POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
IN THE EARLY YEARS

Supporting Children's Social Development

JENNIE LINDON & LIZ ROUSE

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the children, educators, families and managers of the settings used in this text who agreed to the inclusion of examples from their programs. The names of the centres, the children and the educators have been changed to ensure privacy .

Published in 2014 by TEACHING SOLUTIONS

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Copyright © MA Education Limited 2011. This edition is adapted from a book written by Jennie Lindon and first published by MA Education Limited (under its imprint Practical Pre-School Books)

ISBN 978-1-921613-76-0

Cover design by Tom Kurema
Illustrated by Cathy Hughes
Front cover image © iStockphoto.com/Nicholas Monu

Printed in Australia by Five Senses Education

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12-2014

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Social development over early childhood

The National Quality Framework, through both the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS), gives prominence to children's personal sense of self, their sense of identity and their social and emotional development, including patterns of social behaviour and the growth of empathy.

Quality Area 5 of the NQS identifies that through positive peer relationships 'all children need to know that others care about them, know them well and are interested in what they do, think and feel. Developing responsive, warm, trusting and respectful relationships with children promotes their wellbeing, self-esteem and sense of security' (ACECQA 2012, p. 119). The EYLF identifies that a significant learning outcome for children in the early years is to develop a strong sense of identity. This is formed when children engage in meaningful relationships with both familiar adults and peers.

Educators are expected to facilitate positive social development of young children with whom they are working through meeting the key competencies that support their practice. These include being able to plan and provide opportunities for different forms of social interaction between children during play with respect for each child's interests, goals and development; create opportunities for children to participate in meaningful ways in group discussions and shared decision-making; structure experiences in a way that promotes cooperation and conflict resolution and arrange the environment to encourage interactions between children as well as accommodating a child's need for privacy, solitude or quiet. It is important for educators to promote in children a sense of being part of a learning community as well as to help them investigate ethical issues that are relevant to co-existing in a community and in society.

The national framework implies that thoughtful educators — and their programs — will support children. Young children do not make close personal relationships with other children unless circumstances are favourable to this development. Positive social development does not just happen. Certainly, educators do not promote friendly behaviour between children, or actual friendships, simply by announcing that 'We're all friends here.' It is important to think not only about the older preschool children and school-age children who are forming strong social connections and friendships with their peers, but also to reflect on the social and identity development of infants and young toddlers — what actually helps babies and children to flourish socially — or what could undermine them.

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

The social baby and toddler

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

Responsiveness to familiar adults

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

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

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

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

Responsiveness to other children

Very young children do not only make friendly contact with familiar adults. Babies and toddlers show that they recognise familiar peers and, within their physical abilities, engage in social play with individuals. Even the very youngest children are aware of each other, and alert educators can see those early social contacts. Babies and very young toddlers who spend enough time together on a regular basis get to

know each other on a friendly basis. You will see their face light up in recognition and even babies who are familiar with each other will stare or put out a hand to touch each other.

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

FOR EXAMPLE: MAKING CONTACT THROUGH PLAY

In Lyttle Street Learners ELC the room for 18 month to two-and-a-half year-olds is called the Snug. There are low mirrors fixed to the wall at child height. Mirrors are a valuable addition to any setting, as they are often used by children in joint activity, looking at each other as well as themselves in the mirror. For example, James (15 months) loves dressing up and during this day he chose a hat and went to look in the mirror. Freddy (22 months) saw what James had done, fetched a hat for himself and joined James at the mirror. These two very young children spent time smiling and laughing at each other. They sat comfortably, both of them at the mirror, and carefully observed and deliberately imitated each other's play movements.

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

Toddlers' interest in mirrors often starts when they are much younger. The team in the birth to 18- month room (referred to as the Nest) regularly see babies who are comfortable to lie on their tummies, looking closely at the wall mirror in that room. Individual babies often explore what they see with their hands by tapping the mirror. They look unsure, but also excited by their reflection.

Links to your practice

Within their own family, babies make active contact with parents, siblings and other close relatives. Some babies also spend considerable time in non-family care, in centred-based care or in the home of a family day care educator. It is essential that the primary educator in the group setting, or the family day care educator, welcomes personal contact with individual babies, developing a close and affectionate relationship with them (Lindon & Rouse 2013).

Wherever they spend their days, babies and young toddlers — and slightly older children too — need the emotional security that comes from a close attachment to a small number of familiar adults.

A very normal problem for the very youngest children is that sometimes their attempts to make social contact do not go smoothly. Babies' and toddlers' social moves are often more physical. They can hurt without any deliberate intention, because their strategy for gaining another's attention may be to seize hold of a fistful of hair or another little arm. A touch turns into an unintentional push, or a full body wrestle, which is not always welcomed by the toddler on the receiving end. A very vigorous hug may result in both toddlers toppling over — not necessarily with any physical damage, but it can be a close thing. The communicative touch on a toy, to initiate play, may be interpreted by the other child as an attempt to seize the item.

The first child reacts by holding on harder, or glares with the message of 'Get off it!' It is important that educators recognise these attempts at social interaction and see then for what they are. In this way children can be guided and supported by a responsive and trusting adult to develop these relationships positively.

Of course, one- and two-year-olds do not play in the same way as slightly older children. They already make active social moves that can develop into the initiation of social games with familiar children, as well as adults. Babies' and young toddlers' sociability involves a lot of looking and moving alongside, but in their own way they are active in making this contact.

Two-year-olds, and some older toddlers, begin to be able to coordinate their actions towards new play sequences, just as much as they add to existing play rituals. They use verbal and non-verbal communication to guide the interaction, and these skills are sometimes used by a younger child to initiate a familiar pattern of play with an older child, perhaps a sibling. You can find family examples in Lindon & Rouse (2012)

Very young children cannot yet manage the complex pretend play that is within the scope of mainly three– and four-year-olds. Toddlers' pretend play is emerging and they love to copy what you do by pretending in simple ways, such as pretending to drink from a cup, feed a teddy or talk on a telephone. Give them toys so they can help clean, wash, sweep, cook, garden and fix things. They will enthusiastically join in when welcomed by older siblings or other familiar children. Under threes, even under twos, are willing to tolerate a fair amount of being ordered about by four-year-old play directors, as long as the younger ones are allowed to join the pretend dragon hunt, or sit in the beach cafe. Such opportunities are only available to the youngest children if they spend at least some of their day, or part of the week, in a mixed-age range. If their social interaction is always within a narrow age band of under twos or threes, they will not get these opportunities.

Food for thought

It is worthwhile thinking why the social moves of older babies, toddlers and young twos are sometimes overlooked by educators. What do you think about the following possibilities?

- Perhaps very early social behaviour is semi-dismissed by early years educators if they have been encouraged to view what they see and hear as 'just parallel play' or 'only playing alongside each other'.
- Some educators do not welcome some of the actions involved in toddlers' reciprocal game play that involve imitation. Educators, and parents too, may look askance at cooperative bouncing up and down on the sofa, or perfect turn-taking to post small toys down the drain. You may need to redirect the shared focus of these toddlers or two-year-olds. Nevertheless, what you saw was genuine social play and friendly interaction.
- Sometimes you need to deal with the physical fall-out of rumbustious play. Again, socially sensitive educators recognise that, until the unfortunate crash of buggies (or two little heads), these young twos were engaged in intense social interaction, supported by their chosen dollies and buggies.
- Is the educators' attention most caught by the genuine struggle for very young children with taking turns over play resources? It does not matter how many bags you have, at some point two toddlers (or slightly older children too) will insist on their territorial rights over the same bright red handbag. Yet, the same toddlers or young twos manage well with turn-taking over actions: for instance the sequence of 'I peep at you and then you peep at me and then I …'. Is this observation less prominent in adult memory — or documentation — than the handbag fight?

Reflective questions

- In what ways have you explored, and ensured that your educators and the rosters in the centre enable babies and young children can make a personal, close relationship from which they can then choose to make broader social contacts (see Linden & Rouse 2014)?
- When observing and documenting infant and toddler play — how often do purposefully seek to observe and document reciprocal social play? What does this tell you about your own planning and interactions with the children? How do you make this learning visible for families?

The social and emotional child

Two- and three-year-olds are increasingly able to draw on their spoken language skills to make personal contact with peers, to share interests in a simple way and to make suggestions within chosen play. These still young children are able to use verbal as well as non-verbal means of communication to show and gain attention and to support a friendly atmosphere of responsiveness within play and other joint enterprises.

Claire Vallotton and Catherine Ayoub (2010) observed very young children at 14, 24 and 36 months of age and tracked how their growing vocabulary enabled the children to be adept at self-regulation. The number of different words that young children used was more significant than sheer talkativeness: how much they said in total. Young children's growing ability to express out loud their wishes, preferences and feelings means that they are more able to adjust their own behaviour — in a simple way — to the social situation.

As children's language develops, some of their vocabulary may enable them to express what they feel through words. Of course, babies show their feelings: contentment as well as distress, happy recognition as well as surprise or wariness. Throughout the second year of life, toddlers are making sense of spoken language and learning that people, objects and actions can be represented by words. Once they have this basis of understanding, young children are able to acquire a wide vocabulary with a pool of words to name and express feelings such as being happy or cross. They initially apply these words to their own feelings, but steadily very young children start to suggest that someone else is 'sad'.

Like any other extension to their vocabulary, young children need to hear the words for feelings in context. If their familiar adults do not use an emotional vocabulary in a meaningful way, then children cannot pluck words out of the air. It is this awareness of the emotions that others are feeling that creates and develops empathy, and prosocial relationships.

Understanding emotions

The social world of feelings is a confusing place. Think about how adults sometimes misread the emotion felt by a fellow-adult, even a person they know very well. In an uncertain or puzzling situation, young children will sometimes turn towards a familiar adult (parent, relative or educator) to look at her or his reaction. This process, called emotional or social referencing, is a strategy that seems to reassure children. Does

my daddy look comfortable about this loud stranger with the tambourine? Yes, he looks cheerful, maybe I will start singing along too. Or whoops, Daddy has got his frowny face. I am right to feel I would much rather be somewhere else.

Young children are certainly not going to be more accurate than adults in reading the emotions of other people. It seems that grown-ups, across diverse cultures, are largely correct in interpreting four emotions exclusively from body language, including facial expression. These basic emotions are fear, anger, happiness and sadness. A further two emotions — surprise and disgust — are often, but not always, interpreted correctly by non-verbal means. These findings come from the cross-cultural research of Paul Ekman, and are summarised with reference to children by Helen Bee and Denise Boyd (2004).

Clearly, adults and children experience a far wider range of feelings than these six emotions. The very practical point is that, without verbal communication — asking and explaining — the chances of being accurate in reading embarrassment, anxiety, guilt, jealousy and so on are very much reduced. Children learn about many feelings through social interaction. The ability to talk and listen to the reply is a crucial part of this development.

Young children do not only learn the words to name feelings. They absorb broad social messages. For instance, throughout early and middle childhood, girls and boys learn whether feeling 'guilty' is an important concept in their family or broader cultural group. They realise that some feelings are more welcome to their familiar adults: maybe everyone is supposed to 'put on your happy face'. Perhaps the expression of distress or anxiety gets a different response, depending on whether you are a girl or a boy. Young children also learn about acceptable, and unwelcome, ways of expressing feelings such as anger or frustration.

Choice over expression of emotions

Over early childhood, young girls and boys are able, with some help, to learn active control of their emotions. They become able to hold back a little on their impulse to unleash angry or distressed feelings in ways that hurt other people. Nancy Eisenberg (1992) makes a persuasive case that this self-regulation over emotions is the basis for children's repertoire of skills that ease their social interaction. Friendly contact between children and social play is supported when children are able and willing to allow for 'you first' sometimes, rather than always 'me first'. Children can also be motivated to find ways to express emotions that do not annoy their companions and lead to the temporary disruption of play.

Young children can learn self-regulation, with educator help. It would be unrealistic to expect under threes to hold back; they tend to express straightaway whatever emotion is uppermost. However, wise educators will have started the process of guiding toddler's actions when their chosen way of expressing feelings is going to hurt somebody. Older threes, and increasingly the fours and fives, become more able — at least sometimes — to inhibit the expression of strong feelings, when they judge it is neither the time nor the place. Adults are sometimes, understandably, most concerned about physical expressions of anger. However, by the end of early childhood, children can be irritated by peers whose main option for expressing frustration, or even mild sadness, is to burst into tears.

Links to your practice

Listen to two– and young three-year-olds that you know. What words do they use to refer to feelings? The point here is to be alert to what children choose to say, without any prompting from you. Consider what they express in the context of their relationships with other children — or possibly linked with their favourite stories in their own spontaneous comments about characters.

Do you work with three- or four-year-olds who rarely or never use words to name and describe feelings? How often do they hear this kind of emotional vocabulary as part of a timely comment from you, applied to real events?

These comments and questions apply equally to both genders. There is good reason to challenge any implication that boys are less sensitive to emotions than girls. Lise Eliot (2009, pp. 253–6) points out that the sensitivity of very young males usually leads them to conclude that they are not supposed to express certain feelings. A circular effect is also set in place whereby, if educators comment less to boys about emotions within spontaneous events, then boys get less experience than girls about putting feelings into spoken words. As with all learning, it is being in environments where exposure to opportunities for experiencing and experimenting new ways of being that supports children's capability to share feelings and emotions.

Reflective questions

- What are your expectations of children in how they express and speak about emotions? Do you have the same expectations of boys as you do of girls?
- What language do you use with children to support them and encourage them to share feelings and emotions? Is there a gender bias?

Friendships over early childhood

When studying or thinking about children's social relationships, educators will often discuss this in terms of who children are friendly with or chose to play with. However, is it less usual to have a focus that starts with how children themselves are most likely view their social world (Buysse, Goldman & Skinner 2002).

Kind and playful adults make a huge difference for a happy childhood. But children relate to other children in an entirely different way than they do with adults — in talk, play, exploration or just companionable sitting and watching the world go by. Listen and you will hear children playing with language in repetitive and sing-song ways that they realise even the most lively adult does not want to continue with for ages.

Preschoolers (3 to 5-year-olds) spend time giggling about topics (such as poo) which they have realised adults do not find very funny. They enjoy rerunning their preferred games or pretend play themes in ways that even the most thoughtful of grown-ups are tempted to try to 'improve'. In a happy atmosphere with enough resources, children are sometimes pleased to be left in peace with each other.

Food for thought

It has generally been a positive move for early years educators to avoid the unhelpful labels of 'good', 'bad' or 'naughty'. A popular alternative has emerged of using 'inappropriate' and 'appropriate' behaviour. This choice brings some problems when used as a shorthand about the ground rules for friendly interaction or ways to express feelings under pressure which are welcomed, or not, by the adults.

When terming a child's behaviour 'inappropriate' it is worth reflecting on who thinks this choice of behaviour is 'inappropriate' and why? The educators need to be clear about what underlies their judgement and how they can make this understandable to a young child. With older preschool children and early primary school-aged children, what and why behaviours are appropriate can be explored and negotiated through engaging them in the discussion and acknowledging your own values, beliefs and behavioural expectations, and reflecting on whether these are influencing your decisions on what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

It is also important that educators speak with young children to share thinking and model behaviours for why a different reaction to the same tricky social situation might be a better choice to make? This gives them a wider repertoire of responses to dealing with social and emotional situations.

Reflective questions

Reflect on behaviours and rules you have set in place for appropriate and inappropriate behaviours.

- Why are these important? Are they important to you because this is what you have been brought up to believe? Or are they important because they are encouraging children to develop awareness of and respect for the rights of others?
- How do you discuss with the children the reasons surrounding what you have decided to be appropriate behaviours?
- Do you encourage the children to share thinking about rights of and responsibilities for others in a democratic way?

What is friendship?

Judy Dunn has undertaken a considerable amount of observational research into family life and interaction between siblings. In *Children's Friendships* (2004) she turned her attention to the relationships that are forged between unrelated children. Books about friendship often start with primary school and middle childhood, but Judy Dunn describes how the close and caring relationship that characterises friendship can definitely develop over early childhood. She makes a strong case that friendship is reciprocal — both parties feel and agree that 'we are friends' — and that applies to young children's friendships just as much as in later life.

Marion Dowling (2005) summarises research showing the importance to children of their chosen friendships. It is not at all surprising that children experience happier transitions when they move on with the company of friends. Children express regret for the loss of friends when they have split up to go to different home rooms.

Other disruptions happen as the consequence of several moves between settings for young children over early childhood. Centres that use a mixed-age or multi-age approach support children in dealing with the separation of friends moving to different base rooms as they create opportunities for children across the centre to spend time in friendship and sibling groups rather than in age or development groups — fostering these positive social relationship.

Dowling also accurately points out that young children often tend to regard their current playmates as their 'friends', even though this social relationship may be temporary. Also, young children's easy use of the word may simply echo how their familiar adults talk to them. It is not unusual for parents and educators to say 'There's your friend' in reference to a peer that this child has only met once before. Maybe the apparent greater stability of 4- and 5-year-olds over friendships is at least partly children's growing ability to correct adults with 'She (or he) is not my friend.'

But what about infants and toddlers? While they might not have the language and vocabulary to speak about their 'friends', this does not mean that these children do not form strong connections with other children. If you follow a developmental and Piagetian focus, you would believe that children under 3 or 4 do not develop friendships, and do not engage in cooperative or prosocial play. However, when examining