

How Children Develop Social Skills

Understanding how children learn to behave and noting their reaction to the environment and the people around them can help you effectively teach social skills such as caring, honesty, cooperation, responsibility, etc. Young children learn through their senses. They learn by moving, listening, touching and feeling. Watching, listening, and relating consequences to actions helps children understand their world. Through the repetition of their own behavior, and the responses of others to that behavior, they learn what works for them.

Learning styles are partially determined by ethnicity and culture. A child's behavior should be viewed in a cultural framework. How is the child disciplined at home? Is aggressiveness reinforced because strength is valued? What are family goals? Does the family value passive behavior rather than active intervention?

The term "social learning" describes the many ways people influence and change each other's behavior. For instance, three-year old Susan learns that if she throws a toy and then herself on the floor in a tantrum, she will get some attention. The provider has a choice about responding: She can say, "Pick up that toy. You know better than that". Or she can say, "When you pick up the toy I will be over to help you," and ignore Susan until the toy is picked up. The third way the provider can respond is by going over to Susan and talking about feelings and suggesting other ways to manage her feelings. The provider offers positive reinforcement when Susan's behavior changes. All three responses get Susan what she wants - adult support; but in the third response, the provider is helping Susan learn more appropriate ways to manage her strong feelings."

Behavior management is primarily a teaching process rather than a control problem. In the example above:

- The provider identifies a problem (throwing the toy and tantrum).
- The provider lets Susan know she understands how she is feeling.
- The provider helps Susan discover other ways to "solve" the problem.
- The provider notices when Susan's behavior changes.