

What Is It?

Promoting peer interactions is a universal strategy that involves setting up intentional opportunities for children to successfully communicate and play with each other. Adults can promote positive peer interactions by arranging the environment, explicitly teaching children social skills, and reinforcing positive exchanges between children. Promoting peer interactions helps children build important social skills that lead to positive relationships, friendships, and acceptance. It also prevents challenging behavior, and fosters long term school success.

When to Use It

- Throughout the day to increase children’s social interactions.
- Across any early childhood setting. It is particularly beneficial within inclusive classrooms.

Steps to Implementation / How to Do It

□	1. Intentionally plan for promoting social interactions. Arrange the environment so it includes clear boundaries between centers. Include materials in each area that encourage collaborative play such as dress up clothes, building blocks, and diverse figures. Choose materials that are fun, interesting, and culturally relevant to children. Periodically rotate old materials out and replace them with novel materials.
□	2. During routines and/or centers, group children with diverse social skills. For example, pair quiet or shy children with more talkative children or a child that uses gestures to communicate with a child that uses verbal language.
□	3. Use modeling and prompting to teach children targeted skills that promote positive peer interactions such as appropriately gaining attention, trading and sharing objects, exchanging play ideas, and saying something kind to a friend.
□	4. Use positive descriptive feedback to reinforce positive social interactions between children, even when the interaction requires prompting.

Example

Teacher Kelly works in a preschool that highly values academic instruction. Although she wants to prepare her pre-k students for kindergarten, Teacher Kelly is concerned that she spends too much time focused on academic skills such as number identification and letter sounds, and not enough time fostering social skills and peer connections. She believes a lack of instruction on peer interaction and friendship skills has led to increased challenging behavior between children. Teacher Kelly decides to address her concern by increasing the time that her learners spend in centers and free play activities while systematically embedding social skills instruction. First, she rearranges play areas so that they encourage small groups of 3-4 learners in one area at a time. Then, she rotates some play materials out for play materials that align with the children's current interests.

During circle time the next day, Teacher Kelly tells children that they will have a longer time to engage in centers and free play activities. She tells them that during these times, they will practice gaining one another's attention. Teacher Kelly models appropriately gaining attention using the classroom puppet, Arnold. Arnold gently taps Teacher Kelly on the shoulder and says, "Teacher Kelly." Teacher Kelly says, "Hi Arnold! How are you?" and Arnold replies with a compliment, "I like your funny chef hat!" Teacher Kelly repeats a similar model one more time and then the children transition to free play.

At free play, Teacher Kelly and other supporting adults in the room look for opportunities to prompt and reinforce children's use of the modeled strategies to gain peers' attention. The adults provide frequent positive descriptive praise such as, "Wow, you said your friend's name calmly to get his attention. Nice!" Every few weeks, Teacher Kelly introduces a new social skill to the children while continuing to model and reinforce the previously taught skills.

How to Increase Effectiveness

- Include visual images near play centers that show positive social interactions, such as children giving high fives or trading toys.
- When encouraging social interactions, consider prompting model peers to initiate and reciprocate social interactions, rather than relying solely on prompting the child that needs more support.

Resources

Bovey, T., & Strain, P. [Promoting positive peer social interactions](#). (Issue Brief No. 8). Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.

Ostrosky, M. M., & Meadan, H. (2010). [Helping children play and learn together](#). *Young Children*, 65, 104-110.

Strain, P. S., & Kohler, F. W. (1998). [Peer-mediated social intervention for young children with autism](#). *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 19(4), 391-405.