

Eyes on



Social cognition

Helping your child understand
people's thoughts and feelings



Centre of Excellence
for Early Childhood
Development



STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE
CLUSTER ON EARLY

child development



“Children who develop social cognition at a young age have the foundations for good social interactions before they start school.”

What do we know?

- “Social cognition” means being able to understand our own and others’ thoughts, desires, intentions, and feelings.
- Children begin to develop social skills when they understand how people’s thoughts, desires, intentions, and feelings affect the way they act and behave.
- Infants are born with an innate preference for social interactions. From birth, they pay the most attention to human faces and voices.
- In the first months of life, infants are able to smile at people, and respond to others with gestures and facial expressions.
- By the end of the first year, infants start to share interest and attention in objects with you, and may decide whether or not to try a new activity based on your expression. For example, your infant may not play with a new toy if you appear anxious or worried.
- Around the age of two, toddlers distinguish a real object from a pretend object (ex. using a block as a telephone).
- As they grow older, children become able to talk about what they and other people like, want, think or know (around age 3). They also understand that people express different emotions depending on the situation (ex. knowing that an individual is happy when he gets what he wants or sad if he does not).
- Four-year-old children usually recognize that other people’s thoughts may differ from their own. They no longer believe that everyone knows what they know. This step in their development helps them to understand that their own thoughts do not always reflect reality.
- Children who are able to control impulsive thoughts and behaviours are better able to develop social cognition.
- Children who develop social cognition at a young age have the foundations for good social interactions before they start school.
- School-aged children with a well developed social cognition have a tendency to be better at resolving conflicts with friends, which in turn can lead to more positive relationships with their peers. But equally these children may be better at deception and manipulation.
- Social and cognitive understanding can have a positive impact on children’s later school success.

Paying attention to...

What can be done?

...your child's emotional expression.

- Recognize and name your child's emotions. For example, "You seem sad that we have to leave the park."

... your child's ability to understand goal-directed behaviours.

- Show your child new ways to obtain interesting outcomes. For example, manipulate toys in different ways than he naturally does.

... the distinction your child makes between an object and thoughts about an object (i.e., mental representation).

- Create situations for pretend play. Show him that blocks can be used to represent other objects, such as a phone or a car.

... your child's ability to take part in activities and to pay attention to what is happening.

- Join in your child's play as a partner. For example, join in a game he is already playing and show interest. While playing together, ask him what he is doing and how he feels at the moment.

... experiences that help your child to develop early social and cognitive skills.

- Introduce your child to interactive activities with other children (ex. sand play or reading circle) that allow him to express his feelings, as well as experience the feelings and perspectives of others.
- During a group activity, take a moment to ask your child what he thinks his friends are thinking, feeling, and wanting.

... your child's capacity to see things from other people's points of view.

- Invite your child to see things from different points of view. For example, when reading stories together, help him understand why the characters act in certain ways.

... the importance of being a good model to your child to help him develop positive relationships.

- Be sensitive and caring with your child.
- Tell your child that it's important to share, listen, and help when he's playing with his brothers, sisters or friends.



Information

This Key Message is a publication of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development (SKC-ECD). These organizations identify and summarize the best scientific work on early childhood development. They disseminate this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of Social Cognition, consult our synthesis and Experts' articles on this topic in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at www.child-encyclopedia.com.

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