



# SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL



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Activities to support your child's engagement, learning, and development

These social-emotional learning ideas can be adapted for one-on-one use, or for small groups.



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## Let's Work Together

### Why is team building important?

*The skills learned from team building are important parts of personal and group development in children. During team building activities, children have the chance to communicate with each other and work towards a common goal. By practicing being an effective team member and team leader, children develop confidence in their own abilities. Learning how to work with others and communication are important by-products of team building.*

*"The art of communication is the language of leadership."  
— James Humes*

### Working as a team.

Team building with children means you are developing their ability to work together toward a common goal. This makes the work or job easier because the children are working together. When a team works together to solve a challenge, everyone in the group wins and all children have a positive experience. Conduct team building activities with children that emphasize cooperation and collaboration, not competition. The skills learned from being part of a team are necessary for positive action in everyday life in school, work, and the community.

Conducting team building activities with children can help children work on developing the following skills:

Problem solving	Idea exchange
Communication	Working with others and different groups
Cooperation	Leadership
Listening	Creative thinking
Self-esteem	

The following suggestions are for activities that encourage team building among children. These activities work well with both older preschool and school-age children.

Safety of children should be the number one concern. Make sure rules are clear on the proper use for equipment and expected behavior for each activity.

### Activity: "Cats and Dogs"

**Materials:** None

**Age:** Preschool children

**Description:** This is an excellent activity for making teams or groups. Every child must choose to be a cat or a dog, and the goal is to find and join others of the same animal. Children must make the sound of their animal to locate others because everyone has their eyes closed. The game is over when all the dogs and cats have found each other. Children may take turns to suggest animals other than dogs and cats.

### Activity: "Create a Work of Art"

**Materials:** Large piece of paper, crayons, paint or markers

**Age:** Preschool or school-age

**Description:** Decide on a theme for the artwork. Spread a large piece of paper on the floor and have children work together as a team to create a piece of artwork based on the chosen theme. Encourage children to share ideas and divide duties to create a masterpiece.

## Activity: "Knot Me"

**Materials:** A piece of rope. The rope should be at least 1-2 feet long per child.

**Age:** School-age

**Description:** This game requires children to work together toward a solution to a problem. Take the piece of rope and tie a knot about every 2 to 3 feet. There should be one knot per child. Lay the rope out and have each child stand by a knot. Have each child grab the rope with one hand, holding onto a side of a knot. The

children have to use their free hand to untangle the knot. Children have to work together to figure out how to untie the knots without letting go of the rope.

After each activity, discuss some of the following team building questions:

Did your group work together?

How did the group communicate?

What did you learn from this activity?

Other common games that can be used as easy team building activities include:

Jump rope   Simon Says   Red Light, Green Light

## Activity: "Group Puzzle Activity"

**Materials:** Puzzle

**Age:** Preschool or school-age

**Description:** Take a puzzle from your classroom and divide the puzzle pieces among the children. Have the children put the puzzle together as a team. Encourage them to communicate and collaborate as they use the pieces to complete the puzzle.

### Resources:

Pica, Rae. 2006. *Great Games for Young Children*. North Carolina: Gryphon House.

Heck, Tom. 2009. *Duct Tape Teambuilding Games: 50 Fun Activities to Help Your Team Stick Together*. Asheville, NC: Life Coach, Inc.

#### References:

Katz, Lillian. 1993. "All about me: Are we developing our children's self-esteem or their narcissism?" *American Educator*, 17(2), 18-23.

Midura, Daniel W., and Donald R. Glover. 2005. *Essentials of Team Building: Principles and Practices*. Maryland: Sheridan Books.

## Other classroom ideas that support the development of team building skills:

**Problem solving.** Encourage children to think independently by asking open ended questions throughout the day. Example: Jose wants to play with the blocks and Sierra is already playing with them. Ask Jose, "What can you play with until it is your turn to play with the blocks? What else do we have in the classroom that you can use to build something?"

**Communication.** Good communication is necessary for successful teams. Teach children to send clear messages through the day and in all classroom activities. Get their full attention to what is being said, encourage them to ask questions if they don't understand, and have them repeat back to you what is being said.

**Cooperation.** Teaching children to take turns is an excellent way to develop cooperation.

**Self-esteem.** Giving children choices helps them feel like they have some control over what is happening. This can be as simple as asking them which color marker they want to use or what color cup they would like for their milk at snack time.

**Idea exchange.** Group projects are ways for children to come up with an idea and work as a team on a project. For example, have children work on a paper quilt. The teacher or children can choose the topic for the project. Have each child create a work of art on a piece of square paper. Once the pictures are completed, they can be glued together onto a paper drop-cloth. The finished project can be used as a classroom display.

**Leadership.** Give children the opportunity to take leadership roles in the classroom. Create leadership situations in the form of classroom jobs. Make sure everyone has a chance to have a leadership role such as door holder, snack helper, line leader or clean up helper.

## Choking Cautions

Young children can choke on small objects and toy parts. All items used for children under three years of age and any children who put toys in their mouths should be at least 1¼ inch in diameter and between 1 inch and 2¼ inches in length. Oval balls and toys should be at least 1¾ inch in diameter. Toys should meet federal small parts standards. Any toys or games labeled as unsuitable for children under three should not be used.

Other items that pose a safety risk and should not be accessible to children under three include, but are not limited to: button batteries, magnets, plastic bags, styrofoam objects, coins, balloons, latex gloves, and glitter.

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Supported by funds from the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, a joint office of the Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare.

## Stress busting activities for young children

Stress is often thought of as a grown-up condition, but children can also experience stress. Stress in children can result from school, homework, friends, family disruptions, changes in routines, and many other situations. Stress can

be observed as an obvious physical reaction such as crying or a headache, or it can be an emotional or behavioral reaction such as worrying or shyness. Reactions to stress can vary with the child's age and stage of development.

If early childhood practitioners can identify stress in young children, they can intervene with stress-relief strategies before little pressures turn into big problems. There are several strategies children can be taught to help them cope with stress.

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### Exercise

This is one of the best stress relief activities for children (and adults too!). Children can participate in an organized sport, be part of a team, or just spend time outside playing with friends. Regular exercise can help children feel less stressed, and if children experience a particularly stressful day, a few hours of active play can reduce their stress.

### Deep breathing

Any child old enough to count to four can learn to how to do deep breathing exercises to lower stress. Children, with the help of adults, slowly count to four as they inhale, and then count to four as they exhale. This exercise should be done for several minutes until the child is calm.

### Muscle relaxation

Children can relieve stress by using muscle relaxation exercises. Children, with the help of adults, can easily learn to tense and relax each muscle group while they are lying down. The activity starts at the top of the head; each child works his way down to the tips of his toes. The child simply tenses up each muscle group, then releases it and continues on to the next group until he has gone through his whole body.

### Visual imagery

This is a way for children to create positive and relaxing images and thoughts that can be used to block out upsetting ones. Children identify a favorite place, a relaxing point in time, or a special happy memory. Then the children close their eyes and imagine that they are at that favorite place.

### Sensory activities

These can have a calming effect on children when they experience stress. Play dough is a popular childhood material that provides a wonderful sensory experience. When children feel stress, give them play dough to squeeze, pound, and manipulate. A stress ball offers a similar experience for children because they can squeeze the squishy ball. Finger painting and playing with water or sand are other sensory activities that can be used to reduce stress.

### Journaling

Journaling offers a place for older children to release their feelings about a stressful situation. A journal can be as simple as a plain notebook decorated by the child. Encourage children to write about their thoughts and feelings. Younger children can draw pictures. A journal may help children figure out how to handle a particular stressful situation.

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## Hobbies

These can be any activity that the child enjoys doing. Encourage the child to participate on a regular basis. Engaging in a favorite hobby brings children enjoyment, gives them a break from the stressful situation, and may provide a fresh look at the situation. Offer children different activities to try if they don't have a favorite hobby. Providers may plan experiences in art, music, board games, reading, puzzles, or science for the children to try.

## Music

Some children are able to reduce stress and boost feelings by listening, exercising, or dancing to music. Practitioners can work with children to experiment with different types and styles of music to help encourage relaxation.

## Healthy lifestyles

Children should eat nutritious regular meals and snacks throughout the day to give them the energy they need to tackle the day. Foods filled with sugar and caffeine provide energy for a short time, but once it wears off children feel sluggish and tired. Getting the correct amount of sleep is important to help children think clearly and face the challenges of the day ahead.

## Talking about stress

Caregivers can be good listeners when children come with even the slightest "problem." The caregiver can listen to them and help them with advice if they want it, but some children just want to talk things out with a trusted adult.

### Use books and stories to talk about stressful and everyday events.

Stories can help young children relate to characters that are in stressful situations and learn how to work out their problems. Some suggested books for young children include:

*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst

*Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves* by Trevor Romain and Elizabeth Verdick

*A Boy and a Turtle* by Lori Lite

Early educators teach children valuable life skills such as sharing, critical thinking, and independence. Teaching children how to cope with stressful situations is another very valuable skill that supports children's growth into successful adults.

## Additional Resources:

Galinsky, Ellen. 2010. *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Honig, Alice Sterling. 2009. *Little Kids, Big Worries: Stress-Busting Tips for Early Childhood Classrooms*. Baltimore: Brooks Publishing Company.

Youngs, Bettie B. 1995. *Stress and Your Child: Helping Kids Cope with the Strains and Pressures of Life*. New York: Ballentine Books.

## Active Social-Emotional Play

The Early Learning Guidelines provide information related to seven universal areas of child development and learning, called domains. One of these learning guidelines is to foster social and emotional development in young children. By learning how to appropriately express and manage their feelings, children learn to get along with others, to take turns, to lead and follow, and to control their own behavior. Children benefit from adult support and modeling to develop the ability to work through interactions and utilize appropriate problem-solving skills. —Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines

These skills can be developed during children's everyday, active play. Following are active play ideas that foster social-emotional development.

### Three legged races

Three legged races are great for building teamwork. An adult or children tie a scarf or handkerchief around one leg of two children standing next to each other, loose enough that it is comfortable.



Children set up a distance to walk or run together. After they try it, pairs talk about working together as a team, about how to solve the problem of working together, about the importance of practice. Some teams may even learn to run together.



### "If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands"

Sing and act out the song "If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands":

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands (clap clap)

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands (clap clap)

If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands. (clap clap)

Other verses could be: ... stomp your feet, ... turn around, ... give high fives, ... hug a friend, and so on.

The actions and interactions help children build self-control and also awareness of their bodies in space. (NIEHS)

### Relays for different jobs

Children put on types of clothes or accessories at one point and then run to another point and take the clothes off. The idea is to see how fast they can do it. Enhance learning by using:

- different occupations' clothes (toy fireman or construction worker hat, chef apron, gardening gloves),
- multicultural clothes (Hawaiian lei, turban, sari), or
- clothing from different stages of life (cane, push toy, shopping cart).

Discussion of the different occupation, culture, or ages of people raises awareness and acceptance in children.





## What If!

“What If” or “As If” is an activity that doesn’t require any equipment. Children act out each idea for 20 to 30 seconds. Children love to create their own ideas for additional activities. Examples:

- Jog in place as if a big scary bear is chasing you.
- Walk forward as if you’re walking through chocolate pudding.
- Jump in place as if you are popcorn popping.
- Reach up as if you are grabbing balloons out of the air.
- March in place and play the drums as if you are in a marching band.
- Paint as if the paint brush is attached to your head.
- Swim as if you are in a giant pool of gelatin.
- Move your feet on the floor as if you are ice skating.
- Shake your body as if you are a wet dog.

(Mahar et al.)

## Charades in action

Write emotions on popsicle sticks with a face on the end of each stick that shows an emotion. Children choose a stick, act like the word or face, and put an action activity with it. For example, if a child pulls “angry” he could show a scowl and jump up and down and shake his fists. Or, if the child pulls “sad” she could show a sad face, slowly walk or crawl around, and slump. Children need help to identify the look, facial expression, and body language of emotions.

## Resources

Durden, Tonia R., Jennifer K. Gerdes, Ruth E. Vonderohe, Kayla Colgrove, LaDonna Werth, Lorene Bartos, Leslie Crandall, and Carrie Miller. 2013. “Keeping Children Moving, Active, and Healthy. HEF609.” Faculty Publications from CYFS. Paper 48. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cyfsfacpub/48>

“Learning Through Playing.” Blog. Little Bins for Little Hands. <http://littlebinsforlittlehands.com>

“Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines, 2nd Revision.” August 2013. Nebraska Health and Human Services System and the Nebraska Department of Education.

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS). “Kids’ Pages.”

<http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/games/songs/childrens/happyandmp3.htm>

Mahar, Matthew T., Rhonda K. Kenny, A. Tamlyn Shields, Donna P. Scales, and Gretchen Collins. “Energizers: Classroom-based Physical Activities.” [https://www.ecu.edu/cs-hhp/exss/upload/Energizers\\_for\\_Grades\\_K\\_2.pdf](https://www.ecu.edu/cs-hhp/exss/upload/Energizers_for_Grades_K_2.pdf)

Reimer, Jamie. 2014. “26 Gross Motor Activities for Preschoolers that Like to MOVE.” Blog. Hands on as We Grow. <http://handsonaswegrow.com>

Reimer, Jamie. 2014. “Physical Activities for Toddlers With Lots of Energy.” Blog. Hands on as We Grow. <http://handsonaswegrow.com>

## Rich language and responsive feedback

Children need language to relate to and interact with others well. Research shows that the rich conversations and language adults use with young children provide a strong foundation for children's overall development.

Follow children's leads in conversations. Talk with children during all interactions—mealtimes, center times, group times, and routine times—about something that relates to their experiences and is interesting to them. Use these practices to support rich language and responsive feedback:

### Comment and describe

Professionals support budding language when they comment on and describe the child's actions. For example, the professional might say, "You built a big tower with the red blocks. I wonder what you are going to build next."

### Introduce new vocabulary

Use new words often with children in conversations, in multiple settings and experiences. For example, if a child makes a short comment like "The duck," add something more such as "The yellow duck is swimming in the water." Add words that stretch the child's language, but keep the original meaning of what the child says. Build on what children say by extending language and adding new words that connect to the topic of conversation.

### Model

Modeling is an intentional way of presenting something children need to learn.

For example, the child might say, "I like apples." The adult responds, "I like apples, too, especially green apples – they are a yummy, delicious fruit!" This teacher used words to teach types of apples, and that they are a fruit.

### Responsive feedback

Children say very little when prompted to talk on the spot. Connect during natural moments and notice when children have something to say. Preschool professionals can use observation to decide when to add conversations and when to step back and observe. Conversations should be authentic, relatable, and never forced.



### Choose phrases that make connections

Capture and build on what the children are wondering about and want to investigate. A carefully chosen phrase can transform a child's idea into an inquiry. In the book *The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning*, Ann S. Epstein recommends that educators choose language "that encourages children to reflect on and discuss the work. Such a dialogue develops naturally when adults interact as partners with children."



## Provide feedback

Feedback that hints at new ideas is one way to scaffold children's learning, to help them think at deeper levels, and to connect to other learning. A small question can lead to a big discovery.

*"Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can."  
– Fran Peave*

## Open-ended prompts and questions

Teachers can use questions and prompts to facilitate higher-level thinking skills and to connect to developmental skills children are working towards. Avoid asking children questions to which they already know the answers. There are better ways for children to learn than quizzing them with questions such as "What color is this?" or "What number is this?" The Right Question Institute states, "Questioning is the ability to organize our thinking around what we don't know."

Ask open-ended questions, or hint with open-ended prompts.  
For example:

"I wonder if we...."

"Suppose that...."

"What do you think would happen if we...."

"Tell me how you made this."

"I noticed that...."

"Describe how you...."

"How do you know this?"

Language development is intertwined with all the domains of learning—physical, cognitive, and social and emotional.

## Include feeling talk during book reading

An important way to support feeling talk during the day is when educators read books with children. When children are involved in discussions of how a character might be feeling and why, they develop a better understanding of emotions and learn feeling word vocabulary. They also learn more about what causes people to feel different ways, and how feelings can affect behaviors.

While the adult reads with children:

- **Point out the facial expressions in pictures that show how a character might be feeling.**

*"Look at the girl's face. How do you think she is feeling?"*

- **Help children think about why a character feels a certain way, and what happened to make the character feel that way.**

*"Why do you think Sophie is feeling mad? What happened to make her feel mad?"*

- **Help children think about how feelings affect behaviors.**

*"Sophie was feeling mad. What did Sophie do when she was feeling mad?"*

- **Build an understanding that feelings can change in different situations.**

*"How does Sophie look now? How did she look at the beginning of the story?"*

- **Ask children about their emotions.**

*"When was a time that you felt mad? Can you tell me about a time when you felt happy?"*

