



Cultivating Child Development Series

Social Communication

What is Social Communication Skills?

In our society, each of us is not an independent individual. We have interaction and connection with each other. As children grow up, through contact and interaction with people around them, their social communication skills develop and mature. Guiding and assisting children to develop good social communication skills help them to develop good interpersonal relationship, enhance their personality and emotional development. In general, social communication skills include the following:

- Verbal and nonverbal communication skills (e.g. eye contact)
- Social interactional skills (e.g. sharing, turn-taking)
- Conversational skills (e.g. initiation, responding and back-and-forth conversations)
- Social cognition (e.g. understanding other's feelings, thoughts and needs, complying with social rules)
- Friendship-building skills



What are the factors that affect children's social development?

1. Temperament / Personality traits:

Each children has their own temperament. Some are introvert and shy, some are outgoing and cheerful. The different temperament could affect children's performance in different social situations. Parents must not compare the performance of their own child with other children or try to change their temperament in a hurry.

2. Developmental stage:

Children's social skills would develop and mature with age and life experiences. Their social skills are affected by their cognitive skills, reasoning skills, motor skills and language skills. Children learn basic social skills and manners through observation and imitation of people around them. For example, children learn to nod their heads to greet familiar people in the morning by observing what the adults are doing. Children also learn by limitation to smile or use nonverbal gestures, such as waving hands and head nodding to respond to others. When children grow up with more mature verbal expressive and conversational skills, they learn to conduct back and forth conversations to express their own feelings and thoughts. Parents should understand the special needs of children with developmental delay or other developmental disorders. They should learn relevant handling skills in order to facilitate their development of social cognition and communication skills.

3. Environmental or family factors:

In preschool years, parents and caregivers are the main characters for children to learn social communication skills. Therefore, parents should set a good example to their children. After children enter primary school, peers and teachers become more important. Parents should understand child's performance in other social situations so as to give guidance on their social communications skills.



What should I do when my child does not like to greet or respond to others, and shows no interest to peers?

1. Understand and observe carefully, give guidance with concrete demonstrations:

Parents need to understand and observe children's social difficulties carefully and see if they display interest to interact with peers. Some children have interest to interact with others but do not process the necessary social or cognitive skills. Parents should give appropriate guidance and advice according to their needs.

2. Teach and strengthen child's basic social skills:

- ✧ For children who are shy, parents should take a step by step approach. They should encourage children to interact with others in a way that they feel comfortable, and praise them for their effort. This will enhance their confidence to interact with others gradually.
- ✧ Parents can play simple interactive games with their children at home so that they can experience the joy of social interaction. They can enhance social interactive experiences in their children's daily life by asking them to greet family members, relatives or neighbours, then slowly broaden their experiences by inviting familiar peers or cousins to play at home.

3. Broaden life experiences and create opportunities for social interaction:

Parents can create opportunities for social interaction such as inviting peers to come to home to play, or joining other classmates' or close friends' gathering such as birthday parties.

4. Establish routine and give advance notice for social activities:

Parents can inform and explain to their children about the flow of social gathering in advance, help them to build up a routine for the activity and teach them some basic play skills in advance so that they can have more psychological preparation to enjoy the social activity.



5. Encourage and reinforce intention and behaviour for social interaction:

- ✧ Parents can start with activities that child shows interest to encourage his participation. When he shows interest in other children or their activities, such as smiling, observing and displaying friendly behaviour, accepting other children to sit next to him, or sharing of snacks and toys with others, etc., parents should show positive reinforcement and give specific praise to such behaviour.
- ✧ Use the child's favourite toy or food as tools to induce his communication or expression of needs. Give praise immediately even when he just shows nonverbal gestures.

6. Strengthen communication with teacher:

- ✧ Parents should communicate with teacher on social problem encountered by their child. They should invite teacher to observe child's performance in school so that teacher can provide guidance and discuss with parents on appropriate strategies to help the child.
- ✧ For children who are shy, teachers can invite them to help with some classroom chores in order to serve other classmates (e.g. serving snacks during snack time), or help to take care of younger children in order to help the children to build up a positive self-image.

7. Don't overprotect:

Teacher or parents can arrange an outgoing peer to sit next to the quiet and passive child in order to promote his social communication. However, they should not over protect the child, otherwise it may reduce his chance to express or speak up.

What should I do if my child does not understand game rules and instructions?

1. Complement verbal instruction with demonstration and assistance:

Parents should give instructions and game rules in wordings that are comparable to child's language ability. They can also provide demonstration and assistance to facilitate child's participation and sense of achievement during the game.



2. Use visual cues to aid comprehension:

Parents can use visual cues or pictures to teach social rules. With repeated practice in real life situations, child's social skills may gradually improve.

My child wants to join his peers in playing but he does not know how to join in and how to begin conversation with them. What should I do?

1. Choose appropriate peer to build up child's social confidence:

Parents can advise their children to make friends with peers that are gentle and friendly. They can make friends with them by smiling to them and sharing snacks with them.

2. Teach specific skill:

Parents can teach their children how to join other people's activities. For example, they should first observe the others' activity and choose an appropriate time to express their wish to join in and wait for their consent. Teach the children how to handle and accept the situation when their peers turn them down.

Even when my child joined in others' play, he quickly walked away and could not sustain the interaction or conversation. What should I do?

1. Careful observation and guidance on problem-solving:

Parents need to observe carefully what are the difficulties and problems of the child when he interacts and communicates with others so that they can analyse and provide guidance to him.

2. Teach child how to understand social situations and hidden rules:

The child might not understand hidden meaning behind other children's play or speech. He might lack the social communication skills to express himself or make request effectively. He might also leave the group as he lost interest during the play. Parents can work on child's verbal comprehension and expression skills, and help him to understand some social situations and the rules behind.



My child is taken advantage by others easily, does not know he is being teased or tricked, or how to respond and solve the problem. What should I do?

1. Understand the whole story and don't jump into conclusion:

Parents need to understand the whole story and don't be too subjective or judgemental. Parents need to know if it is an one-time incident or recurrent bullying. It is also important for parents to understand child's feelings and thoughts.

2. Use role-play to build empathy:

Parents and other family members can do role-plays with child at home so that he can understand perspectives and thoughts of different people, which is essential to build up his problem-solving skills.

3. Learn problem-solving skills:

Depending on child's ability, parents can analyse and discuss with child on the pros and cons of different solutions and pick the most appropriate one. Parents can encourage child to inform them when he encounters similar problem in the future so that they can solve it together.

4. Use visual strategies to enhance comprehension:

For younger children or children with weak comprehension and expression skills, pictures or other visual cues can be used to enhance their understanding and help them to express their needs.

My child is bossy and often minds other's business. He would point out other's fault directly and bluntly. He is self-centred and does not like to share, hence other children do not like him. What should I do?

1. Training on leadership skills:

If child often has a lot of opinions, parents can express appreciation before teaching him how to express his ideas and opinions in an appropriate time and manner.



2. Set priority to problems:

Teach child how to set priority to solve different problems and the appropriate ways to handle them. For example, some problems can be ignored; some problems can be solved by direct communication; some problems can only be solved together with adults, etc.

3. Building empathy towards others:

Discuss with child about possible feelings of other people and help them to experience the feelings via role-play. Explain to the child that every person could have their own perspectives which might be valid so that child could be less self-centred and more empathetic towards others.

4. Experience the joy of sharing:

Prepare in advance abundant materials and resources (food, toys, art craft etc.), encourage child to share them with others so that he can experience the joy of sharing. Gradually he can be encouraged to share things with limited supply only.

My child values too much on the winning and losing in games and competitions. He threw temper and refused to join again when he lost in games, what should I do?

1. Play games with quick turnover rate:

Play short games with many rounds of winning/losing so that child can get used to the winning/losing pattern and that he can play in the next round very soon.

2. Stress on the importance of the process rather than the outcome:

Before starting the activity, tell the child what are the behaviours you value most, such as active participation, compliance to rules, try to enjoy the fun and joy in the process, not afraid to lose in games etc. Parents can discuss with child on these behaviours rather than focusing on the outcomes.

3. Stress on sportsmanship:

Introduce the concept of sportsmanship via books or other media, teach child to appreciate people who show good sportsmanship.



4. **Be child's role model:**

Parents should set a good example and show child how to deal with success and failures in life.

Whenever my child participates in a group game/activity, he often disturbs the group, does not follow instructions or ignores the rules. What should I do?

1. **Limit the group size:**

Start with smaller group of 2 to 3 children and prepare enough helpers to keep the group in order so that child's misbehaviour can be managed immediately.

2. **Limit the time of the group activity:**

This can prevent child from becoming uncooperative because of excessive emotion or fatigue.

3. **Tell child the rewards and consequences in advance:**

Before starting the activity, explain to child the rewards for good behaviour and consequences of inappropriate behaviour. Give encouragement and reinforcement whenever possible during the group activity. Give reminders and carry out consequences immediately (such as pausing the activity) if inappropriate behaviour occurs.

My child often has conflicts with peers. He cries loudly or becomes aggressive. I am worried that he might hurt himself or others. What should I do?

1. **Learn problem solving skills:**

Try to discuss with child on problems he encounters in daily life, guide him to think of more possible solutions and analyse their pros and cons. Practice how to solve the problem via role play exercises.

2. **Learn emotional regulation skills:**

Try to increase child's ability to be aware of his own emotions. Try to use appropriate methods to calm himself down, such as deep breathing, counting numbers, walking away from the scene etc., to avoid direct confrontation. Encourage him to express his needs or feelings when he calms down.



3. Training on patience:

Children who are impulsive and impatient are prone to have conflicts with others. Parents can try to train up their patience by delaying satisfaction to their requests in daily life. For example, ask them to wait for 5 minutes in order to get more rewards. With repeated practices, parents could gradually increase the time for waiting.

My child does not seem to be aware or care about other's feelings. When others were suffering or upset, he still laughed and continued to play. What should I do?

1. Building up empathy:

By learning to observe facial expressions of people in pictures or photos, parents can teach their children to understand the others' nonverbal expressions so that they can have a better sense of the other's feelings and expectations in real life situations.

2. Calm down emotions:

Teach children to be aware of their own feelings so that they can use appropriate strategies to calm themselves down before their emotions reach a climax. If necessary, bring them out of the scene to let them calm down.

References and further reading:

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