Your child’s social and emotional development (mental health) — how he or she manages emotions and relates to others — is as important as physical health. Social and emotional development is not as obvious as physical health, but it’s vital for future success — in school and in life.

Why it matters
Your child’s social and emotional development affects every part of his or her life. Children who develop good social and emotional skills:
- make and keep friends
- understand and express emotions
- are ready for school
- think clearly and learn new things

You can make a difference
Your love and attention are as important as food and a place to live. When you cuddle and play with your child and praise good behavior, you’re supporting your child’s social and emotional development — and building a foundation for a lifetime of success.

Inside you’ll learn about:
- social and emotional milestones for your child
- how to support your child’s social and emotional development
- when to be concerned
- where to go for help
### If your child is...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12 to 18 months</th>
<th>18 months to three years</th>
<th>Three to five years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What to Expect</strong></td>
<td><strong>What You Can Do</strong></td>
<td><strong>When to Be Concerned</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comes to you when distressed and accepts comfort from a parent or caregiver</td>
<td>Shows affection by hugging you or holding your hand</td>
<td>Enjoys imaginary play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explores with enthusiasm and is curious about other people</td>
<td>Comforts self using objects, such as a blanket</td>
<td>Wants to do things without your help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes to be around children but may be afraid or anxious around strangers</td>
<td>Expresses feelings, by smiling or crying</td>
<td>Plays and shares with other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys books, songs and simple games</td>
<td>Gets upset and cries when you leave up until age two, and in other stressful or unfamiliar situations after that age</td>
<td>Learns to name and express feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>May have temper tantrums when she doesn’t get her way</td>
<td>Starts understanding and uses “no”</td>
<td>Becomes aware of your feelings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feels proud of what she can do, such as running or kicking a ball, and shares accomplishments with you</td>
<td>Asks a lot of questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tests limits but accepts them most of the time</td>
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#### What You Can Do

- Hold and cuddle your child so he trusts you to protect him.
- Praise good behavior; use positive words and encourage your child.
- Notice when your child wants to be close or wants to explore.
- Use everyday activities — bath time, meal time — to connect with your child.
- Read books together.
- Sit on the floor to play; allow your child to lead.
- Help your child find a blanket or stuffed animal she can turn to for comfort.
- Stay near your child as she explores the world.
- Discipline with kindness; try using timeouts and follow through consistently.
- Label feelings, especially when setting limits, such as: “I can see you’re angry but it’s not okay to hit.”
- Play “make-believe” games together.
- Listen and talk to your child. Help him name his feelings and talk about yours.
- Find a balance between talk and play.
- Encourage your child to play with siblings and other children.
- Supervise play times.
- Stay involved in your child’s friendships.

#### When to Be Concerned

- Is difficult to comfort or cries most of the time
- Rarely makes eye contact
- Reacts the same way to parents and strangers
- Is too comfortable with, or overly fearful of, strangers; doesn’t show preference for any one adult
- Seems sad or withdrawn; lacks interest in people or toys
- Has temper tantrums, often hits, bites or punches, or destroys toys or other objects
- Can’t focus on or finish activities
- Clings or gets upset when you leave
- Witnessed violence or had a traumatic experience
- Doesn’t play with you or others
- Is too aggressive

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### Your Child Depends on You

It’s important to take care of yourself, too. Talk to your doctor if you:

- Feel tired, depressed, worried or overwhelmed, and these feelings don’t go away
- Don’t enjoy spending time with your child
- Are having a hard time with your own emotions and relationships
- Witnessed violence or had a traumatic experience