



The Down Syndrome Association Gauteng

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT – WHAT IS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT?

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Basic Support for Children with Special Needs 'What You Need to Know' – DSSA 2012

What is Social Development?

This is where children learn what is acceptable and appropriate behaviour and what is not. It reflects the values of the child's family and society. When working with children experiencing a disability, it should be remembered that each child is an individual and their social skills, communication ability and understanding will differ widely. Each child's behaviour and development will be affected by their personality and their experiences within the family, school and community.

Children are influenced from birth by adults trying to guide them in behaviour that society expects from them. Children imitate what they see. They adapt social expectations to their own personality. Social understanding is usually good in children with Down syndrome. They can cope better socially than other children with similar cognitive or communicative difficulties. This can help them be more successful in community activities and in inclusive settings. It can also help them to be naughty as they know how to get reactions, they want from others e.g., running away means that some will chase you to bring you back!

Appropriate behaviour has to be learned in a number of different settings – e.g., free exploration of the environment is encouraged at school, but not in the church/mosque/temple etc.

The Influence of the Development of Language on Social Development

Socialisation involves the relationships the child has with a number of different people. The development of language is very important here because it allows the child to communicate with others. Language makes it possible to reason with a child and explain why certain behaviour is desirable and others are not (although most situations can also be explained with the use of sign language). As their language and communication skills develop, children experience less frustration and can explain how they feel and ask for what they want. Silent, inner communications with oneself can also be used in the control of behaviour.

The most obvious implication of delayed language and cognitive development is that those children experiencing difficulty in these areas will be more at risk for behaviour and social problems and will be more demanding to manage for longer periods of time during childhood. For most children with cognitive difficulties however, their social competence and behaviour steadily improves with increasing age. The different roles played by males and females are learned. Social attitudes, including prejudice, are learned at an early age.

The Relationship between Social Development and Cognitive Development

Cognitive development and social growth is related. If the child is to understand the results of his actions, he must have a certain level of intellectual development. Children experiencing delays in their cognitive development are therefore likely to have more difficulty in becoming socially competent or with the self-regulation of their behaviour. For example, they will be older before they understand why certain behaviour can be dangerous.

It is important to encourage young children to enjoy shared activities e.g., looking at books, playing games together. This will help them to increase their attention span, to learn to listen, to interact with another person and to follow instructions. These skills will help the child in any learning situation as well as prepare the child for sitting, listening and taking turns with others in a playgroup or classroom. They are also basic social skills. Many children with Down syndrome struggle with distractibility and with limited attention spans, so the sooner they can learn these skills, the better.

Children with Down syndrome learn best by watching, imitating and then 'doing'. Their understanding increased by participation, practice and feedback rather than by verbal explanation. This means that these children should be allowed to experience a wide range of social situations outside of the classroom (shops, cafeterias, buses, church etc.) so that they can watch and learn from others in a variety of settings.

Social Development and Play

Children learn much about how to behave through play. In all situations, at home, at pre-school and in the community, age-appropriate and socially acceptable behaviour should be encouraged and expected. It is very easy to 'baby' or overprotect children with Down syndrome and other special needs because of their small size and language delay. But they have to learn to control aggressive impulses, to think about others beside themselves, to share and resist doing what they shouldn't. They can rehearse for life without suffering the real-life results because difficult behaviour will limit children's social opportunities and cause family stress.

Delayed spoken language skills will affect a child's ability to play with other children. In pre-school such children usually play alongside rather than with the others. However, they will be learning about play and social behaviour from watching and from listening to the language of the other children.

***NB! Children with Down syndrome usually understand more than they can express.
This is also so for many other children with special needs***

Relationships with other children

Social development means moving away from the influence of adults to people of one's own age. Children with disabilities also need to be given the opportunity to socialise and make friends.

Friends give children models for comparison, for imitation, for reassurance. They are a source of support.

Children need to learn to function as members of a group. This helps them learn to take turns and to share adult attention with other children. Children with Down syndrome and other special needs can be too dependent on too much one-to-one support (from an adult, usually).

They can also be more dependent on their brothers and sisters and their friends, their parents, other family members and adults for their social relationships. Friendships with able-bodied peers often need planning and additional support from parents. Parents of children with disabilities usually have to take the lead and invite such able-bodied children to their home and be available to monitor and support the play activities that have been planned.

Children with Down syndrome and other special needs may need two different groups of friends. They will learn a great deal from friends who are able-bodied but they will experience successful and satisfying play experiences with friends whose skills are similar to their own.

The more social experiences a child has, the better. Social learning can only take place in social situations and all children have to learn from the reactions of others to their behaviour.

The Effect of Inclusive School Placement on Social Development

Mixing with the same age able-bodied children in an inclusive setting will provide stimulating role models for learning about age-appropriate behaviour and spoken language. However, the other children may become helpers and supporters rather than real friends. This is a valuable role, but different from having equal friends. In these situations, children with disabilities can sense that they are 'different' and be aware that they cannot do all that their classmates can do.

In most inclusive school situations, the child with Down syndrome and other special needs has some support from a so-called Facilitator or Learning Support Assistant. A key part of this role should be to facilitate the social inclusion of the child with a disability. It also means that they have to be aware that their presence can be a barrier to the formation of social relationships with other children. At such times they need to stay in the background, as it is vital to encourage an understanding in the able-bodied children that they are the main supporters of the child with a disability, not an adult.

The Parents' and Teacher's Role

- To plan and arrange a social environment that will encourage appropriate social behaviours – have areas that allow for interaction; toys that encourage co-operative play e.g., telephones, scooters and dress-up clothes etc.; and time for this to happen.

- To help children to develop trust by helping them to:
 - Understand their own needs
 - Allow them to choose a friend
 - To talk about their feelings
 - To resolve conflict (sort out fights)

- To be aware of the choices they have made and the needs of others.

- To help children develop good social skills by listening to them.

- By showing them how to be assertive not aggressive.

- By showing them how to make other plays e.g., find another place to play; to go along with someone else's idea; to share.

- To help children recognise another child's emotions.

- To see how their behaviour affects others e.g., a loud voice.

- To understand how to make friends – to know what works.

- To help the child understand the community in which he lives e.g., go shopping, or go on outings to the fire station etc.

- To give children opportunities to learn to share and to take turns.

- To teach children how to co-operate with others.

Behaviour Management

All young children can, at times, behave badly.

The reasons for such behaviour are usually the same, whether the child is experiencing a disability or not. (People generally forget this most important fact and tend to blame the disability for the bad behaviour).
(See Page 6 - 'Why Children Misbehave')

Much of the apparently inappropriate behaviour observed in children experiencing disabilities can be because of their level of developmental delay. In other words, not only will they show delays in physical and intellectual development, but their behaviour may also be immature.

Because they learn more slowly than their peers, they will take longer to learn social rules e.g., taking turns, sharing or co-operating with others.

It is important that care givers distinguish immature behaviours from those that are deliberately naughty or attention seeking and that the child is helped gradually to behave in a more age-appropriate manner.

Knowing what affects children's behaviour and feelings helps adults understand and manage the misbehaving child. Problems can be anticipated and then avoided/prevented rather than simply waiting for them to happen.

If sufficient care is not given to planning the day's activities for a child with a disability either in school or at home, the child may have to cope with seriously difficult situation and as a result, become awkward or disruptive.

Children get frustrated when they are faced with people who are not prepared to listen or who are unable to understand what they are trying to say.

Children with special needs can get confused and forget what they have been told because they have limited comprehension skills and a poor auditory memory.

These situations can also lead to feelings of frustration and bad behaviour in the child.

Why Children Misbehave

1. Because they want adult attention.

- They know what they are doing is naughty
- They have done it before and know it works
- They would rather be punished than ignored

2. Because they are angry or frustrated.

- Anger is building up and needs to be let out
- They lash out at whoever is nearby
- They need to regain some control over their lives

3. Because they are uncertain or confused.

- They are unsure of what is expected
- They don't realise that it is unacceptable
- They have done it before without being told off

4. Because it gives them pleasure.

- The reward overrides the consequences
- It helps them unwind or calm down
- They don't notice that people are getting cross

Isolated, unhappy children may indulge in self-stimulating behaviour like rocking, thumb sucking or genital stimulation. Such children should be seen as a warning and particular attention should be paid to the way the child is being managed.

When children repeatedly behave badly, it is because they get something satisfying or rewarding from their bad behaviour. It is important to let them see that good behaviour is more satisfying than bad behaviour.

For example, it is breakfast time and Mark is being ignored by his mother who is busy with the other children. He is refusing to feed himself. He may be afraid that if he feeds himself, he will be left out even more. He is very dependent on his mother's care and attention. He throws his food on the floor. His mother is angry and scolds him.

Let's look at what he gets as a result of his bad behaviour.

- He gets the attention of the whole family.
- His mother quickly leaves the other children and goes to him.
- If he cries when she scolds him, she comforts him and feeds him like a baby.
- And then he gets to play with his toys.
- By being fed like a baby, he calms his fears of growing up and losing his mother's care and attention.

So, by throwing food, Mark gets a lot of satisfaction. His mother also needs to see that she is giving him confusing messages – at the same time as she scolds him, she also gives him the attention and care that he wants.

How should Bad Behaviour be managed?

Try and find out why the child is behaving badly;

Consistently reward good behaviour;

Rewards can be praise, hugs, special privileges (playing with specific toys), or food treats (be careful with children who are overweight);

Ignore bad behaviour;

Reward good behaviour immediately;

Be consistent in how you respond to your child's behaviour.

If you have decided to ignore a certain behaviour and at other times either scold or do what the child demands, it will be confusing for him and his behaviour will not improve;

The child's behaviour might get worse when you first start, so don't give up;

Teach the child thoroughly and slowly. Don't expect improvements to happen overnight.

It might take several weeks before the child's behaviour improves, so you will need to be patient;

When the child's behaviour starts to improve you will need to keep encouraging it so that it becomes a habit, replacing the old, negative behaviour.

Types of Anti-Social Behaviour:

Temper tantrums

Aggressiveness

Rough play with younger, smaller children

Vandalism

Stealing and dishonesty

Very loud, noisy behaviour

Sexual aberrations

Use of undesirable language

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Information included in this article was taken with thanks from the following publications and cannot be reproduced for commercial use: -

Dr. Gill Lloyd (2004). The importance of Early Intervention. (Johannesburg, Unpublished DSSA)

Down Syndrome Society of South Australia "Right to Know" Programme 2004