



The Early Years: Prosocial Skills

“Prosocial skills” is a broad term used to identify the behaviors people use to help them get along with others. Those behaviors include giving help and comfort to others, particularly friends. Prosocial skills help a child to show empathy and get along with others in positive ways. Expressing empathy, which might best be described as *being sensitive to the feelings of others*, is an important prosocial skill.

Prosocial skills, especially empathy, are important in making and keeping friends. You are helping your children to develop empathy and to respond positively to others when you show affection, sympathy, kindness, and regard for the feelings of others. Children learn more about empathy when you talk with them about the importance of being kind and considerate toward others. They also learn about empathy when you read stories to them that talk about these skills.

Friendships are an essential part of healthy child development. Children without friends may experience serious social problems throughout their lives. Many children who are rejected by their friends lack the social skills necessary to make and keep friends. They are at risk of becoming victims, bullies, or perpetrators of violence. Parents act as “social skills teachers” when they:

- Invite friends over and arrange for children to join in group play with other children.
- Talk to their child about what it means to be a host and how to look out for another child’s needs.
- Discuss fairness with their child—how to take turns, how to share, and how to resolve problems.
- Respond to aggressive behaviors in their child and offer alternative, nonaggressive ways to solve problems.
- Help their child learn to play a variety of cooperative games that, in turn, the child can play with other children.

If you have concerns about your child’s lack of prosocial skills, you can talk to other experienced parents, child care teachers and providers, parenting educators, pediatricians, school teachers, or counselors. They can suggest how to find out if your child’s problems with prosocial skills require professional attention.

The information contained in this summary is taken from the Early Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).

Funding for this publication was provided in part by the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority. The views and statements expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract number ED-99-CO-0020. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.