

TIP SHEET

Supporting Social-Emotional Skills in the Playspace



Why Social-Emotional Skills Matter

Social-emotional development is about how children learn to:

- Understand and express feelings
- Get along with others
- Handle big emotions
- Build trust and feel safe in relationships

These skills are *just as important* as learning numbers or letters—and they grow best through **warm relationships, play, and predictable routines.**

What This Looks Like in the Playspace

In a Playspace, children develop social-emotional skills when they:

- Try taking turns with a toy
- Ask for help or comfort
- Express frustration safely
- Work through challenges with a volunteer or peer
- Feel proud of something they created or did

Even small moments—like giggling together, playing peek-a-boo, or sitting quietly side by side—help build trust, safety, and confidence.

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Your Role as a PAL

As a Playspace volunteer, your role isn't to teach or manage behavior. You're here to:

- Create a **calm, welcoming** space
- Follow the child's lead, offer choices, and validate their feelings
- Model kindness, patience, and flexibility

This helps children experience what safe, supportive relationships *feel like*, which builds the foundation for all other learning.

Why We Don't "Teach Manners"

We don't require kids to say "please" or "thank you," insist they share, or correct what may seem like "rude" behavior—and here's why:

- Many children in shelter are coping with stress or instability and are focused on feeling safe.
- When overwhelmed or tired, their behavior may reflect unmet needs—not a lack of manners.
- Respect and kindness are learned through supportive relationships, not correction.

Instead of teaching manners, we **model compassion, patience, and respect**—and trust that those seeds will grow in time.

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Supporting Social-Emotional Skills in the Playspace: Strategies



Help children feel safe, seen, and empowered by using these simple techniques to support social-emotional learning in the Playspace.

WHAT YOU CAN DO	WHY IT HELPS
Get down to the child's eye level	Builds connection and reduces power struggles
Reflect feelings: <i>"You look upset. That was hard."</i>	Helps children feel seen and heard
Offer choices: <i>"Do you want to color or build?"</i>	Supports autonomy and confidence
Narrate play: <i>"You're stacking so many blocks!"</i>	Builds language and awareness
Take a calming pause if things escalate	Models emotional regulation without shaming