



## 5 Skills Every Kid Needs

Essential skills that help children relate to others, respond to their own feelings, and negotiate conflict to help build lasting personal relationships and succeed in school.

By Stephanie Dolgoff, Parenting

When a little kid manages to wrestle her own tights on -- even though the heels are popping out in front of her ankles -- or propels her fork to her lips without bouncing bunny-shaped macaroni onto the carpet, you feel a surge of pride: She's learning to do for herself. And when she gets a little older and tackles her homework without being hounded or teaches you how to set your preferences on your new Pda, you want to cry with gratitude. Kids these days, as they might put it, have mad skillz. But don't let them stop there -- they need to master more than self-care and smartphones to be both happy and successful in life. When was the last time you had a sonic runny-mascara meltdown because there were raisins in your coffee cake and *you haaaate raisins*? Being able to control your impulses, delay gratification, and identify and manage your feelings are all skills that fall under the category of emotional intelligence. Social intelligence is all about being able to relate to others, respond to their feelings and cues, and negotiate conflicts. Learning these techniques is important not only so your kids will have friends to complain about their parents to, but also so that they can do well in school. Here are five such skills you can help your child develop that will set her up for life.

### Skill #1 How to be a loser

No mom wants her child to be a loser in the good-at-nothing, eating-lunch-alone, social-outcast sense of the word. But literally learning how to lose at something, handle it, and then bounce back is critical to being happy. Think about it: Losing a game of boxball is nice training for when you don't have the winning Powerball ticket, which, odds are you won't.

**For little kids:** Model being a good loser -- over and over. Say something like "Ooh, you whopped my butt! That was so fun. Let's play again." It's fine to let preschoolers win much of the time, but then gradually wean them off it, says Erika Rich, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Los Angeles who runs social-skills groups for children. When you win, say to your child, "I won this time. But you made a great try" If he gets terribly upset, explain that no one prefers to lose, but that losing is part of playing -- the only person who truly loses is the one who doesn't make an effort. "Starting around age five, your child should not be winning every game, and it's time to let him experience losing, even if it means a tantrum," says Rich. It may take a few million games of Candy Land, but he'll get the hang of it.

**For bigger kids:** By age 8, says Rich, most children tend to take losing in stride. One reason some still don't is that school-age children -- like many adults -- can become so focused on the outcome of a process (getting to sit next to a friend, being chosen first for a team, scoring the highest) that they lose sight of what's fun along the way, says Pam Schiller, Ph.D., author of *Seven Skills for School Success*. The trick is to get their eyes off the prize. If your child loses a ball game, for example, Schiller suggests saying, "So you didn't win. Let's talk about some of the other things that happened. Did you enjoy getting out there and playing with the other guys on your team? Did you enjoy the

other parents cheering for you? Did you enjoy being outside?" The goal, Schiller emphasizes, is to "take them away from the idea that if they didn't win, it wasn't any fun."

### Skill #2 How to be a joiner

You don't want your child to be indistinguishable from the flock, but knowing how to join in an activity or a preexisting group -- rather than sitting on the sidelines -- is good training for the future. "In every aspect of life, she's going to have to work in a group, on school projects or at a job," says Rich. "Kids and adults are frequently thrown together with people they might not ordinarily choose, and they need to be able to negotiate different ideas and realize that others have important things to contribute, too. Leaders are often the ones who are able to glue a team together."

**For little kids:** You'll probably have to first teach your child to recognize an entrée to a group, says child psychologist Lawrence E. Shapiro, Ph.D., author of *How to Raise a Child With a High EQ*. "Sometimes a child will try to talk to the whole group, as opposed to picking out one kid in the group," he says. Picture a child standing outside a circle, saying to no one in particular, "Can I play?" and not being heard. Instead, point out the kid who is giving off friendly signals, many of which are nonverbal and not easy for a child to recognize. Tell her that a friendly child will be looking at her, smiling, gesturing for her to come over, or that her body posture will be positive. Explain to her, "If there's a child who is turned toward you, not facing the other way, that's the child to approach."

**For bigger kids:** School-age kids usually have the nonverbal signals down but tend toward black-and-white thinking, notes Shapiro. If your child says, "But nobody likes me," help her focus on the kids who do. She may just need help choosing the right group to join, rather than constantly knocking on closed doors. "What parents don't realize is that kids do well with kids who are like them," says Shapiro. If your child is shy, pair her off with other shy kids; if she's into **Star Wars**, steer her to other kids who like **Star Wars**. "Friendship skills are learned through practice, and you can help her find the right kinds of friends to practice on," he adds.

### Skill # 3 How to fight for what's right

Being the defender of someone lower on the social food chain than you is enormously scary -- it can feel as though your entire social survival is at stake, which is why almost all kids need help to do so. Having both the confidence and the moral judgment to not only refuse to join in when another kid is being teased but also walk away or -- even better -- verbally stand up for that person involves a few different skills: empathy (understanding that the victim is being hurt), the ability to strategize (that is, to devise a course of action), and the savvy to anticipate what the other kids will do.

**For little kids:** Preschool kids are focused on the rules -- and they know that teasing is a no-no -- so they're likely to go tell an adult if they see it happening. If you're that adult, emphasize basic empathy: "It's good that you came to tell me, because wouldn't that make you feel bad if someone called you a poopiehead?" This helps them recognize what that emotion feels like and makes them want to cushion others against feeling hurt, says Schiller. On the other hand, if you're speaking to the child doing the teasing or bullying, walk her through that same scenario -- "What if someone did that to you? How do you think it would make you feel?" -- so she becomes familiar with empathy for others, too. Simple repetition and practice putting herself in someone else's sneakers ("What do you think it feels like to Isabel when Olivia says she can't play?") is the key to helping young children develop empathy.

**For bigger kids:** The stakes are quite a bit higher for school-age children who now have cliques and BFFs they feel they need to be loyal to. Plus, it's no longer cool to go running to a teacher or parent

for help after age 6 or 7. That's why it becomes important to give your child some in-the-moment strategies to cope with "groupthink," emphasizes Rich. Start by doing a postmortem: Ask her for a blow-by-blow of a painful incident, one in which your child didn't know what to do, then brainstorm ideas for when a similar situation arises in the future. "Talk about what sort of response feels comfortable to her, and ask her to come up with different ideas," says Rich. That might mean creating a distraction if that will take the focus off the person being targeted; inviting the person getting teased to play something apart from the group; or consoling the aggrieved party after the fact, and standing up to the teaser later. Encourage her to say something like "I heard what you said to Kira yesterday, and I thought it was totally not cool. I don't want to hang out with people who act that way." "It's going to be different from school to school, from peer group to peer group," says Rich. "The more you go over these situations with them, the more readily accessible the options will be the next time."

#### **Skill # 4 How to be a good actor**

Being the Streep or the De Niro of the playground means knowing which emotions to reveal and which ones are better kept under wraps, to be expressed later. It also means learning how to be less than honest at times for the sake of others' feelings. You will no doubt teach your child to say to his well-meaning great-aunt who didn't get him a Wii game, "Thank you, I can really use these thermal socks," even though the emotion he's actually feeling is complete and utter disappointment. That's called being polite. The same principle can apply when he's dealing with other kids, says Rich.

**For little kids:** At this age, learning to be polite (aka faking his real feelings) is all about impulse control. You can help him learn not to blurt out "But I didn't *waaaaannnt* socks for my birthday" by giving him clear guidelines, notes Schiller. Saying "Whenever you get a gift, I want you to say 'thank you' even if you really don't like it" is being clear. Saying "Be nice to Auntie Kim"? Not so much. Later, explain why shelving his feelings is important ("Auntie Kim tried really hard to get you something you'd like") and let him say what he wants about the stupid socks.

**For bigger kids:** Explain why "acting" can be to his advantage. For instance, "Everybody gets teased sometimes, but if you don't let on to the bully that he's pushing your buttons, he'll stop. Instead of showing that you're upset, you roll your eyes and walk away." The important thing at this age, notes Shapiro, is to help your child discern between telling a white lie for the right reasons and the wrong ones. When an older kid is asked "How does my hair look?" it's hurtful to respond "Awful!" even if that's what he really thinks, explains Shapiro. He needs to recognize that a response like "Fine" or even "Good, but I really like it when you wear a ponytail" is the tactful and empathetic approach. But when you ask him "Did you finish your project?" saying yes when he didn't is the wrong kind of faking it -- you can't gild the lily to get away with something.

#### **Skill #5 How to question authority**

When you're at your wit's end, a child who does what you tell him to do is certainly a blessing. But a kid who questions authority -- and manages to do so respectfully and effectively -- is a kid who will do well for himself in the long run. The boy who can make a polite and compelling case for why he needs to, say, get the black high-tops everyone else has instead of the dorky white ones is more likely to get his way, and to do so without angering the holder of the purse strings in the process. This is a child who will grow up to be someone other adults respect and want to negotiate with.

**For little kids:** The toddler's main mission in life is to question authority, and it's not likely to be in a restrained and polite manner, since (in case you haven't noticed) 2-year-olds aren't exactly adept at controlling their emotions. Your main goal at this stage is to teach him how to ask nicely for

something. It also helps to say yes whenever you can, says Rich. Of course, this doesn't mean yes to candy and unlimited crappy plastic toys every time, but it does mean saying yes whenever it really doesn't matter all that much. This strategy will allow you to save your energy for when you really need to insist on "no," and it demonstrates to your child that he got to make the decision on wearing the frog T-shirt instead of the dinosaur T-shirt because he asked politely instead of blowing a gasket over it.

**With bigger kids:** When talking about things that are up for negotiation -- like whether you'll take your daughter and her seven BFFs to Burger Mania or the Pizza Palace for dinner -- use phrases like "I've got an idea," "What if," or "What would happen if we tried," which encourages her to do the same. "It's all about giving kids the right language to interject their thoughts without being offensive," explains Schiller. "Some kids are too afraid to question a parent or the teacher and they never find out they've got it inside them to do that." So avoid a my-way-or-the-highway attitude whenever you can, even if you're not going to grant her request. Say there's no way you're going to take her to see that awful movie with the squeaky chipmunks instead of visiting her grandparents, as planned. But saying "No, and stop nagging me already" won't encourage her to ask in an appropriate adult manner. Try something like "C'mon now, you know we promised Grandma we'd be over today, but if you had asked me when we didn't have other plans, I'd have been more likely to do it." Or better yet, get her to ask Grandma to take her to see the movie.