

School Readiness: Social Knowledge and Competence

by Alka Burman

“Social knowledge and competence” refers to a person’s ability to get along with others. A child’s social competence is displayed through their ability to interact appropriately with their peers, family members and other adults around them.

The Importance of Social Knowledge and Competence

A young child’s ability to interact successfully with others will support them in all areas of development. According to research, this area of development is one of the best childhood predictors of adult adaptation. Children who are generally liked, get along well with others, and have well-meaning relationships and interactions will have success in their peer relationships and this will continue on into their adult life. The long-term risks for children who lack skills in this area include mental health problems, isolation and low academic achievement and other school difficulties. Children who have better mental health, stronger relationships and more success in school have more opportunities to strengthen their social competence. This can be achieved through playing, talking, working out disagreements and collaborating with peers and adults. Children who have at least one close friend are more likely to increase their social connections and to have positive feelings about school over time.

Developing Social knowledge and Competence

Social knowledge and competence begins with attachment and relationships. Social competence is the ability to get along well with others and make

friends. It is also about taking responsibility and showing respect, as well as the ability to solve problems and adjust to routines. These factors will influence how ready a child is to learn and succeed.

Children show interest in socialization during the early years, and the adults around them can support and nurture this. Relationships within the family will affect a child’s social behaviour. In fact, home is where children learn their first social skills. As children have different personalities and traits, they learn through trial and error how to work with one another and become competent in doing so. If children receive the proper support at a young age, they will be ready for these opportunities when they start school.

Learning Environments that Support Social Knowledge and Competence

Learning environments can provide many opportunities for children to learn social knowledge and competence. Here are some examples:

- Learning the rules of a game and then having opportunities for turn taking;
- Engaging in ‘pretend play’—children act out scenarios, learn new things from one another and discover how to get along;



- Sitting around the lunch table and practising social skills as they pass things around, ask for more and even use 'please' and 'thank you' with each other;
- Playing in the block area as children problem solve, listen to each other's ideas, learn to co-operate and take responsibility for actions;
- Sitting and listening to a story and making personal connections to the narrative, being engaged, listening attentively to the story;
- Setting up activities at the table where children need to share materials and have opportunities to take turns and follow directions;
- Playing co-operative games outdoors, being mindful of rules of conduct and appropriate engagement skills, following routines with minimal supervision or reminders, or even being able to adjust to changes in a routine or schedule;
- Creating opportunities for children to have control or share control over a particular event or activity, thus supporting their confidence and self esteem.

Social Knowledge and Competence in the Home

There are many ways that parents can support these skills at home:

- Teaching children what is acceptable behaviour in public places. This will include visiting a variety of different places like the grocery store, doctor's office or restaurants.
- Planning ahead of time for long outings so they are prepared for the wait with something to do, limiting the opportunity for inappropriate behaviour to take place.
- Speaking to their child in a respectful manner. This encourages children to be respectful of others and helps them to build trusting relationships.
- Teaching children to control their behaviour, especially when a problem arises, and then helping them with a solution. This will model social competency.
- Being consistent with children. Having a schedule and household rules that are enforced the same way every time and that apply to everyone.
- Teaching children to be co-operative and to follow rules. Talking to them about sharing, taking turns and playing together.
- Encouraging children to develop good social skills by modeling these skills themselves and nurturing children's attempts at social competence.
- Providing opportunities for children to play with other children and to work out their problems. This should be done with some support at first, working toward independence in this area.



Alka Burman, Early Literacy Specialist, Parenting Specialist, Childhood Diversity Trainer, Registered Early Childhood Educator with special supports and services provided to programs supporting Home language and English language learning. Alka can be contacted at burmana@peelregion.ca.

