

20 Evidence-Based Social Skills Activities and Games for Kids

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SEL Articles

Activities and games for socialization are a great way for your child to learn how to behave around their peers, no matter if he is a toddler, preschooler or if he just started kindergarten. Games can teach skills like taking turns, managing emotions, and reading body language.

Use these evidence-based social skills activities to help your child build their social behaviors and learn how their actions affect others. With these games, they can become more independent and maintain healthy relationships throughout their lives.

1. Staring Contest

Many children have trouble maintaining eye contact in conversation. A staring contest can help kids make and keep eye contact in a way that allows them to focus on that task, rather than trying to communicate simultaneously.

If your child still feels uncomfortable, you can start smaller. Place a sticker on your forehead for them to look at and then build toward having a conversation.

2. Roll the Ball

It's never too early to start building social skills, and a game of roll the ball suits children as young as toddlers. Kids take turns rolling a ball back and forth between them, laying the foundation for other social skills.

Kids learn to carry this skill into taking turns in conversation or when doing joint activities. They also learn self-control by aiming the ball toward their friend and rolling it hard enough to reach them yet with limited force.

3. Virtual Playtime

Sometimes, your child can't have play dates in person, but they can still spend time together over video chat and other online spaces. Video chats help kids make eye contact by looking at their friend on the screen.

Learning to adapt to new situations becomes a valuable trait, whether with social distancing or in their future workplace. Coming up with new ways to spend time together increases problem-solving abilities, which adds to a set of vital social skills.

4. Emotion Charades

Emotion charades involves writing different emotions on strips of paper. Your child picks one out of a hat or bucket. Then, they must try to act out that emotion.

Emotion charades can help children learn to recognize emotions using facial and body cues. You can even adapt social skills activities like this to create a game similar to Pictionary, where children draw the emotion.

By depicting and acting out emotional expressions and reactions in social skills activities, children learn emotion management, which plays an important role in creating positive relationships and communicating feelings.

5. Expression Mimicking Games

When you play this game with your child, you're teaching social skills with expressions. Mimicking your expressions allows your child to understand what certain expressions mean and recognize them when others make them in real conversations.

When kids with social challenges learn to read facial expressions, they become more comfortable in situations involving them.

6. Topic Game

You can play several variations of the topic game, but the most common one involves choosing a topic and naming things that fit into that category using each letter of the alphabet. For example, if you choose animals as the topic, you might come up with:

- A: Aardvark
- B: Baboon
- C: Chicken

The topic game teaches kids to stick to one subject and follow directions until they complete the activity. It also helps them make connections and get creative with letters that have fewer options.

7. Step Into Conversation

Step Into Conversation is a card game made for children with autism. The game presents structured social skills activities, like starting a conversation and talking about specific subjects based on cards.

The game helps kids learn how to talk to others appropriately and carry a conversation with perspective and empathy. It teaches good manners and self-control by showing them how to politely enter a conversation, when to talk, and when to listen.

By using socialization games like this one, you give structure to conversations to develop the social skills necessary to handle different situations in their daily life.

8. Improvisational Stories

Many children tell stories even outside of intentional social skills activities. With improvisational stories, you add another challenge that requires them to collaborate and create a narrative without thinking about it beforehand.

For this activity, place cards with pictures or words face down. The child picks three of these cards, and they must include these objects or topics in the story they tell. The game ends when all the cards are gone, or the kids reach the end of their story.

You can use this activity as a multiplayer game where children take turns adding to the story and building on each other's ideas, or one child can tell you their own story.

9. Name Game

With this simple game, kids roll or toss a ball to someone after they call out their name. Social skills activities like this one work well for helping even toddlers learn their peers' names. It shows that they are attentive to others, and it's a step toward getting to know other people.

10. Simon Says

Simon Says builds social skills for kids' self-control, listening, and impulse control as they copy their peers' movements and follow instructions. It also helps keep the attention on the game and rewards good behavior for those who follow the rules throughout the game.

11. Rhythm Games

You can incorporate rhythm games as a social skills activity both at home and in the classroom. These music-making games let your child be creative while following directions and recognizing patterns.

A 2010 study by Kirschner and Tomasello shows that joint music-making helps social behavior. In a game where children must "wake the frogs" with music, the researchers found that kids who followed the rules by making music were more likely to help others who tried waking the frogs with non-musical means.

12. Playing with Characters

These social skills activities involve tapping into your child's natural tendency to play. Using stuffed animals or dolls, you can interact with your child through the toys.

Having conversations through toys teaches kids to recognize behaviors and communicate their feelings. They practice their social skills through the toys in an imaginary, low-risk environment, without worrying about the toys' hurt feelings.

13. Play Pretend

Kids will typically create a scenario in which they pretend to be someone or something else. For example, they might play house and take on the roles of parents, become a doctor, veterinarian, teacher, or cashier. Each of these situations allows them to explore different social skills activities.

As they pretend to parent another child, for instance, they must learn to recognize and respond to emotions, deescalate situations, and adapt to new situations.

14. Token Stack

You can adapt token stack from board games like checkers to create social skills activities that teach children how to have a considerate conversation. Every time the child speaks and responds appropriately, they add another token to their stack.

They face the challenge of trying to stack their tokens as high as possible while taking turns speaking. This activity makes them focus on having a calm conversation and giving thoughtful responses to questions and statements.

15. Decision-Making Games

Social skills activities like decision-making games come in many forms. By using strategy games or activities as simple as sorting and matching, your child learns persistence, thoughtfulness, and cooperation with others.

These games help kids with indecision, as they ask the child to make a choice, even if it's not right the first time. It demonstrates low-risk consequences and encourages them to try again if they make a mistake.

16. Building Game

When children work together to build something, like a tower using blocks, they must communicate, take turns, and understand each other to bring their creation to life.

Kids will work together to come up with a method to build their item. When they apply it, they learn to try again if the creation falls and celebrate each other's unique abilities when they finish the project successfully.

17. Community Gardening

Community gardening works differently than other social skills activities in that it teaches children to nurture a living thing.

Gardening with others increases social competence by having your child take care of something and learn responsibility, as they cannot neglect their plants. This activity also gets kids outdoor and can help calm them.

18. Team Sports

Children can participate in team sports through their school, on a recreational team, or even play with friends in their backyard. Team sports show kids how to work together toward a common goal and keep their focus on the game.

They also learn to recognize emotions, like when someone gets hurt or scores a goal, and react appropriately when they win or lose.

19. Productive Debate

A productive debate works well for older kids to learn how to manage emotions and work on positive expression, even in challenging situations. They learn how to have difficult conversations calmly, without turning them into an argument or trying to insult the other person.

People who can debate and listen to their opponent develop more of the skills needed to become leaders in the classroom and workplace.

20. Scavenger Hunts

During scavenger hunts, children work together to find objects or get a prize at the end of the activity. By working toward their goal, they learn teamwork, organization, and positive decision-making. They can choose to split up, move as a group, and collaborate to reach the end of the game.

They also get rewarded for cooperating. These activities help them with creative problem-solving abilities by making up clues for other players to solve.

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