

# Social & Emotional Development in Early Childhood

AGES 1-4 YEARS

Rochelle Mayer, Ed.D.  
Jeanne Anastasi, M.A.  
Eileen M. Clark

# What to Expect & When to Seek Help

 A **Bright Futures** Developmental Tool for Families and Providers

## What Parents Want to Know...

From the moment of birth, parents want to know: *Is my baby "OK"?* You'll ask this question again and again as your child grows from toddler to teen.

All children are born with different strengths and abilities, and no other child will develop exactly like yours. Health, personality, and early experiences are important to your child's development; family, community, and cultural traditions also play important roles. For example, ideas about how and when to toilet-train a child may differ in various cultures.

Although each child is unique, *all* children face social and emotional challenges in early childhood, including:

- Learning how to control their emotions and tantrums
- Testing limits and becoming more independent
- Learning how to share, take turns, and play with others

As parents, you are becoming experts at knowing and meeting your child's needs. This tool can help by providing:

- A "snapshot" of what to expect as you and your child learn and grow together
- A way to identify your child's strengths and your abilities as parents
- A starting point for talking with others about your child's development
- Tips for when, where, and how to seek help

If you have questions or concerns about your child, "check it out." Ask a trusted friend, family member, or member of your faith or cultural community; talk with your child's health care or child care provider; or contact your local health department or social service agency. Help is available in your community. See the last page to learn more about services and support for you, your child, and your family. Finding answers to your questions early will help your child develop in the healthiest way possible.



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**T**he *What to Expect & When to Seek Help: Bright Futures Developmental Tools for Families and Providers* are guided by the following principle:

*Every child and adolescent deserves to experience joy, have high self-esteem, acquire a sense of efficacy, and believe that she can succeed in life. —BRIGHT FUTURES CHILDREN'S HEALTH CHARTER*

Based on *Bright Futures in Practice: Mental Health*, the Bright Futures developmental tools offer a framework for providers and families to begin a conversation together about how best to support healthy social and emotional development in children and teens. The tools are part of a coordinated set of print and Web materials, including the Referral Tool for Providers and the electronic Community Services Locator. The tools gently encourage families who have any questions or concerns about their child's development to "check it out"—and offer a number of tips for when, where, and how to seek help through local, state, or national resources.

## Beginning the Conversation

Written in family-friendly language, the tools may be used by families and child development professionals in a range of disciplines, including health, education, child care, and family services.

Throughout the tools, a strong emphasis is placed on strengths as well as concerns. The information under "What to Expect" not only offers a guide to healthy development and parenting, but provides information that parents can find reassuring about their child's behavior and their own parenting.

The tools provide an opportunity to identify concerns at an early stage. The information under "When to Seek Help" includes issues that might be addressed with additional information, as well as those that signal the need for further assessments and services. Space is provided for families to write down their concerns as well as to create their own list of community resources and services.

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## Eating and Sleeping

### What to Expect

#### Child:

- Likes to explore new foods, choose what he likes, and feed himself (using fingers first, then child-size spoon; drinks from a cup)
- Enjoys being part of family mealtimes and “table talk”
- Has a regular bedtime routine (cuddles while listening to stories, goes to bed at same time each night)
- Can usually settle herself down to sleep, may hold a comfort object (soft toy, blanket)
- Sleeps through the night
- May have nighttime fears like monsters in the dark

#### Parents:

- Offer a variety of healthy foods, allow your child to choose what and how much to eat
- Eat family meals together, keep mealtimes pleasant and unrushed
- Avoid using food for comfort, reward, or punishment
- Have a regular bedtime routine, cuddle while reading a bedtime story together
- Gently help your child learn how to soothe and settle himself for sleep
- Calm your child’s fears, help him feel safe and secure
- Provide a safe, quiet place for your child to sleep (no loose bedding, waterbeds, or spaces where child could fall or be trapped)



### When to Seek Help

#### If your child:

- Wants to eat all the time and begs for food
- Refuses to eat or doesn’t enjoy mealtimes
- Has temper tantrums about foods
- Shows little interest in feeding herself
- Refuses to go to bed or stay in bed
- Has trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Has strong nighttime fears or scary dreams

#### Or if you, as parents:

- Have concerns or power struggles over your child’s eating
- Are trying to force your child to eat certain foods
- Feel pressured to increase or decrease your child’s weight
- Get upset when your child won’t eat or makes a mess when eating
- Are worried about having enough money to buy food
- Have a hard time getting your child to fall asleep or stay asleep
- Need help handling bedtime problems, night waking, or nighttime fears

## Self-Care and Toileting

### What to Expect

#### Child:

- Wants to do some things for himself without your help
- Feels good when she learns to wash her hands and face, brush her teeth, and dress herself (2-4 years)
- Shows that he is ready to learn how to use the toilet: knows the difference between wet and dry, can pull his pants up and down, gives some sign before wetting or bowel movement, stays dry for 2 hours or more (2 to 2-1/2 years)

#### Parents:

- Teach your child basic self-care skills (handwashing, toothbrushing, dressing), and help make these routines fun
- Encourage and praise him as he learns to make choices and grow more independent
- Support and assist your child if she returns to baby-like behaviors at times of change or stress; avoid shaming or criticizing
- Wait to begin toilet training until your child seems ready
- Delay toilet training if major changes occur in family (new baby, home, or child care)
- Deal with “accidents” calmly and with acceptance
- Avoid conflicts or struggles over self-care or toileting

*continued*

## Self-Care and Toileting Continued

### When to Seek Help

#### If your child:

- Shows no interest in learning to wash and dress herself
- Has made little progress in self-care or toileting (by age 3)
- Is unable to control his body functions or use the toilet (by age 3)
- Seems very afraid of using the potty or toilet
- Goes back to soiling herself after she has learned to use the toilet
- Holds back or refuses to have bowel movements

#### Or if you, as parents:

- Find it hard to let your child try doing things for himself
- Are having struggles with your child over self-care or toileting
- Worry that your child doesn't seem able to learn how to use the toilet
- Are pushing too hard (or feeling pressured) to toilet train your child
- Get very upset or punish your child when "accidents" occur

## Developing the Self: Personality, Emotions, and Independence

### What to Expect

#### Child:

- Learns to name and express feelings (joy, anger, fear, sadness)
- Is very curious and loves to explore
- Is aware of gender
- Becomes more aware of others' feelings
- Likes the word "no" and uses it often (even when he means "yes")
- Likes to test limits but accepts them most of the time
- Finds it hard to control strong emotions like anger and frustration
- May have temper tantrums
- Makes some choices (books to read, clothes to wear)
- Does simple chores (picks up toys, puts dirty clothes in hamper)
- Feels good about himself, his body, and what he can do (run, jump, climb, throw) (3-4 years)
- Learns basic skills (drawing, sorting, counting, letters and numbers) that help her feel ready to start school (4 years)

#### Parents:

- Accept and support your child's developing personality and style
- Help your child name what she's feeling, talk about your own feelings
- Praise good behavior and efforts; smile, give hugs
- Talk with your child about what you do together; help him name what he sees, hears, and does
- Allow your child to make some choices about snacks, clothing, stories, playtime
- Give your child freedom and space to explore safely; stay close by
- Set safe and secure limits
- Help your child deal with anger and other strong feelings; learn what helps him gain control (holding, calmly talking, distraction)
- Discipline with gentle restraint, distraction, or "time out"
- Expect behavior that matches your child's age and abilities
- Encourage your child to be kind and helpful



## When to Seek Help

### If your child:

- Has trouble expressing feelings
- Shows little interest in doing things for himself or trying new skills
- Seems to be in a world of his own (poor eye contact, repeated body rocking, little interest in people or toys)
- Is unable to calm down after a few minutes or has extreme temper tantrums
- Seems very stubborn compared with others his age
- Gets very frustrated when trying to do simple things that others his age can do
- Is unable to wait for a few minutes when she wants or needs something (by age 3)
- Can't seem to focus on or finish activities (3-4 years)
- Often refuses to do simple things you ask
- Hits, bites, or punches
- Destroys toys or other objects

### Or if you, as parents:

- Have trouble keeping up with your child's activities or needs
- Want tips for setting safe limits, simple rules, and following through
- Expect more than your child seems able to do
- Have a hard time dealing with your child's anger or your own anger
- Need tips for dealing with temper tantrums or power struggles

## Family

### What to Expect

#### Child:

- Feels loved and accepted, shows affection, trusts you
- Wants to please her parents
  - turns to parents for affection and security
  - imitates parents' actions (talks on toy phone, combs doll's hair) (2 years)
  - usually cooperates with family routines and simple requests
- Communicates needs and shares feelings
  - uses mostly sounds and gestures, says about 15-20 words (18 months)
  - links 2-3 words together in simple phrases ("more milk") (2 years)
  - speaks in short, mostly clear sentences ("me want ball") (3 years)
  - tells lots of stories, asks lots of questions (4 years)
- Gets along most of the time with siblings, but sometimes fights with them
- Is learning to share and take turns
- Can separate easily from her parents for a while (3 years)

#### Parents:

- Show affection, care, and concern in the family
- Give lots of smiles and hugs
- Listen actively to your child and talk together
- Play creatively together: encourage dress-up and pretend play, allow space and freedom to explore safely, play games and activities that strengthen new skills
- Praise your child's strengths, skills, and efforts; avoid comparing with other children
- Look for ways to help your children get along together (fun games or outings)
- Let your children try to solve conflicts on their own, teach how to be fair; do not allow physical or verbal bullying
- Spend special time alone with each child (listening, talking, reading, playing)
- Respond to your child's curiosity; encourage questions
- Limit TV time; watch shows together and talk about them
- Help your child learn to take care of himself and to be confident without being aggressive



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## Family Continued

### When to Seek Help

#### If your child:

- Seems withdrawn or doesn't enjoy being part of the family
- Doesn't seek your love and approval
- Clings and gets very upset when you leave (at 3-4 years)
- Tries to physically hurt siblings
- Often sees violence at home or on TV; shows violent behaviors
- Never shares toys or takes turns (3-4 years)

#### Or if you, as parents:

- Find it hard to praise your child or show affection
- Focus more on your child's negative behaviors
- Feel alone or have little support (family, friends, neighbors, church)
- Have trouble setting consistent rules and safe limits
- Need tips for dealing with fights among your children
- Are having serious conflicts in your family or other relationships
- Often argue in front of your child

## Building Friendships

### What to Expect

#### Child:

- Plays side-by-side but not directly with other children (1-2 years)
- Begins playing together and sharing with other children (3 years)
- Gets along with others in child care or preschool; can name two or more playmates (4 years)
- Begins simple make-believe play (2 years), then more complex pretend play with friends (3-4 years)
- Uses language to communicate with playmates
  - uses simple phrases or 2-word sentences ("my ball") (2 years)
  - speaks in 4- to 5-word sentences ("I go home now") (3 years)
  - talks easily; makes up fantasy stories with friends (4 years)

#### Parents:

- Encourage your child to play with other children (siblings, play group, child care, preschool) as a way of learning social behaviors
- Supervise playtimes and activities
- Help arrange social play that suits your child's personality (free play or structured, quiet or active, short or long)
- Encourage your child to tell you about his playmates and the things they like to do together
- Allow your child to assert herself, but teach her not to hit, bite, or call names
- Provide safe ways to release built-up energy through physical activities (throwing balls, crashing toy cars, running and jumping)
- Protect your child from frequent contact with very aggressive playmates
- Find opportunities for your child to play with boys and girls of other racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds

### When to Seek Help

#### If your child:

- Seems very shy or fearful with other children
- Doesn't communicate with other children through short phrases or sentences
- Plays alone most of the time, doesn't play well with others, or feels "left out" (3-4 years)
- Hits, bites, or punches others when angry or frustrated (3-4 years)
- Refuses to share toys or take turns (3-4 years)

#### Or if you, as parents:

- Worry that your child is too active or too aggressive with other children
- Notice that your child is often alone and doesn't play with other children (3-4 years)
- Get phone calls from preschool or child care teachers with concerns about your child's social behaviors
- Need tips for encouraging your child to play happily with others

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ AGE \_\_\_\_\_

## Your Questions and Concerns

### Eating & Sleeping

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### Self-Care & Toileting

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### Developing the Self: Personality, Emotions, and Independence

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### Family

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### Building Friendships

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