

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Peer Relationships



What You Need to Know

Babies are born with an innate desire to connect with others. At first, their priority is to establish a strong relationship with the adults who care for them. As babies grow into toddlers, they begin to show interest in and awareness of their peers and a desire to play interactively with other children. For toddlers, peer play is often as simple as playing *beside* each other and, every once in a while, looking up to see what their playmate is up to. As teachers, you can help children begin to enjoy each other’s company and form positive connections that set the foundation for developing friendships.

Things to Consider

Play can be categorized into 4 types:

1. **Solitary:** playing on their own and is not interested in, or is unaware of, peers.
2. **Onlooker:** watches other children and is interested in what is going on, but does not join in.
3. **Parallel:** plays beside another child with the same or similar toys; at times imitates others’ actions, but there are few back-and-forth exchanges.
4. **Collaborative:** playing together in a coordinated, shared activity.

Toddlers spend most of their time in solitary, onlooker, and parallel play. When they *do* engage in collaborative play, it is often only for brief periods of time (a few minutes). Some children who demonstrate challenges with social interactions and peer relationships may not engage in a variety of play. It’s okay if they prefer solitary play, but it is important to offer opportunities for children to see and participate in collaborative activities.

Development of Relationships with Peers

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Participate in simple back and forth interactions with another child.	Initiate social interactions with peers.
Recognize familiar peers (names) and their likes/dislikes.	Respond to contact made by peers.
Imitate a peer’s sounds or actions (e.g., running after a child).	Show preference for particular peers.
Engage in parallel play.	Watch and imitate other’s play.
	Take turns with peers.
	Engage in collaborative play.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of peer relationships:

- ◆ Shared experiences (e.g., a shared music activity where everyone is in a “band” but has their own instrument, or painting together on one large piece of paper).
- ◆ Shared tasks (e.g., for younger children, both put trucks in the same bucket; for older children, one holds the bucket while the other puts trucks inside).
- ◆ Turn-taking games to provide practice in “sharing” (e.g., toss one beanbag into a bucket, roll a ball down a block ramp to knock something down, or one child building a tower and the other child knocking it over and then switching).
- ◆ Activities with limited materials that require sharing (e.g., paint cups with only one brush per color).
- ◆ Read social narratives about social skills like social problem-solving, turn-taking, etc. to provide additional support.
- ◆ For nonverbal children, post visuals throughout your classroom with core words or relevant vocabulary. This alternative form of communication allows children to point to words/phrases when engaging with peers. For example, hang visuals of core words like ‘more’ and ‘stop,’ or vocabulary like ‘block,’ ‘fall,’ ‘tall’ in the block center. You can also post Solutions Kit visuals or other visuals that can support children to form positive peer relationships.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Peer Relationships

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe children as they interact with their peers. What type of play do you notice (see list on previous page)? Do some children initiate play/communication with a peer? Do they take turns on occasion? Do children show preferences for specific children? Who may need extra support?
Tuesday FOCUS	Acknowledge Positive Peer Interactions Focus children's attention on positive peer interactions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I see (Child) and (Child) are both building towers."◆ "Wow, you guys are working together to clean up the blocks!" For some children with disabilities or additional needs, a positive peer interaction may simply be one in which both children have safe bodies near each other (i.e., no hitting, biting, etc.). Be sure to acknowledge these moments and reinforce as appropriate.
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Join in the Play Join in the play to promote positive interactions between children. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Prompt interactions: "Who wants to have a pretend picnic with me in the house area?"◆ Model how to initiate play: "I see you looking at (Child). Let's ask them to play with us. (Child), we are having a picnic, do you want to eat some sandwiches with us?"◆ Encourage eye contact: Joint attention is the foundation for more advanced forms of play and social communication. Support children to make eye contact by holding toys, books, or desired items by your face when you play.
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Provide Support During Teamwork Remember that interactions with peers are often difficult for toddlers. Focus on providing support during their interactions or collaborations to help them be successful. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "OK, now (Child 1) is going to stack the blocks and (Child 2) will knock them down. Whoa, that was fun! Now, let's switch."◆ "(Child) is handing you the doll and pointing to the chair. I think they might want to play with you!"
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.