

Keys to unlocking social skills

What is the practice?

Adults can encourage sisters, brothers, and friends to interact in specific ways that motivate young children to learn key social skills for talking and playing.



How do we do it?

During playtimes in everyday settings and activities, help your young child's sibling or a similar-age friend use the following six strategies or "keys" to help her learn, practice, and strengthen important communication and social skills, such as sharing playthings, taking turns, and responding to a playmate's questions.

Suggest that the friend or sibling make sure the child is paying attention by saying the child's name. Remind them to use clear, simple words, and explain that it may take a little time for the child to react to what they have said.



- 1 Make available play activities the child prefers, and encourage the friend or sibling to let the child make choices about the activities and toys or play materials she wants to use.** (You might say: "Ask if Emma wants to play with Legos or with the ball.")
- 2 Help the friend or sibling maintain the child's interest by suggesting that he vary the games and topics of conversation during their playtime.** (You might say: "You've played ball for a while. Why don't you ask Emma what she would like to play next?")
- 3 Provide activities the child has already mastered along with new ones for the children as a way to maintain the child's sense of success and reinforce skills already learned.** (Example: If the child can color with crayons, set out art paper and crayons for the children to share, as well as

tools for exploring new activities such as paints and brushes.)

- 4 Encourage the friend or sibling to show or model a desired behavior, like how to take turns, many times as they play.** (You might say: "Laura, will you let Emma use the green crayon for a while? Then you can ask her to give you a turn using it.")
- 5 All the child's attempts to try a new behavior during play, not just the successful attempts, should be rewarded naturally.** (For example, encourage the sibling or friend to hand your child a toy when it is requested or to say something in response to the child's utterance.)
- 6 Natural reinforcers should be used to reward the child's behavior you want to teach or strengthen.** (For example, to promote word use, if the child says "seesaw," encourage another child to help her hop aboard.)

See it happen

Arrange a play situation for your child and a friend or sibling around a few activities you know your child enjoys. If he likes swings, for example, start by letting the friend or sibling push him on the swing. Then ask them to switch places for a few minutes to reinforce turn-taking.

Is it working?

The child interacts more often with other children during play.

The child uses more words or sounds to communicate with others.

The child can carry out a play theme, such as playing "house" or building with blocks, for a longer period of time.

The child responds to others' questions/requests more often.

