

Encouraging Social Interaction Through Play

Your child care program is a prime place for young children to develop and practice emerging social skills in a nurturing environment. For some, your program may even be their first experience being around other children and their first opportunity to interact with peers.

Is social interaction only talking with expressions and gestures? Or is it more?

Social interaction is also what occurs visually, verbally, and/or physically any time a child comes into contact with another child. It may be as simple as a touch or a glance or as complicated as cooperating or taking turns.



For young children, social interaction skills are acquired through frequent contact with peers and caring adults.

During:

- Group activities
- Caregiving routines
- Sharing with another child
- And other activities in your program

Children learn developmentally appropriate skills they can use in many situations.

Sometimes children may not spontaneously interact with one another.

Responding to the limitations and needs of each child, make an active effort to mix children with different strengths and abilities throughout routines and activities. Pair children with disabilities (and/or younger children) with children who are more skilled at interaction. Offer verbal and physical encouragement to help overcome the tendencies of some children to avoid social interaction with other children who are seen as different. Create opportunities for social interaction by carefully selecting and using particular play materials.

Using play materials to promote social interaction offers children with and without disabilities natural opportunities to learn to interact.

Carefully selecting play materials to promote social interaction is both practical and unobtrusive— the materials themselves prompt play and interaction – leaving the care

provider freer to attend to the needs of individual children and caregiving routines. The characteristics that are common among toys and equipment that promote social interaction can be described as the “ABCs of play materials for social interaction”:

- **Accessible** – require little or no adult assistance
- **Be adaptable** – children at different ability levels can play together
- **Cooperative** – require the help of another child
- **Designed for two (or more)** – allow space for several children to play
- **Extra sensory** – maximize visual, verbal, and physical contact

Efforts to increase social interaction also include – in addition to play materials – attention to curriculum, activities, care routines, individual skill acquisition in communication, and specific behavior interventions.

As you use these ideas, you will see children developing in both small and large ways in their ability to interact. By providing appropriate play materials and encouraging social interaction in your child care program, you assist children in their learning to play together, to cooperate, and to find joy in their interactions with others.

Continue on page 2 →

Encouraging Social Interaction Through Play

A Providers Question

One of the children in my program, Andy, has a severe developmental delay. He has very limited movement, doesn't use words, and seldom plays with toys, much less other children. Is social interaction something I should work on for this child, too?

Definitely! Children interact with adults, toys, and their peers even when they have significant developmental delays or disabilities. The way interaction occurs may be different from what is thought of as typical, but social interaction is important for every child. Here are ways you might promote social interaction for Andy:

- Be sure that he has an opportunity to play in each of the activities you provide or areas you arrange. Andy's play may not be the same as another child with better motor abilities, but it is important for him and for the other children to spend time together – in the same play areas playing with similar materials. In the block area, for example, Andy may not build towers or houses, but he might enjoy knocking down towers or looking at blocks arranged in interesting patterns.
- During art activities, arrange the art supplies on Andy's wheelchair tray. When children need more paint or another pair of scissors, they can go over to his tray, tell Andy what they need, and pick it out for themselves. This allows Andy to be involved and gives children many opportunities to talk to and interact with him. (Don't forget that Andy needs a turn to create his own art work, too.)
- During circle time, you may need to be creative in looking for ways that Andy can interact with his peers. He may need an adapted chair or other positioning device so that he can sit at the same level with the other children. You or one of the other children may



want to help Andy make the motions to familiar songs and nursery rhymes.

The important thing is to separate social interaction from a child's ability level – it really is possible to interact with people and materials at any developmental level. Your job is to look for and create opportunities that make it easier for children with disabilities to interact with their peers and truly feel a part of the group.

RESOURCES

- **Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning** <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>
- **Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards** <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php>
- **Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices** <http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices>

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- **The Registry Training Calendar** <https://www.the-registry.org>
- **WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar** <http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/>
- **MECA Special Needs Support Program (SNSP)** <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/meca/snsp/default.htm>

This document was modified for use by the State of Wisconsin from the **Encouraging Social Interaction Through Play tip sheet** created by **Montana Child Care plus+**, <http://www.ccplus.org/Products.html>.

Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge is a cross-departmental grant that uses the talent, experience, and vision of three Wisconsin State Departments: Department of Children and Families, Department of Public Instruction, and Department Health Services. The contents of this document were developed under the RTTT-ELC grant. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Federal Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.