

# Strengthening Families: Social and Emotional Competence<sup>1</sup>

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Parenting is a tremendous responsibility full of many moments of joy. But sometimes the rapid rate of a young child's growth and development can leave parents feeling a little overwhelmed. This *Strengthening Families Series* highlights six factors that promote positive parenting and protect against stressors and frustrations that can lead to harsh parenting: Parental Resilience, Social Connections, Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Concrete Support, **Social and Emotional Competence**, and Nurturing and Attachment. Each of these protective factors offers families and children some defense against distress. However, together they combine to create a solid foundation of knowledge, parenting skills, and support that can help families thrive during everyday circumstances as well as persevere during times of stress or crisis (1).

## Overview

Of all the protective factors described in this series, Social and Emotional Competence is the only factor that focuses on the characteristics of the child:

*The social and emotional development of young children plays a critical role in their cognitive skill building, social competence, mental health, and overall wellbeing. The nature of this development is deeply affected by the quality of a child's relationships with his or her primary attachment figures, usually parents (2).*

Sometimes children feel things that they cannot understand. This can be frustrating to children and cause them, in a plea for help, to act in ways they know are not acceptable. When parents help their children understand emotions, they are empowering the child to communicate how they feel. This communication is valuable for parents and other caregivers because it allows them to help the child work through the immediate issue as well as establish emotional and social life skills. In the case of children with developmental, emotional or social issues, parents can find the extra help they need to understand the challenges their child may be facing. In many cases, parents need access to trained staff, direct teaching of social and emotional skills, creative programs for children, and timely action when there is a concern.

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## What You Can Do

Parents foster positive social and emotional development through their everyday interactions with children. To support the most positive social and development of your children, you can do the following (3):

- **Provide a safe, loving environment for your child to feel comfortable communicating with you.** Help your children express their feelings through language, art and play. “Teaching Your Child to Identify and Express Emotions” is an excellent resource on this topic ([http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching\\_emotions.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching_emotions.pdf)).
- **When your child expresses their feelings and needs, be responsive and supportive.** Many times, children need affirmation and can benefit from hearing, “I understand how you are feeling.”
- **Set clear, reasonable expectations.** Children need clear rules and guidelines for their behavior—rules or consequences that are constantly changing can be confusing for children.
- **Be a good role model.** Children frequently learn behaviors from their parents, so work to express your own emotions in constructive ways.
- **Plan for situations that may arise.** If you anticipate challenging situations and prepare for them, you can prevent many problems. For example, if you are going to dinner with your children, it’s a good idea to pack some coloring books or activities for them to engage in while the adults chat.
- **Take care of your own needs.** Parents who are experiencing stress need to take care of themselves as well as their children. Reducing your own stress will improve your parenting.
- **When negative behavior arises, stay calm and try to give limited attention to the negative behavior.** Constructive parenting usually takes place when parents react calmly and rationally to the situation.
- **If your child is struggling with social or emotional issues, be proactive.** Work with your child’s teachers, counselors, or other adults to create a plan for dealing with the challenging behavior.
- **Celebrate the positives.** Children thrive on positive feedback—when they engage in positive behavior, praise and reinforce them. When you look for the good, it helps to balance out the more challenging times.
- **Remember that children’s communication and coping skills are still developing.** Your children need your patience and encouragement when something is wrong.



## Finding Resources and Information

There are many resources available to support your parenting. Start with this list and pursue additional resources that meet your specific needs.

**Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning**—This site provides resources for parents on a variety of topics related to social and emotional development. <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html>

**Child Welfare Information Gateway: Protective Factors**—This site presents an overview of protective factors and serves as a clearinghouse for related resources. <http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/protective.cfm>

**Healthy Children (American Academy of Pediatrics)**—This site provides advice and resources from pediatricians on a broad range of parenting and child development topics. <http://www.healthychildren.org>

**Just in Time Parenting**—This Cooperative Extension site provides a variety of resources on parenting and allows parents to sign up for “age-paced” newsletters that provide relevant information as your child ages. <http://www.parentinginfo.org>

**Parenting 24/7**—This site, created by University of Illinois Cooperative Extension, is an excellent resource for “raising children and managing family life.” <http://parenting247.org>

**Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children**—This site provides research and resources related to improving the social and emotional outcomes of young children who are at risk for developmental delays or disabilities. <http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu>

**University of Florida Extension Publications (EDIS)**—The EDIS website is a comprehensive, single-source repository of all current UF/IFAS numbered peer-reviewed publications. UF/IFAS [academic departments](#) develop and maintain a collection of publications available for universal free distribution on the World Wide Web and through the Florida Cooperative Extension Service [County Offices](#) and [Research and Education Centers](#) statewide. Publications that address the needs of children in Florida are accessible to all at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topics/families/children.html>.

**Zero to Three Parenting Resources**—The “parenting resources” section of this website has practical resources for parents. <http://www.zerotothree.org/about-us/funded-projects/parenting-resources>

## Endnotes

(1) This work is based on the framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with more information available at <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>

(2) Horton, C. (2003). Protective factors literature review: Early care and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy. p. 21.

(3) This advice has been synthesized from the resources described in the Resources and Information section.