



Supporting Social-Emotional
Development

A Resource Book for Early Childhood Educators

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About This Resource Book

Purpose of this Resource

This resource was created to help early childhood educators better support children's social-emotional development in everyday practice.

What Research Shows

Research shows that social-emotional development is shaped through children's play, relationships, and interactions with their environment. While many studies focus on individual factors, such as children's play, educator beliefs, or classroom design, less attention is given to how these elements work together in daily practice.

Focus of This Study

This resource explores how educator practices, learning environments, and children's play experiences work together to support social-emotional development. The findings show that development happens through the interaction of these factors, rather than through one single approach. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights how children's development is influenced by relationships, environments, and broader systems.



Professional Lens



My interest in this topic comes from both my personal and professional experiences. Growing up, I didn't have many opportunities for outdoor play, and most of my experiences were based on structured indoor routines.

After moving to British Columbia, my perspective began to shift as I worked in settings that placed a stronger focus on outdoor learning. I started to see how outdoor environments support children's confidence, independence, and emotional development in ways I hadn't experienced before.



These experiences helped me become more aware of how educators' decisions, especially around safety and structure, can shape children's opportunities to explore and take risks. This led me to think more deeply about how educators support preschoolers' social-emotional development across both indoor and outdoor environments.



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Understanding Social – Emotional Development

Social-emotional development includes children's ability to understand emotions, build relationships, regulate behaviour, and solve social problems. These skills are essential for participation in early learning environments and long-term well-being.

Research shows that these skills develop through play, relationships, and guided interactions, rather than direct instruction alone. For example, children learn emotional regulation through real-life experiences such as managing frustration during play or resolving peer conflict.

Outdoor play further supports development by providing opportunities for children to negotiate, cooperate, and manage emotions in less structured settings, which strengthens self-regulation and resilience.



The Role of Educators

Early childhood educators play an important role in supporting preschoolers' social-emotional development through everyday interactions, relationships, and intentional teaching practices. Rather than teaching these skills through direct instruction alone, educators support development through real-life experiences, guidance, and responsive interactions.

Educators support children's development in several key ways:

› Modelling Emotions

Educators model how to express and manage emotions by using calm language, naming feelings, and demonstrating appropriate responses. This helps children understand and communicate their own emotions.

› Guiding Social Interactions

Educators support peer relationships by guiding conflict resolution, encouraging cooperation, and helping children express their ideas. These everyday interactions provide meaningful opportunities to develop social skills.

› Supporting Problem-Solving

Instead of solving problems for children, educators ask questions and provide guidance, encouraging children to think through solutions and build confidence.

› Co-Regulating Before Independence

Children develop self-regulation through support from adults. Educators help children manage emotions and gradually build independence over time.

› Creating Supportive Environments

Educators design both indoor and outdoor environments that support development. Indoor spaces provide structure and predictability, while outdoor environments offer opportunities for exploration, independence, and social interaction.



Learning Environments

Learning environments shape children's development in meaningful ways.

Indoor Environments support:

- structure and routine
- predictable expectations
- calm spaces

These support emotional regulation and provide children with a sense of security.



Outdoor environments support:

- open-ended play
- exploration
- social interaction

Outdoor environments allow children to take initiative, solve problems, and build independence.

Research shows that both environments are important and complementary, supporting different aspects of development.





Educator Beliefs

Educator beliefs strongly influence how learning environments are structured and how children experience play.

Research shows that:

- educators who value exploration provide more opportunities for development
- concerns about safety can limit outdoor play
- restrictions on risk-taking may reduce opportunities for confidence-building

Some educators view safety as eliminating risk, which can lead to limiting physically active play.

Balancing safety and opportunity is essential in supporting children's independence and resilience.

Practical Strategies



Supporting Social-Emotional Development: Everyday Strategies for Early Childhood Educators



Emotional Development

What to do

- Model emotional language
- Help children name feelings
- Validate emotions

Try saying

“I see you’re feeling upset.”
“That was frustrating for you.”
“It’s okay to feel that way.”



Supporting Social Skills

What to do

- Guide peer conflict calmly
- Encourage cooperation
- Support communication

Try saying

“What happened?”
“How can we solve this together?”
“What could we try next?”



Supporting Self-Regulation

What to do

- Stay calm and present
- Co-regulate before independence
- Provide calm-down spaces

Try

Sit beside the child
Use a calm tone
Practice breathing together



The Environment

Indoor

- Predictable routines
- Calm, quiet spaces

Outdoor

- Exploration
- Independence
- Safe risk-taking

Educator Checklist



Supporting Social–Emotional Development:

Use daily or weekly as a reflection and planning tool

Emotional Development

Children develop emotional awareness through guided interaction.

- ☐ Do I model emotional language throughout the day?
- ☐ Do I help children name and understand their feelings?
- ☐ Do I acknowledge and validate children's emotions?

Self-Regulation

Children learn regulation through adult support first.

- ☐ Do I stay calm during challenging moments?
- ☐ Do I co-regulate before expecting independence?
- ☐ Do children have access to calm-down spaces or tools?

Social Skills

Social skills develop through real interactions with peers.

- ☐ Do I guide peer conflict instead of solving it for children?
- ☐ Do I encourage turn-taking and cooperation?
- ☐ Do I support children in expressing their ideas?

Learning Environments

Different environments support development in different ways.

- ☐ Do I provide both structured indoor and open-ended outdoor experiences?
- ☐ Do indoor spaces support calm, predictable routines?
- ☐ Do outdoor spaces allow exploration and independence?

Educator Checklist



Supporting Social–Emotional Development:

Use daily or weekly as a reflection and planning tool

Outdoor Play & Development

Outdoor play supports confidence, resilience, and social interaction.

- ☐ Are children given time for open-ended outdoor play?
- ☐ Is safe, manageable risk-taking encouraged?
- ☐ Are children interacting with peers during outdoor play?

Educator Practice

Social skills develop through real interactions with peers.

- ☐ Do I guide peer conflict instead of solving it for children?
- ☐ Do I encourage turn-taking and cooperation?
- ☐ Do I support children in expressing their ideas?



Reflection

Educator beliefs can shape children's opportunities for learning.

1

Am I limiting opportunities due to safety concerns?

3

Do I step in too quickly when children face challenges?

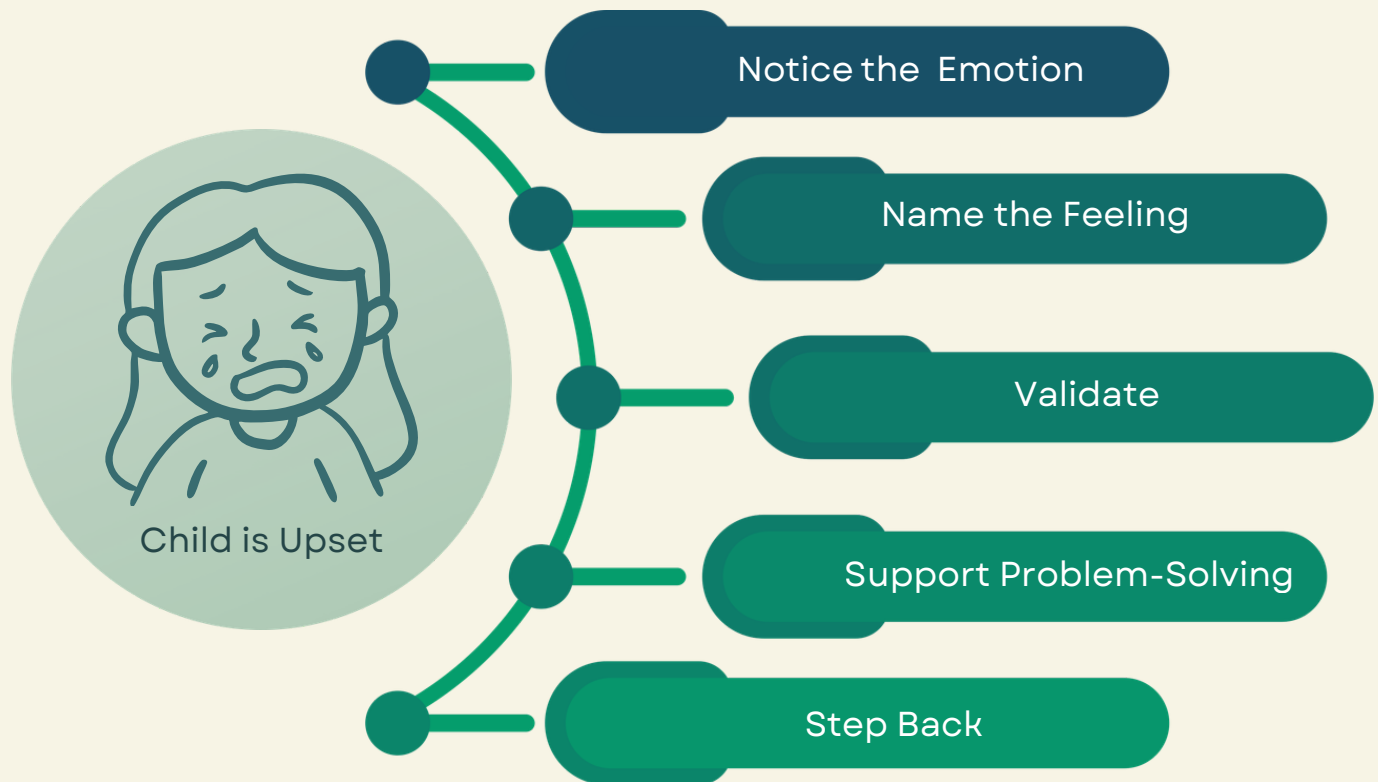
2

Do I allow children to take manageable risks?

4

Do I view outdoor play as essential for learning, or as optional?

Response Guide



Using the Response Guide

When a child is upset, the first step is to stay calm and present.

Start by noticing what the child might be feeling. Pay attention to their body language, facial expression, and what's happening in the moment.

Then, help name the feeling. You might say something like, "I see you're upset" or "That looks frustrating." This helps children begin to understand their emotions.

Next, validate how they're feeling. Let them know their emotions are okay by saying, "That makes sense" or "It's okay to feel that way." This helps children feel heard and supported.

Once the child feels calm and understood, you can move into problem-solving. Ask questions like, "What can we do?" or "How can we fix this together?" This encourages children to think through solutions.

Finally, step back. Give the child space to try their ideas while staying nearby for support if needed.

This process helps children learn how to manage their emotions with support first, so they can eventually do it on their own.

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