more developed sense of themselves as individuals with private thoughts, and with their own past, present, and future.

At this age, most children will be developing a basic understanding of themselves and their preferences. They may express personal likes and dislikes such as favourite foods, colours, music, or activities.

By five, many children can identify basic feelings in themselves 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. Later in this guide, we describe how activities like book sharing can support the development of children's emotional vocabulary.

In the pre-school years, children are unlikely to be able to fully understand or reflect on their thoughts or beliefs – these abilities develop later.

Children in the pre-school years are also still developing the ability to set and achieve goals that go beyond simple tasks. Young children may begin to talk about their future dreams, like wanting to be a doctor, footballer, or artist. 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.

Manage our emotions

How development happens...

At birth, babies cannot recognise or manage their emotions. Babies display distress when they are hungry, scared, uncomfortable, cold, or wet. This distress can feel physically and emotionally overwhelming. Babies are incapable of managing these feelings by themselves and need caring adults to regulate their emotions for them – for example, by soothing them as they cry.

Young babies cannot distinguish between discomfort and danger. For a tiny baby who is totally dependent on adults for survival, not being fed or comforted may feel life-threatening. Because they are entirely dependent on adults, babies are biologically programmed to express distress, generally through crying, to ensure their needs are met.

There can be differences in how babies deal with distress and discomfort depending on their temperament. Some babies might be soothed easily with a gentle shush and develop ways of soothing themselves, such as sucking hands, early in life. Others might need to be picked up, cuddled, and rocked, and may take time to calm down, even when supported by the most sensitive caregivers. These individual differences are not signs of deficits or delays, but part of the expected differences between children.

From birth, babies express their needs in a variety of ways through their eye contact, vocalisations, facial expressions, and movements. When their needs are not met, they have limited mechanisms to deal with this. They may protest, but if their cries go persistently unnoticed, they may withdraw socially as a way of preserving energy. They will therefore show fewer cues and cry less. A socially withdrawn baby may sometimes be mistaken for a ‘good’ or ‘quiet’ baby.

When babies experience the consistent support of caring adults, they gradually get better at regulating their own emotions. This is supported by the development of areas of the child’s brain that can influence emotional impulses. These brain regions continue to develop through childhood and adolescence.

From around seven months old, babies start to respond to the emotions in adult voices, showing that they are beginning to be sensitive to emotions in others.

What we might see 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.

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.

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 in challenging situations. At times, all five-year-olds will still struggle to manage their emotions in some contexts. These skills take time to develop. Some children, such as those who are neurodivergent or with global developmental delays, may find more situations and experiences challenging and therefore may have more experiences of big emotions at this age.

While they may not yet have fully developed strategies to manage intense emotions, five-year-olds might calm themselves by using simple methods, such as taking deep breaths. 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 seek out this support.

Focus our thoughts

How development happens...

Because young children's brains are less developed, it can be harder for them to pick out what information is relevant to them. As their brains develop and mature, it becomes easier for children to pick out important information and ignore distractions, as well as to control impulses. Between the ages of one and five, babies and young children gradually develop the ability to focus on a particular task.

By the age of three, typically developing children can settle at activities and focus for a little while, and can shift from one task to another if asked to do so.

What we might see by the end of early childhood...

By five years old, most typically developing 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, children with developmental delays, or those who have experienced adversity might find it particularly challenging to focus or to shift attention when needed.

At this age, 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 will 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 will 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.

Communicate with others

How development happens...

The skills to support communication begin before birth. For example, babies can hear voices in the womb from around 24 weeks of pregnancy . From birth, many babies show familiarity to and a preference for voices of their birth parents compared to other adults. Babies also show recognition for patterns of language they have heard in the womb.

Babies are born ready to relate. They will actively look at faces of adults around them, showing a preference for looking at faces compared to other objects. Babies are biologically programmed to seek out interactions and connections with adults which will support their development and strengthen the caring relationships which will be vital for them to thrive.

Babies communicate their needs to caregivers instinctively from birth, for example through crying. Babies also have a range of non-verbal cues which demonstrate they are content or that they are overwhelmed or distressed, for example squirming, arching their back, or turning away. Attuned caregivers will learn to notice how their baby communicates their feelings and needs in different ways.

Babies make a range of noises from birth and will start babbling and cooing in the first six months of life. Babies often engage in back-and-forth interactions, babbling and cooing in response to adults around them. Many children typically say their first word at around one year old.

Other more intentional communication behaviours develop in the early years of life, for example, typically developing babies often begin to point between nine and twelve months old.

Babies understand words before they use them themselves. From around six months, they will respond to familiar voices and their own name, and over the months that follow, begin to respond to simple words.

By eighteen months old, typically developing children will be able to listen and respond to simple instructions, and will be able to use a range of words and combine these in two-word phrases. The complexity of what children both utter and understand continues to grow over the months and years that follow.

What we might see by the end of early childhood...

By the age of five, typically developing children have developed a basic ability to express their feelings and needs through words and actions. Their communication skills are still developing, and they will be able to put together short sentences and use past and future tense. However, they are likely to still struggle to communicate or understand abstract or complex concepts.

By the age of five, most children have the skills they need to listen and understand communications from other people, provided the language and concepts are not too complex. They will also recognise and respond to non-verbal cues about others' feelings, such as noticing 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.

Some children may have communication difficulties due to developmental delays, hearing, or speech difficulties. Children will communicate in different ways depending on their needs and experiences. 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.

Nurture our relationships

How development happens...

If children have had experience of nurturing early relationships, we typically see patterns of behaviours which show they are developing close relationships with their primary caregiver. These are known as **attachment behaviours**. You can find out more about what attachment is in section 7.

Very young babies show a preference for parents' voices and smell but can happily be soothed and cared for by any adult. From around six weeks old, babies start to show a preference for more familiar caregivers, and this continues throughout early childhood for children who have experienced consistent, loving care. During the first year of life, they will have an increasing desire to be cared for by their primary caregiver. Children who are typically cared for by one or two primary caregivers will start to become more anxious when separated from them at around 6-12 months.

All these behaviours depend on the child's temperament and neurotype, their experience of care, and their context. Some children may be more anxious to be left than others. This is to be expected as a result of normal variation and not a sign of difficulties or delays in their development. In stressful or novel contexts, children might be more "clingy" and less comfortable when separated from their caregiver. Children who have not experienced nurturing care might not show distress when left by their caregiver or – conversely - might be inconsolable.

Children also go through development phases in how they play with other children, which differs from how they interact with caring adults:

- Babies start playing by exploring their bodies and environments, such as kicking their legs or reaching out to hit or grab toys. They actively engage in and enjoy play with adults, including simple games where the adult takes a lead, such as peek-a-boo. From around six months old, children will show that they understand and follow the simple "rules" and patterns of these games.
- When not playing with adults, very young children typically play alone or are onlookers of other children's play. They spend time watching older children play, which can help them to learn social rules and norms around play and to build their confidence to get involved.

- At around the age of two years old, children will engage more with each other whilst playing and enjoy each other's company, but tend not to actually play together. This is called parallel or associative play. Children might play alongside each other, often playing in similar ways and with similar toys. A desire to play with others is emerging, but they still find sharing or turn-taking difficult. They might interact with each other, but stay focused on their own goals.
- By age three, children can sometimes manage to share and take turns with others.
- As children's social skills develop, we see the emergence of co-operative play, where children play together with shared goals, rules, and roles.

Children do not progress neatly through these stages of play at different ages: it depends on their preferences, and the context and opportunities available to them. Children become more capable of social play as they get older but children who feel more tired or overwhelmed, or prefer to be alone, may still choose to engage in solitary play. Children's cultures, experiences, and neurotypes as well as the environment and adult behaviour can also influence how they play in different contexts. For example, adults can support children's play, making it easier for them to engage in cooperative play by providing rules for the game and supporting children to share with others. This is called scaffolding and is discussed in more detail later in this guide.

What we might see by the end of early childhood...

By the age of five, most children will have 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 interact and 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.

Explore the world

How development happens...

Throughout early childhood, children are naturally curious and eager to explore the world around them. As babies, children's ability to explore and engage, and to show their creativity and curiosity, might be limited by other factors, such as their physical abilities. Very young children may also not have the verbal communication skills to share their curiosity or wonder with us, but caring adults will be able to observe their interests through picking up on non-verbal cues.

Very young babies' exploration and engagement abilities are focused on their developing needs. Newborn babies, for example, are perfectly adapted to the most urgent priority of recognising their mother, feeding, and engaging their carer to ensure their survival, with all their abilities adapted to this end. For example, their eyesight is limited at birth but allows them to see as far as the face of their caregiver.

By the age of around 18 months, toddlers are often increasingly curious about the world and keen to explore.

What we might see by the end of early childhood...

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 joy in everyday moments, such as in the beauty of nature, a favourite song, or playing with friends.

While they may still have limited understanding of complex concepts, young children's 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.

How culture can influence social and emotional skills

Families and communities can vary in their attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours. These things are commonly described as culture.

A family's culture can influence how children are parented, views on child-rearing, and expectations of children, including gendered expectations. For example, in many communities, babies and young children may be looked after by multiple caregivers from the extended family.

A child's culture can shape their social and emotional skills, and how they express these skills. For example, there might be cultural differences in:

- Whether children are encouraged to express and articulate individual goals.
- The extent to which children are encouraged or discouraged to show emotions.
- How children are expected to express themselves, and how non-verbal communication is used.
- Social expectations around relationships, cooperation, and conflict resolution.
- Attitudes towards exploration, curiosity and risk-taking, and whether children are encouraged to explore their environment freely and independently.

4

Social and emotional difficulties in early childhood.

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Key takeaways

from this section:

- There is no single measure that everyone agrees tells us whether or not children have good social and emotional development. Different measures have different strengths and capture different aspects of development.
- National data shows that up to 25% of children do not reach expected levels of social and emotional development. Some groups of children, such as those from minoritised communities, with low income, and SEND, are more likely to fall behind in measures of social and emotional development.
- All children have some struggles deploying social and emotional skills from time-to-time. Significant, extreme, and persistent challenges in coping with life, interacting with others, or managing emotions should be cause for concern.
- Problems in social and emotional skills can have different causes, and it is important to be curious about why a child might be struggling with some skills.

Levels of social and emotional development in the population.

In the Child of the 2020s, a cohort study measuring outcomes for a representative sample of children born across the UK in 2020, a quarter of the children scored above the threshold indicating possible behavioural or emotional problems at age two. This was measured through a standardised screening questionnaire called the BITSEA which was completed by primary caregivers[vi].

There is no single national measure of how many young children have strong social and emotional development. Instead, different parts of the UK use different tools and assessments, each capturing slightly different aspects of development.

Key approaches include:

Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), England (age 2–2.5):

A standardised screening tool used in the health visitor review to identify developmental difficulties, including personal and social skills; data varies because participation is voluntary and completion methods differ locally.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) teacher assessments, England (age 5):

Based on teacher observations of children's personal, social, and emotional development at the end of the reception year, offering insight into development in an educational setting rather than through a standardised test.

Universal child health reviews, Scotland (around age 2.5):

A combined assessment using parental reports, professional observation, and the ASQ, where health professionals also note any concerns about emotional or behavioural development.

The variation in these measurement approaches results in differing estimates of how many children show strong, or poor, social and emotional development.

A more consistent national picture comes from the **Child of the 2020s** study, a cohort study measuring outcomes for a representative sample of children born across the UK in 2020. In this study, **a quarter of two-year-olds** scored above the threshold, indicating possible behavioural or emotional problems. This was measured through BITSEA, a standardised screening questionnaire completed by primary caregivers[vii].

Differences in development between groups

Children with particular characteristics are less likely to reach expected levels of social and emotional development. National data shows that emotional and/or behavioural problems are reported to be higher amongst children with the following characteristics, compared to their peers at age 5. Children with a combination of these characteristics may be particularly likely to fall behind expected levels of development.

- Children with special educational needs and disabilities.
- Care-experienced children.
- Children in low-income households.
- Children from some ethnic minority communities.
- Boys.

Simple statistics can mask a complex picture. Differences in development amongst young children from ethnic minorities, for example, are likely to be due to a range of related factors that impact on social and emotional development, such as increased risk of poverty and discrimination, rather than ethnicity being a direct driver of development. Some measures of social and emotional development may have been developed with particular populations of children, and children from different cultures, who are neurodivergent, or who have language delays, may not be able to demonstrate their full social and emotional capabilities when tested using these measures.

Examples of social and emotional difficulties

Signs of delays or difficulties in social and emotional development might include the following behaviours and challenges. This list is not exhaustive:

Being less able to cope.

Children who are less able to cope in challenging emotional or social contexts compared to other children at the same developmental stage may have social and emotional problems. For example, whilst all children can struggle with peer-to-peer interactions during early childhood, severe or prolonged problems in cooperating and playing with peers are an indication of social and emotional challenges.

Excessive or persistent emotional outbursts.

Whilst crying and meltdowns will occur in healthily developing children, prolonged and inconsolable crying, or excessive and persistent regular tantrums may be a sign of social and emotional difficulties.

Social withdrawal.

Babies being significantly and persistently withdrawn can be an indication of social and emotional difficulties. No babies and young children will interact with others happily all the time: they do sometimes need downtime and a break from interactions. However, significant, and persistently withdrawn behaviours can be due do developmental delay or experiences of trauma. Babies who rarely cry might sometimes be perceived as “good” babies but might actually be demonstrating social withdrawal resulting from a lack of opportunity to interact, or because they find their environment too stressful and are exhibiting fright or anxiety.

Hyper vigilance and a heightened response to stress.

Children who have experienced trauma and adversity might have a heightened “fight or flight” response, as they have learned to be vigilant to risk. These children may exhibit strong reactions under stress, such as freezing, being aggressive towards others or being unable to focus.

Avoidance behaviour.

Children who exhibit avoidant behaviour around their caregivers (such as preferring a stranger to their caregiver, or not turning to their caregiver for comfort or reassurance when scared or upset), or who seem confused and inconsistent in their attachment behaviours, may be demonstrating that they have experienced inconsistent, intrusive or unresponsive parenting.

Extreme distress and an inability to settle.

All children will need some help to regulate their emotions, but children who are unable to settle after being upset or who exhibit extreme distress at seemingly normal daily moments may have underlying social and emotional problems.

Dependence and an unwillingness to explore.

Many toddlers and young children are curious and keen to explore new places. Children who are particularly unwilling to take on independence or explore new places may be exhibiting underlying problems.

Different types of social and emotional problems

As explained, there are significant individual differences in children's social and emotional development. Healthy development looks different for different children.

Children might have uneven profiles of social and emotional skills across the course of their development. This means they are stronger at some skills than at others, perhaps having stronger social skills for example, but being less able to focus their thoughts.

When children exhibit social and emotional problems or delays, there may be many causes for this. Some causes may be transient, and others more persistent. When environments are challenging or do not feel safe for children, and they are less comfortable, children may not demonstrate the levels of social and emotional functioning that they are capable of in other circumstances.

When children consistently struggle with particular aspects of social and emotional functioning and fall below expected levels, this might be due to a skill-specific challenge (such as a particular delay in learning to manage emotions) or might indicate a more global problem in their development and wellbeing (such as a genetic condition causing widespread developmental delay).

Some children may have persistently poor social and emotional skills. Other children might fall below expected levels of development for transient periods in their development. This might, in some cases, be a clear response to a particular change or challenge in their environment, such as moving house or school, or recovering from illness.

Some social and emotional challenges, such as excessive crying in infancy, can be typical and transient. They do not last and are part of normal development, rather than an indication of any underlying problem. However, these challenges might still impact on adults' perceptions of and relationships with a child, and this may bring longer-term consequences.

When children have problems that are more significant, extreme, and persistent across different contexts, this should be cause for concern. Social and emotional problems can cause distress and interfere with children's health and their ability to play, interact, and learn.

The importance of curiosity

Because social and emotional development is complex and multi-faceted, problems in social and emotional skills can have many different causes. Delays in developing social and emotional skills might be due to factors such as neurodivergence, wider developmental delays, health challenges, or because of early adversity and problems in early relationships, such as neglect, unresponsive, or inconsistent parenting.

It is important for practitioners to be curious about why a child might be struggling to show or use a particular skill, and what might have happened in their lives or be present in the context that could be influencing their functioning and wellbeing. There is no one-size-fits all response to social and emotional problems.

5

The socio-ecological model of social and emotional development.

Key takeaways

from this section:

- Children's development is shaped by a range of factors including their biology, relationships, home environment, and the wider world around them. The love and connection experienced in early childhood have a particularly powerful impact on development.
- Some factors increase the risk of children having poor social and emotional development, and others are protective, which means they support development or confer resilience. A child's outcomes depend on the balance of risk and protective factors they experience.
- The impact of any risk factor on a child's outcomes depends on its timing, context and severity, and on the extent to which a child is buffered by a nurturing relationship. The likelihood of poor outcomes rises sharply if a baby or young child experiences an accumulation of different risk factors.

Children's development is shaped by their relationships, experiences and environments. These factors start influencing development before a child is even born.

The factors shaping child development include those within the child themselves, to those in their family, community, and wider society. The "socio-ecological" model of development – illustrated in the diagram - describes the different levels of factors around the child that shape their development. These factors are dynamic and constantly changing. They also influence each other. For example, the way parents interact with their children might be affected by a child's temperament, as well as by factors that increase parent stress, such as poverty, employment conditions, and poor community safety and cohesion.

In this guide, we describe some of the most important factors that influence children's social and emotional development. This is by no means a comprehensive account, but we hope provides a good overview. We give most attention to early relationships. The love and connection that children experience is the most important determinant of early social and emotional development.

Environment

Factors that the child does not directly interact with, yet shape their experiences.

Community

Factors within the child's wider family and community, their neighbourhood, environment and the services they use.

Family, Caregiver

Factors affecting the child's caregiver and their home environment.

Child

Individual factors shaped by genes and early experiences.

Risk and protective factors

Risk and protective factors describe the things in a child's life and the world around them that influence their development.

Risk factors are factors that have a detrimental impact on development.

Protective factors promote good development or mitigate the impact of risks.

Individual risk and protective factors do not, on their own, completely determine a child's developmental profile, but increase the likelihood of healthy development or developmental delays. The impact of any factor on development depends on the interaction with a range of other factors such as context, severity, the age of the child, and the level of exposure.

The impact of risk or protective factors is often cumulative: babies and young children who experience several different risk factors are significantly more likely to experience poor outcomes, with the likelihood of harm rising sharply as risks accumulate either at the same time, or over a period of time.

Children do not respond in a uniform way to the same experiences. This might be due to a range of factors such as genetic predispositions, or protective factors such as strong relationships in their lives. Some children are biologically more sensitive to external influences than others, and their wellbeing is disproportionately affected by both positive and negative factors - this is known as **susceptibility**.

The impact of an external event or experience depends on how the child experiences it physically and psychologically. For example, if a child experiences an adverse or frightening event in the absence of a caring relationship, they might find it traumatic and experience the excessive activation of their stress response system which impacts their developing brain and body. However, if the same event occurs when the child is in the presence of an attuned, loving and trusted adult, the relationship can help a child feel safe and lower their stress response system so that the event has fewer long-term effects.

Risk factors

Poor diet

Temperament (e.g. more reactive, harder to soothe)

Neglect

Abuse

Harsh parenting practices / physical punishment

Parental mental illness

Family conflict and breakdown

Technoference

Discrimination

Protective factors

Cognitive skills

Healthy diet

Nurturing relationships

Play

Stimulating home environment

Access to sports and group activities

Parental social support

Supportive public services / high quality childcare

Green spaces

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Adverse childhood experiences

Risk factors in early childhood can be called Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs.

A groundbreaking study in America in the mid-1990s studied the impact of ten types of traumatic experiences in childhood and their impact on lifelong outcomes[viii].

The study found that traumatic experiences such as domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse, and parental substance misuse had lasting impacts on children's health and wellbeing. Experiencing these challenges in childhood was associated with the development of a wide range of later problems, including substance misuse, mental health problems, and wider poor outcomes. If a child experienced more ACEs, their risk of poor outcomes rose sharply.

The term "ACEs" is sometimes used to refer to the ten specific risk factors in the original research study and sometimes used more generally to refer to the more extensive range of experiences in childhood which have been shown to increase the risk of poor outcomes.

Later research supports the evidence that ACEs impact lifelong health and wellbeing. However, their impact is not uniform. Some ACEs have more of an impact than others, and the timing, severity, and context of ACEs matter, as does whether a child has a protective relationship with a caregiver.

Reducing risks and building capacities

People and organisations can act in all the different levels of a child's world and can support children's social and emotional development in two ways:

Increasing protective factors and capacities

Supporting families' and communities' capacities to provide nurturing relations and stimulating experiences which support early development.

↑ E.g. Providing parenting support, building social networks, providing play spaces.

Reducing risks and stressors

Reducing the stresses and pressures on families that interfere with social and emotional development.

↓ E.g. Reducing parental stress and poverty, tackling discrimination.

6

Individual factors and their impact on development.

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Key takeaways

from this section:

- A child's biology, temperament, physical health, and global development all influence their social and emotional development.
- Nature and nurture interact – a child's characteristics and biology influence how they interact with and respond to the world around them.

Factors relating to the baby or child themselves, such as their biology, genetics, temperament, physical health, and wider development, influence their social and emotional development both directly and indirectly.

Development is not purely about either nature or nurture – the two interact. Children's development is a dynamic process, and children actively influence their environments. For example, a child's temperament can shape both how adults respond to them, and how they interpret an adult's responses. External factors also shape the child's biology, for example, even before birth, maternal stress in pregnancy can cause a baby's brain and body to adapt in ways that shape how they later respond to stress.

Good physical health is important to support children's wellbeing and early brain development, influencing their social and emotional development and the extent to which they can interact positively with the people and the world around them. Good diet and nutrition, and a healthy microbiome, are associated with better social and emotional development across the population.

Children who are neurodivergent may interpret and respond to the world in different ways to typically developing children and may also find it harder to thrive in a world often designed for typically developing children.

Health problems, disabilities, and global developmental delay can influence a child's social and emotional development and limit their exposure to growth-promoting experiences and environments. Therefore, it is especially important for those children and their caregivers to receive the extra support they need as early as possible, to minimise the risk of a cascade of secondary difficulties developing. Children with some conditions will still thrive if people recognise and respond to their individual strengths, needs, and preferences.

Children who have problems or delays in developing other skills, such as language, can have lower social and emotional skills because different aspects of development are so interconnected. As described earlier, language helps children to understand the world around them and talk to others and ask for help when they are frustrated or upset.

7

The vital importance of early relationships.

Key takeaways

from this section:

- Relationships and interactions between caring adults and babies or young children are vital for social and emotional development. Loving care and connection makes it more likely that children will thrive.
- Children need adults who notice and respond to their interests and needs in a sensitive and appropriate way.
- Sensitive, nurturing care supports many aspects of development and buffers children against adversity.
- Children do not need perfect parents, but rather “good enough” parenting that meets their needs and helps them to feel safe and secure. Experiencing “rupture and repair”, where adults do not always respond in an optimum way, but then act to correct this, is a useful developmental experience.

Relationships and interactions between caring adults and babies or young children are the most influential factor in shaping social, emotional, and cognitive development in early childhood. Children need connection in order to develop and thrive.

There is clear evidence that warm, sensitive early relationships are essential for the development of social and emotional skills. Love is as fundamental to human development as nutrition. Healthy relationships make the day-to-day moments of life meaningful, fun, and rewarding for both children and adults.

Children need adults who provide consistent, nurturing care. This means noticing and responding sensitively to children's needs and interests, and what they express through verbal and non-verbal cues and communications. Adults also support children's development by providing appropriate levels of stimulation, support, and encouragement.

Sensitive, responsive interactions with adults make day-to-day life more positive for babies and young children, helping them make sense of their feelings, sharing their joy, or soothing them if they are distressed. Nurturing care helps a child to feel safe and loved. When adults show interest in children and respond to them sensitively and warmly, children learn that they and their feelings, views, and perspectives are valued. Every time we respond sensitively to a child's cues we are effectively saying, "I see you, and you matter." If babies learn that their parent or caregiver can be relied upon to respond sensitively to their needs, they develop a sense of security and confidence.

> **Mattering** is a feeling that we are significant to other people - that we are valued and valuable. Children learn that they are valued when other people pay attention to them and give weight to their feelings, needs and opinions. Many of the adult behaviours described later in this section, such as being attuned and responding sensitively to children, help children to feel that they are valued.

Prolonged experience of sensitive, responsive relationships supports the child's social and emotional development in a myriad of diverse ways. Positive interactions help children to develop skills, such as how to manage their emotions. Early relationships teach children about relationships. Children learn that they can rely on other people for support when they are in difficulty, to share their interests, and to take joy in their achievements. They learn that they are loved and lovable. Repeated experiences of sensitive nurturing care give children a template of a positive, caring relationship which can help them as they go on to develop relationships of their own.

Sensitive relationships not only actively support development - they can also act as a buffer protecting children against negative factors in the world around them. If a child experiences adversity, it will be less harmful in the presence of a loving and trusted adult who can provide reassurance and care.

Relationships with parents[2] and other primary caregivers are particularly crucial for children's development, but any adult who is in a caring role with a child, including early educators, grandparents, and others, can interact with them in ways that support social and emotional development. In different cultures and communities, children may be looked after by many caring adults in their family and community in early childhood. The adults around a family can also support primary caregivers in ways that build their capacity to provide the care their children need.

In this section of the guide, we describe some of the key elements of nurturing care. These are high-level principles. We are all individuals, and what nurturing care will look like may differ between people, in different cultures, and at different ages in development.

Although parent-child relationships are vital, it is important to keep in mind:

- Parents cannot determine who their child will become. As psychologist Alison Gopnik describes, parents are not like carpenters who can shape a child into very specific final product, but rather gardeners, who nurture the growth of a child in the context of other factors[ix].

- Children also do not need their parents to be perfect. Pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott established that children just need 'good enough' parenting and actually learn when parents do not get everything right[x].

[2]The word 'parent' refers to anyone who is in the role of a parent or a primary carer. We also recognise that in different families, cultures, and communities, it might be more common for babies and young children to be cared for by different adults so more people may play this role.

Key concepts in early relationships

This section describes the things adults do in early interactions which can support social and emotional development in babies and young children. Many of the adult behaviours here support several social and emotional skills, but for the purpose of this guide we have just pulled out a few illustrative examples.

Noticing and navigating feelings:
Attunement

Back-and-forth interactions:
Contingent responsiveness

Managing big feelings together:
Co-regulation

Supporting early learning:
Scaffolding

Creating space for connection:
Pacing

Noticing and navigating feelings: Attunement

Attuned adults are crucially important to children's social and emotional development. Attunement involves noticing, understanding, and responding to another person in a sensitive and appropriate way. When adults are attuned to babies and young children, they notice cues about the child's feelings, interests, and needs, validate their emotions, and respond appropriately. For example, if a child is experiencing joy in a game, an attuned adult would notice this and might mirror their joy by smiling back at them, playing along with them, and verbalising their positive emotions - "Isn't this fun!" If a child is sad, an attuned parent might slow down and reflect the child's sadness before trying to cheer them up.

Attunement involves responding sensitively to children's cues and communication. Cues are the signals that children give us which tell us about their emotions, interests, experiences, and needs. They include facial expressions, body posture, eye gaze, sounds, words, and movements. Attuned adults will notice and respond to cues in different ways, both verbally through words and sounds, and non-verbally through emotions, gestures, and actions.

Being attuned means being child-led. It is not about always doing what a child wants, but it is about being sensitive to their needs. For example, if a child is deeply engrossed in play when it is getting close to the time to leave the house, an attuned adult might give them advance warning, explaining why we need to leave, and might be more sensitive and sympathetic when asking them to stop their game and put on their coat and shoes.

Being attuned requires adults to be sensitive to a child's level of development, so that they can consider how their child's capabilities and level of understanding influence their experience of the world and how they communicate, and can tailor their response to the child's developmental needs.

An example of how adult behaviours support social and emotional development

Attuned interactions and knowing ourselves

When attuned adults notice a child's feelings and respond with empathy, this helps the child to learn about their own thoughts and feelings. For example, if a baby cries and parents show sadness in their tone and facial expression, this may help the baby to recognise their feeling as sadness. When adults talk to babies and young children about how they are feeling in any particular moment, this helps the child to recognise their feelings, to give them a name, and to consider how their experiences influence their feelings.

Back-and-forth interactions: Contingent responsiveness

When adults respond meaningfully, sensitively, and appropriately to something a child is looking at, saying, or doing, it is called **contingent responsiveness**. The adult's response to the child is "contingent", which means it depends on the child's interests, needs, or actions. For example, a parent might notice that a baby is alert and gazing at the world around them and shift how they are holding the baby so they can see things better, talking to the child about what interests them.

Contingent responding has been called **serve and return**, because scientists think it is like a tennis match: the child "serves" their initial cue, and then the adult "returns" with their response. Ideally, this should turn into a rally, with ongoing back and forth interactions between the child and parent.

Sensitive and appropriate responses to a child's cues do not always involve doing something. Sometimes they might involve stopping doing something. For example, if a baby looks away, the adult might notice that the baby is over-stimulated and pause what they are doing.

Contingent responses can involve an adult naming what is happening for the child to help them to make sense of it; "you look scared, did that big dog frighten you?" Noticing and naming what happens to a child supports their developing understanding.

Contingent responsiveness is important across many parts of a child's daily life and supports development in different ways. For example, in rough and tumble play an adult might notice where a child feels over-excited, scared, or overwhelmed, and moderate the game accordingly. Responsive feeding involves noticing and responding to a baby's hunger, and stopping when they are full, rather than forcing a strict routine and expecting children to finish the milk or food they are given.

An example of how adult behaviours support social and emotional development

Contingent responsiveness and communicating with others

To acquire language, children need to hear words and associate them with real world experiences. When adults follow a child's gaze or interest and pay attention to the same object or event as the child, they can support the child to learn novel words. The adult may label what the child sees or experiences, and this helps the child to associate the word with the object or experience. The adult might label things in the real world, or might give names to a child's feelings.

Managing big feelings together: Co-regulation

Co-regulation involves supporting another person to manage big feelings and return to a state of calm. When adults co-regulate babies and children, they help them deal with positive or negative feelings that might otherwise be overwhelming. This enables the child to return to a state where they can think clearly, feel safe, and respond to the world around them in helpful ways. We all function best when we are not too revved up or too shut down, but somewhere in the middle.

When babies are first born, they are not able to regulate their own emotions, so co-regulation is essential to manage their stress and distress. Through this co-regulation, they learn how to regulate their emotions for themselves.

Co-regulation can involve changing the child's environment, attending to their needs, and helping them to manage emotions. For example, if a baby is crying because they are hungry, a parent might feed them (attending to their needs) and gently rock them (helping to soothe them and manage their emotions). If a toddler is over-excited at a party, a parent might notice and gently guide them to a quieter space. By being a calm presence, the parent can help the toddler return to a calmer state.

The nature of co-regulation will change as children grow. As children develop, they gradually need less external support to manage emotions. That said, even adults sometimes benefit from support during periods of distress or overwhelm.

Co-regulation is not about denying or hiding emotions. Adults might let a child know that it is okay to be sad, scared, angry, or excited, and that the feeling will not last forever. We can help children build a toolkit of strategies to use when experiencing big emotions.

An example of how adult behaviours support social and emotional development

Co-regulation and managing our emotions

Through co-regulation, babies and children learn how to manage their own emotions and calm down when they are experiencing overwhelming feelings. Adults might physically soothe a child with actions (e.g., cuddling or rocking) or might use their words to soothe a child. As a child gets older, they might also provide guidance to help children regulate themselves, such as recommending that they take deep breaths or go to a quieter space. This all helps the child both to feel better in the moment, and to develop the understanding and skills they need to manage their own emotions.

Supporting early learning: Scaffolding

Scaffolding is when adults support children's learning by helping them to do something for themselves. When we scaffold for a child, we make a task easier for them or provide some guidance and support, without being too directive.

Scaffolding allows us to both give children autonomy and agency, and support them to master new skills. It helps children stay in an ideal "goldilocks zone" keeping things not too easy, and not too hard, which is perfect for learning and development.

Scaffolding is a metaphor based on how physical scaffolding is put around a building when it is being built and removed as the building is completed. In the same way, scaffolding is provided as children develop and can be removed as they learn the ability to master new skills.

Scaffolding can take many forms, including simplifying a task, providing a helping hand, or using verbal guidance. We might provide encouragement or use "guiding questions" to support children in coming up with answers and solutions independently. These techniques help a child to stay focused while supporting their autonomy.

An example of scaffolding a child to focus their attention might be helping a child doing a jigsaw through offering guiding questions, "What did you do last time that helped you to complete the puzzle?" An adult might also move the pieces around to make it easier for the child to find what they need. In social situations, a parent might scaffold a child's developing relational skills by providing prompts and encouragement, "Look at Mo's fire engine, I think maybe he likes vehicles just like you do. Maybe you could show him your police car?"

An example of how adult behaviours support social and emotional development

Scaffolding and focusing our thoughts

Scaffolding supports children to do more things by themselves, giving them responsibility and agency, which is rewarding for the child and helps them to develop their confidence. Because scaffolding helps children to do things for themselves, it also supports skills like focusing attention, problem solving, and keeping going. An adult might scaffold a child to achieve a goal through providing guiding questions and words of encouragement, particularly when things get difficult. This helps a child develop strategies they can use by themselves in future, helping them to keep going and bounce back when tasks are difficult.

Creating space for connection: Pacing

Babies and young children's brains are still developing, and they do not process information as quickly and efficiently as adults. When we adjust our tempo and slow down, it can help babies and young children to process information and respond. This pacing creates space and time for meaningful connection, giving the child greater opportunity to engage positively in an interaction or activity.

Pacing is about matching our approach to a child's needs and capabilities, helping them stay interested and engaged without feeling overwhelmed.

Pacing is something adults often do naturally, without thinking about it. Research shows that adults often interact with babies in ways that help them to process information, such as slowing down and exaggerating actions. These adaptations help children notice and tune in to what is important. For example, adults often naturally talk to babies in a higher pitched, slower, and more exaggerated speaking style called "parentese" (also known as "baby talk") which makes it easier for babies to process language. Adults also often use more exaggerated emotional expressions when talking to babies about feelings, helping them to learn to recognise emotions.

An example of how adult behaviours support social and emotional development

Pacing and exploring the world

Babies and children's brains process information more slowly than adults' brains. When an adult asks a child a question and then pauses for a few moments, the child is afforded time to process the information at their own pace and work out how they want to reply. Being offered this time and space supports children to think independently and can help build confidence in their own abilities.

Modelling and teaching

Children's social and emotional skills develop through their everyday interactions with the people around them. Children can learn these skills by seeing them being modelled by other people. Modelling means showing something in practice: when adults manage our emotions, handle conflicts, or solve problems in front of our children we are showing them what this looks like in practice. This helps them to learn how to do these things.

Children develop their own responses to emotionally challenging situations in part by observing how adults respond to the same situations. As adults, we can show children how to manage emotions when we manage our own feelings around them, particularly when we talk to children about what we are doing to cope with big feelings (for example, "I'm feeling a bit cross, so I'm just going to take a moment to calm down before I deal with that").

Through our own emotional expressions, adults also give children cues about the world around them, and this can help children to understand how safe or threatening the world might be, or how they should respond to an event. When worried, for example, a child might look to their parent's face and if their parent looks calm, they will find this reassuring.

We can also explicitly teach children about how to identify and manage their emotions. For example, we might teach children to recognise how their bodies feel when they experience different emotions (e.g. how their heart beats faster when they are frightened so they are ready to act quickly). As children get older, we can talk to them in more detail about their feelings and encourage them to reflect on their experiences and share how they are feeling and why. These conversations are often easiest when the child is feeling calm – not in the midst of experiencing big feelings.

A child will learn best when there is consistency between what they are taught and what is modelled to them. It is harder to teach children positive behaviours if they experience and observe something different.

Touch

Touch is an important part of early child development. Affectionate touch can help children to feel safe and connected and to regulate their stress and emotions. Young babies in particular find it soothing to be held and rocked. This can help to reduce stress hormones, which might otherwise have a damaging impact on their developing body and brain. Positive touch can support children's wellbeing and developing sense of self, and facilitates connection and relationships.

Being cuddled, stroked and shown affection in caring and appropriate ways helps children feel loved, and to learn how to show their affection to others.

The absence of touch from caring adults is associated with poorer developmental outcomes in early childhood.

Rupture, repair and "good enough" care

Babies and young children do not need their parents to be incredibly responsive all the time. In fact, too much responsiveness can actually be overstimulating and intrusive for babies. Babies and young children's development is best supported by interactions in a mid-range – responsive enough, but not overwhelming. This is part of "good enough" parenting.

Breakdowns or mismatches in interactions (known as ruptures) where adults miss a child's cues or respond incorrectly are common. Grown-ups might have missed or misattributed children's cues or have responded in a dismissive or harsh way which is unsettling or upsetting for the child. If repeated and left unresolved, ruptures might eventually lead to a child feeling unsafe, sad, stressed, or alone in ways that can have disruptive impacts on their physical and emotional development, expectations of relationships, or sense of self. However, if ruptures are repaired it can help the child to feel loved and actively support their social and emotional development.

Repair might happen if an adult shows sadness or regret in their expression, apologises, or responds quickly in a more sensitive way. These moments of reconnection can help a child build trust and resilience. The process of "rupture and repair" helps children to learn that, even though relationships may not go smoothly all the time, they can still rely on their caregivers, and they are still loved and lovable. Experiencing ruptures and repairs in early relationships prepares us for difficulties in later relationships and helps children to learn to deal with some discomfort, without it feeling catastrophic or them losing trust in the people around them.

Experiencing rupture and repair also gives children a template for how to deal with difficulties in relationships, which they can use themselves in other relationships as they grow (for example, to deal with a falling out with friends).

Attachment theory

Attachment refers to how children behave around a caregiver - whether they seek contact when frightened or unsure, and how they respond to this contact. Children can have different patterns of attachment to different caregivers.

Attachment is a form of adaptive development. Children's behaviour reflects what they have learned to expect from their caregivers when they need attention, comfort, and support.

When children experience nurturing care, they tend to develop a **secure attachment**. These children are used to their primary caregiver noticing, interpreting, and responding sensitively and appropriately to their cues and needs. They will be more content in their caregiver's company, and will feel confident, loved, and safe. These children can rely on their caregiver to look after them, and this provides them with a **secure base** from which to explore their world. A toddler might go to explore their environment but return to a parent for a cuddle and reassurance before venturing out again.

Babies who are securely attached show they are distressed if their parent leaves them and will seek out contact with their parent when they return. In contrast, babies who have insecure attachment might avoid their parents or be unwilling to leave their side. Some babies display a disorganized attachment style, where their behaviour does not follow clear patterns or seems contradictory. These children have often experienced frightening, insensitive, inconsistent, or neglectful behaviour from caregivers.

A child's attachment relationship with their primary caregiver influences their development and is associated with a wide range of later outcomes because our ability to form trusting relationships is so fundamental to our ability to function in almost every aspect of our lives, throughout our lives.

The impact of care that is not "good enough"

No adult is attuned to a child, sensitive, and responsive all the time. Some parents may be unresponsive, inconsistent, intrusive or abusive towards their child, or neglect their physical or emotional needs. These forms of relational adversity have a significant negative impact on children's social and emotional development, particularly if they are severe, prolonged, and occur early in a child's life.

Some adults consistently miss cues given by children, attributing their behaviour incorrectly or responding insensitively. This is called misattunement. Misattuned responses to a child's distress might include:

- Ignoring or dismissing emotions and cues.
- Interpreting a child's frustration or distress as bad behaviour and responding harshly.
- Trying to distract a child rather than acknowledging their emotion.

Most parents love their children and try to do their best. Misattunement might happen because parents do not have the emotional capacity to perceive, respond to, or cope with their child's needs, and because they may have learned these responses from their own caregivers.

Repeated and consistent experiences of misattunement can be distressing for a child in the short term and damaging for their emotional development. Children may learn to stop expressing their needs, or to unconsciously reject their needs because they learn that these needs will not be met. As described earlier, the absence of nurturing care can also have lasting impacts on children's developing bodies and brains.

Other relationships

Parents and other adults in a parenting role play a central part in early childhood development. In some families and communities, grandparents and other family members will spend a significant amount of time caring for babies and young children, so their influence is vital too.

Parents and other close adult caregivers remain important throughout life, but as children get older and spend more time in education and other settings, they will also start to have influential relationships with a range of different adults. Siblings and peers play a complementary role in development, challenging and supporting children in different ways to the adults in their lives.

When babies and young children spend time in early education and childcare, the quality of this childcare can shape their social and emotional development. Settings where there are skilled practitioners who can tune in and respond to children's interests and needs tend to have better social and emotional outcomes.

8

The role of parental capacities and stresses.

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Key takeaways

from this section:

- Parents' own social and emotional skills and capacities influence their ability to provide the sensitive, nurturing care that children need to thrive.
- To respond sensitively to their baby or young child, parents need the ability to mentalise, which means understanding the underlying thoughts, feelings, and emotions which might inform children's behaviours.
- Past and present experiences of stress, trauma, and adversity make it harder for parents to tune-in to their children and respond to their needs. Factors in parents' daily lives, such as their use of technology, can also interfere with their caregiving.
- Positive factors, like social support and good relationships, can improve parents' capacity to provide nurturing care.

An adult's experience now and in their past will influence how they care for babies and young children. Adults are best able to nurture a child when they have good social and emotional skills themselves - when they are healthy, and when they have the resources and support they need. Parental wellbeing, supportive couple and community relationships, and family-friendly employment all help parents to provide sensitive, nurturing care.

Parents' skills and capacities

Most parents love their babies and want to do their best by them. However parents and caring adults are not always able to provide sensitive, nurturing care.

Adults' own social and emotional skills influence their parenting ability. Parents who have poor emotional regulation, for example, may struggle to stay calm and be attuned when children display negative or intense emotions.

Adults' ability to notice, understand, and respond to mental states – capacities called mentalisation - underpin their ability to provide sensitive, responsive care to babies.

Mentalisation[3] is the ability to understand actions and behaviours in terms of underlying mental states, such as desires, feelings, and beliefs in ourselves and others. Mentalisation helps parents to tune into what a baby's cues might be telling them about the baby's needs and experiences. This supports sensitive, responsive care. A parent's ability to mentalise is linked to more positive social and emotional outcomes for children.

Adults who did not receive sensitive care in childhood may have more difficulty mentalising and responding to their child's emotional needs. They may not have a model of what sensitive, responsive care might look like. High-quality services and interventions delivered by skilled practitioners can support adults to develop these capacities if they have not had the opportunity to develop them before becoming a parent.

[3]Mentalisation builds on theory of mind, which was discussed earlier in this document. Theory of mind helps us to understand that other people have minds with their own thoughts and feelings. Mentalisation helps us to consider how people's mental states inform their actions.

Parental stress and trauma

Whilst early relationships are critical to development, it is important to recognise that these relationships do not occur in a vacuum. Persistent or transient factors in parents' lives influence their interactions with their children and can therefore impact children's social and emotional development.

Factors such as domestic violence, parental substance misuse, parental conflict, parental mental illness, and having a parent in prison are all associated with an increased likelihood of worse outcomes in children, including poor social and emotional skills, poor mental health, and stress-related physical health problems like heart disease, diabetes, and addiction. The more parental risk factors a family experiences, the greater the risk of a child having poor outcomes.

Some parental factors such as mental health problems, domestic violence, and low income are more common in early childhood than at other times. Women face an increased risk of mental health problems in the perinatal period (pregnancy and the first year of life) and are at higher risk of domestic abuse in this period too. Perinatal mental health conditions affect as many as 1 in 4 mothers[xi]. Families in early childhood are at greater risk of poverty and low income.

> **Parental risk factors are highest amongst parents who themselves suffered adversity in their early childhoods. Therefore, we can often see intergenerational patterns of social and emotional difficulties, but these are not inevitable and not irreversible.**

Parental stress factors can influence child development in a number of ways - for example, without the right support, maternal mental health problems in pregnancy can influence foetal development and might influence parent-child interactions after birth.

Parents who experience high levels of stress and adversity, or who have experienced adversity in their own childhoods, are more likely to struggle to meet their child's developmental needs. It is harder to be attuned and responsive when your own stress -levels are high and/or when you lack experiences of nurturing relationships, or have experienced inconsistent, unresponsive, or intrusive parenting in your own childhood. Factors associated with more difficulties in early parent-child relationships include trauma history, mental health challenges, substance misuse, poor health, or conflict in relationships.

It is hard for adults to co-regulate a child or respond sensitively to the child's emotions if their own emotional needs have not been met, and they struggle to regulate their own emotions. Current stressors – such as mental health problems or overwhelming life pressures - can also make it harder for an adult to be emotionally present, notice cues, and keep a child's needs in mind.

Technoference

Technology can have a range of both positive and negative impacts on children's lives. **Technoference** refers to how technology can interfere with our relationships and connections in detrimental ways. This is becoming more prevalent due to the ubiquity of digital devices in our everyday lives, and their ability to grab and hold our attention. Persistent technoference can have an impact on children's social and emotional development.

When parents are distracted by digital devices, they might be less likely to notice and respond to children's social and emotional cues. They might miss things that children are paying attention to or experiencing, which help them as adults to understand and respond appropriately to the child's behaviours. Opportunities for the attuned, back-and-forth interactions that build healthy brains are missed.

Adults might also be tempted to use digital devices to soothe children – such as getting out a video on a phone to calm the child as soon as they are distressed. By doing this, we are missing opportunities to develop personal connections and teach them how to understand and manage their emotions. In these instances, children are also learning to turn to digital devices when they want to feel better, which can both interfere with their development and create habits that could be damaging later.

Practitioners as part of the system

When practitioners work with parents and families, they, and their organisation are part of the eco-system that influences a family's wellbeing and functioning.

Services and practitioners that unintentionally add to the stress and overwhelm that parents face can have a detrimental impact on family relationships.

The way services interact with parents can also positively influence parents' capacities to care for their child. Being **relational** in interactions with families – showing empathy, care and compassion, holding them in mind, and providing emotional containment - helps to reduce parents' stress and supports them to provide nurturing care to their families.

9

Supporting Social and Emotional Development in homes, communities, and education settings.

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Key takeaways

from this section:

- Home environments and daily activities influence a child's development.
- Play is an integral part of childhood. There are different types of play and they support social and emotional development in different ways.
- Sharing books and stories helps children to develop social and emotional skills through supporting connection and conversation with adults, and by helping children learn about emotions and social interactions.
- Access to green space and nature, and other environments which are safe and stimulating, provide more opportunities to support children's development.
- When babies and young children feel that they belong and matter in the places they grow, play, and learn, there is an association with a range of positive mental health and educational outcomes.
- Participation in the arts and musical activities not only supports children's creativity, it also enhances their social and emotional development in a range of other ways.

Belonging

Throughout the many different environmental contexts which provide the background to a child's development, a sense of belonging can be vital.

Research shows that when babies and young children feel that they belong and matter in the places they grow, play, and learn, there is an association with a range of positive mental health and educational outcomes; this supports their wellbeing and development. Conversely, feeling that they don't belong can be harmful to children, and can have widespread and lasting negative consequences.

Belonging is the feeling that you are part of the system that surrounds you – which might be a family, friendship group, education setting, or community. Children feel that they belong when they feel accepted, respected, understood, and supported by the people around them. A sense of belonging helps children to know themselves, develop their sense of identity, and feel connected to the people around them. Children who feel they belong are more likely to participate in activities and seize opportunities to explore, play, and learn.

Alongside providing nurturing care and a sense of belonging, adults in children's lives can also support their social and emotional development through a range of stimulating and nurturing activities.

Play

Play has an important role in child development and supports emerging social and emotional skills.

Children can play in many ways: it can be social or solitary, and can take different forms such as pretend play, building and construction, games with rules, or physical play. Play can be hard to define, as the same activities can be playful or not depending on the context: it matters that a child has some agency and enjoyment from the activity. For example, a child choosing to climb a ladder for fun and exploration might be playing, but a child told to climb a ladder in a PE lesson might not experience that as play. Play can enable children to have choice and agency, which they might not experience in their day-to-day life; this supports both their enjoyment and development.

Different types of play can support children's development in different ways. Play can help children to develop a range of skills and strategies such as focusing attention, curiosity, and creativity. Play can help children learn about themselves and other people, and practice and develop their social interactions. For example, in construction play, children might practice focusing their attention and persisting to achieve a goal. In pretend play, children collaborate to create a shared imaginary world and can act out a variety of emotions and characters in a way that supports their understanding of the social world. When adults join in children's play it can help them feel loved and can support connections.

Alongside free play, participating in organised activities and sports has been shown to improve children's social and emotional development.

Creativity, art and music

Participation in the arts and musical activities not only supports children's creativity, it also enhances their social and emotional development in a range of other ways. For example:

- Music can be calming, lowering stress and supporting emotional regulation.
- Visual arts, dance, and music can help children to understand and express themselves.
- Making music with others is a shared experience which helps to nurture relationships. Music can also enable children to practice social skills like taking turns and cooperating.
- Many creative activities require children to focus their attention on a task.
- Children can explore, identify, and express emotions through different types of music.

Book sharing

Sharing books with grown-ups also supports young children's social and emotional development in different ways. Sharing books can mean reading, but it does not have to involve reading a book from start to finish - it can be using books and the pictures in them as the basis for conversation and play.

Book sharing is often an activity that adults enjoy and find reduces stress, creating a calm environment in which adult and child can enjoy each other's company and experience love and connection.

Sharing books – including picture books – can provide a basis for connection and conversation with others. In a book, children can process what is happening more easily than in real life: it can be easier to see emotions and to talk about what is happening in a story than during our busy daily lives. Through books, children can also learn about people, concepts, and feelings, expanding their understanding and vocabulary in ways that support their social and emotional development. Having a stronger emotional vocabulary helps us as we try to understand our own feelings and those of other people.

Nature and enabling environments

Some environments provide children with more opportunities to develop and learn. When environments enable children to be safe and comfortable, they are better able to develop. When environments provide less stress or distraction, children are better able to connect with their own thoughts, the people, and the things around them. For example, in outdoor spaces where it is quieter, children may be calmer and find it easier to engage with people and activities.

Access to nature and green or blue spaces is also vital for wellbeing and development. In nature, children might have more opportunities to explore the world, to be curious and creative, and to experience joy and wonder. They might also engage in more challenging activities, like climbing trees, that support them to focus their thoughts and manage their emotions.

Being outdoors can support children's wider health and wellbeing. For example, children might feel calmer and experience a sense of connection with the natural world. Escaping from the built environment and the distractions of normal life can help to reduce stress levels.

10

Factors in the community and wider society.

Key takeaways

from this section:

- A wide range of factors in children's communities, society, and economy influence their social and emotional development.
- There can be structural inequalities in the factors that support social and emotional development: children's access to opportunities and experiences that support their development are not equal.
- While nurturing care can buffer children from adversity, it cannot totally eliminate the impacts of social determinants of development like low income, discrimination, and neighbourhood disadvantage.

Other factors that influence a child's social and emotional development are wide ranging, and include things like availability of nutritious food, safe and stable housing, access to enriching environments and natural spaces, social safety and stability, and culture.

Factors can influence child development both directly and indirectly. For example, poverty can impact children through limiting access to stimulating opportunities, toys, and environments; by impacting their physical health through poor nutrition and housing; and – significantly – because it increases parents' stress, making it harder for them to provide nurturing care that supports early development.

While nurturing care can buffer children from adversity, it cannot fully protect them from all the factors that might influence their development. Factors like poverty and discrimination can impact on social and emotional development, even when parents provide nurturing care.

Governments' policies and public services can have many direct and indirect impacts on child development, as do families' communities and their access to informal support.

Businesses play a role in shaping children's social and emotional development. Family-friendly policies (such as parental leave and pay) and wider workplace practices can all influence parental wellbeing, the extent to which parents can spend time and provide nurturing care for their children, and the resources available to families. Businesses also have a role in shaping children's communities and environments.

There can be structural inequalities in the factors that support social and emotional development. Children with different ethnicities, gender, and/or family income, and in different parts of the UK, can have different access to positive opportunities and experiences. Discrimination in society can impact on families' stress levels, social support, and their ability to access and benefit from different opportunities and resources such as shared public spaces and services.

We all have a role to play...

Children's social and emotional skills are shaped by their early experiences, and the love and connection they have with their parents and caregivers is particularly important. The people in families, communities, and services around children can support their healthy development through supporting nurturing relationships and the experiences and environments that enable children to thrive.

Since social and emotional development is the result of a complex interplay of factors, no single person or service can ensure children develop the skills they need. Many services and policies, alongside families, businesses, and communities have a role to play.

By building our shared understanding of social and emotional development, we have a stronger foundation for action across society. Together, we can all help more children to develop the skills they need for a happy, healthy life.

Conclusion

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