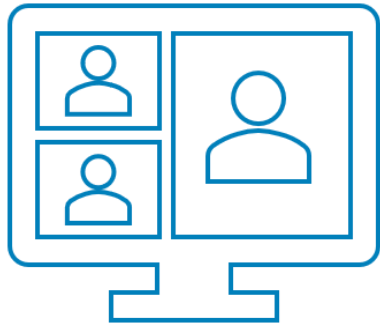




Nurturing Social-Emotional Growth

INTRODUCTIONS

Today's Facilitators



PAL Participants

Please introduce yourself in the **chat**:

- Your **NAME**
- **Shelter where you volunteer**

GOALS FOR THIS TRAINING

We hope you'll leave this session prepared to ...

- Understand why social emotional skills matter
- What social emotional skills look like
- Your role as a volunteer in supporting
- Why we don't teach manners
- Strategies to try in the Playspace

Shared Practices

Safety First

- We create spaces where children feel physically and emotionally safe.

Consistency & Predictability

- We offer consistent schedules, clear communication, and stable relationships.

Collaboration & Shared Ownership

- Shelter staff, Horizons staff, and PALs work together to build and maintain healing environments.

Empathy & Understanding

- We approach children & families with empathy, recognizing that behaviors often reflect traumatic experiences.

Empowerment & Voice

- We respect the voices and choices of children & families whenever possible to promote autonomy and self-confidence. This is critical for children impacted by trauma.

Cultural Humility & Respect

- We honor the diverse backgrounds & strengths of the children & families we serve.

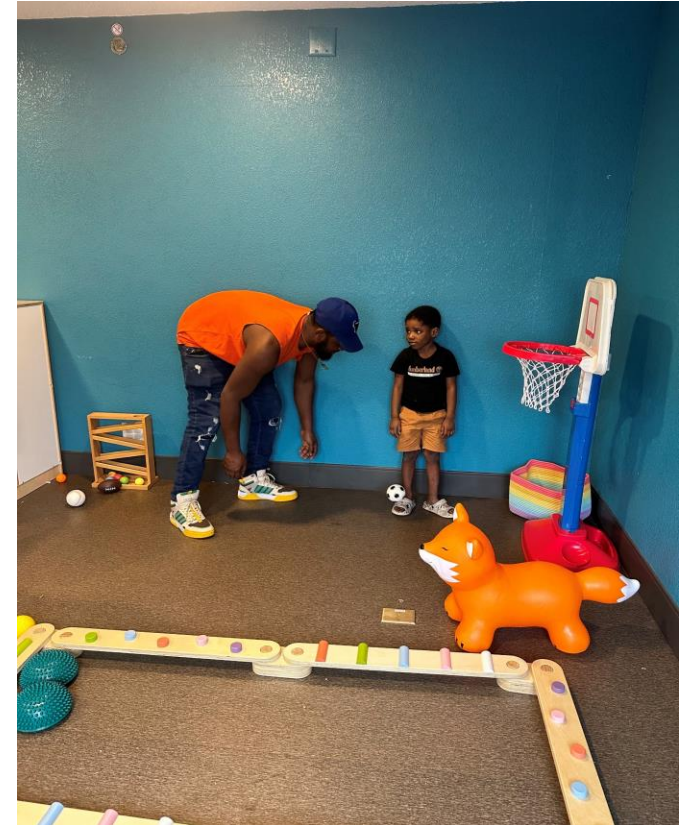
Why Social Emotional Skills Matter



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



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.



Your Role as a Volunteer



As a Playspace volunteer, you are not expected to be a teacher, therapist, or behavior specialist. You are here to:

- Create a calm, joyful space where children feel seen and accepted
- Offer choices, follow their lead, and validate their feelings
- Model kindness, patience, and flexibility

This is how children learn what safe relationships feel like and that's the foundation for all other learning.



Why We Don't Teach Manners



You might notice that we don't prompt kids to say "please" or "thank you," insist they share, or correct "rude" behavior. Here's why:

- Many children in shelter are coping with stress, trauma, or instability. Their nervous systems are doing their best to stay safe.
- "Manners" may not be a priority when a child is overwhelmed, tired, or trying to get their needs met.
- Children learn respect and kindness through relationships, not by being corrected.

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



Try These Strategies



What you can do	Why it helps
Get down to eye level	Builds connection and reduces power struggles
Reflect feelings: "That was hard"	Helps children feel seen and heard
Offer choices: "Do you want to color or build"	Supports autonomy and confidence
Take a calming pause if things escalate	Models emotional regulation without shaming
Narrate play: "Wow you are stacking so many blocks"	Builds language and awareness

Scenario: Trying to Take Turns with a Toy



Child Age: 3 years old

What Happens:

Three children want the same dinosaur toy. One child grabs it, and another starts to cry.

What Not to Do:

The PAL says,

“You need to share! Give it back right now.”

The child who grabbed the toy clutches it tighter and yells “No!”

Now both children are upset.

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Creates shame and resistance
- Doesn't teach problem-solving
- Misses the emotional needs behind the behavior

A Better Way:

The PAL kneels down and says calmly:

“It's really hard to wait when you want that toy. Mason is using it now, and you'll get a turn soon. Let's pick a different toy while we wait. do you want the red car or a book?”

Why This Works:

- Validates big feelings
- Offers choices to reduce stress
- Teaches patience in a supportive way

Skills Supported:

- Managing frustration
- Waiting with support
- Trust and fairness

Scenario: Focusing Too Much on Manners



Child Age: 3 years old

What Happens:

A child reaches for a puzzle piece and doesn't say "please."

The volunteer says,

"You need to say 'please' if you want that."

The child looks down and walks away.

What Went Wrong:

The volunteer corrected the child instead of connected. At age 3, especially in a shelter, the child may be shy, unsure, or overwhelmed.

A Better Way:

The PAL could say,

"You really want that toy! Here you go I'm glad you're playing with me."

Later, the PAL models kindness by saying,
"Thanks for handing me the puzzle piece!"

Skills Supported:

- Feeling safe
- Learning kindness by example
- Building trust

Scenario: When Comfort is Missed



Child Age: *2 years old*

What Happens:

A child's block tower falls, and they burst into tears.

What Not to Do:

The PAL says quickly,

"It's okay, don't cry. Just build it again."

The child turns away, still upset.

Why Doesn't This Help:

- The child's feelings were dismissed.
- They didn't get the connection or support they needed.
- The PAL unintentionally skipped over the child's emotional experience.

Better Way:

The PAL sits beside the child and gently says:

"Oh no that was a big crash. I can see how sad you feel. Do you want to try building again together?"

Why This Works:

- Names and validates the emotion
- Offers connection, not correction
- Helps the child feel seen and supported

Skills Supported:

- Naming emotions
- Seeking comfort
- Building resilience through co-regulation

PAL Resource Page



PAL RESOURCES

The Playspace program is made possible by the 700 dedicated PALs across Massachusetts who bring kindness, play experiences, and moments of joy to children living in shelter every week! Horizons staff is committed to the success of the volunteers, the program, and the families we serve. Ensuring volunteers feel prepared and confident is important to us and your feedback is welcome. Email us at palsupport@horizonschildren.org if you have suggestions or feedback.

Tip Sheets

The following resources and tip sheets are designed to empower you with the tools and knowledge needed to support the children served in Playspace. For more in depth information, attend one of our ongoing training sessions!

Playspace Policies

Activity Ideas

Building Healthy Relationships

Language Support

Managing Behaviors

Outdoor Playspace

- [Policies and Procedures](#)
- [Attire Guidelines](#)
- [Incident Reporting Guide](#)
- [Incident Report Form](#)
- [Non-Permitted Items & Materials](#)
- [Communication Guide](#)

Tip Sheet



TIP SHEET Nurturing Social-Emotional Growth



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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TIP SHEET Nurturing Social-Emotional Growth



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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TRY IT YOURSELF! Nurturing Social-Emotional Growth



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: "You look upset. That was hard."	Helps children feel seen and heard
Offer choices: "Do you want to color or build?"	Supports autonomy and confidence
Narrate play: "You're stacking so many blocks!"	Builds language and awareness
Take a calming pause if things escalate	Models emotional regulation without shaming

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Final Thoughts



Every moment of play is a chance to nurture connection, confidence, and healing. You don't have to do it perfectly just be present, kind, and open. That's what makes the Playspace so powerful

