Shaping Us

The **Shaping Us** Framework

Understanding the social and emotional skills that matter most

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Foreword
Her Royal Highness,
The Princess of Wales

Let us build a more loving, empathetic, and compassionate society together.

Modern society is complex. At times, it can feel like the world is filled with mistrust and misunderstanding, leaving many people feeling isolated and vulnerable during difficult times. The impact of this – poor mental health, addiction and abuse – can be devastating, for individuals and for society.

If we are to address this properly, if we are to find real, lasting solutions to these deep-rooted challenges and create a physically and mentally healthier society, we must reset, restore, and rebalance. We must invest in humankind.

As human beings, we are at our best when we are surrounded by love, safety, and security. We thrive when we are connected to one another; when we feel like we belong, feel seen, heard and accepted for who we are.

That means taking a profound look at ourselves and our own behaviours, emotions and feelings.

It means getting much better at acting with compassion and empathy towards one another, to help us bond and maintain lasting relationships that bring meaning to our lives.

It means better understanding of how we can protect and build upon what connects and unites us, so that we can find new ways to strengthen communities.

And it means acknowledging that society is something we build together, through the actions we take every day.

At the heart of all of this is the need for us to develop and nurture a set of social and emotional skills which we must prioritise if we are to thrive.

This report sets out a universal approach to understanding these core social and emotional skills throughout all stages of our lives. It highlights the skills which are the bedrock of any healthy, happy society and it helps individuals and organisations understand the ways in which they can contribute to making this conceptual model a living, breathing reality for everybody.

It lays out why early childhood is such a golden opportunity to give the next generation the most positive start in life. But it also shows that these skills continue to grow throughout adulthood – it is never too late.

The Shaping Us Framework is designed to provide an accessible way of focusing on social and emotional skills. It can be used by organisations of all shapes and sizes to design and deliver interventions that raise awareness across society, and to support the development of these critically important skills for people at all stages of life.

Most importantly, it shows that we can all play a vital part in building a more loving, empathetic, and compassionate society, and a world with humanity reconnected.

**Her Royal Highness,
Princess of Wales**

Foreword
Shaping Us Framework
Study Advisory Group

Human development is a highly intricate and multifaceted process.

From conception through the first five years of life, our physical development is most noticeable – and viewed as the most critical area of child development. Cognitive development – the ability to think, reason and communicate (among others) – is seen as fundamental to academic attainment and future success, and is prioritised in education settings. Yet it is only in recent years that the fundamental importance of social and emotional development in shaping children's life trajectory has also been evidenced and recognised.

As a group of academic and clinical experts in the field of human development, from the very start of life through to older age, we collectively bring decades of experience in advancing understanding of development, with a focus on social and emotional development. Over many years, we have generated evidence about different aspects of social and emotional development – from understanding and managing our emotions to behaving creatively and curiously – and furthered knowledge of how social and emotional skills can be nurtured in the home, by health and social care professionals, in care and education settings, and through voluntary and community sector organisations across the international community.

In the summer of 2023, we warmly welcomed the invitation from Her Royal Highness, The Princess of Wales, to form an advisory group to guide the Delphi study that laid the foundations for the development of the Shaping Us Framework.

By being part of this endeavour we hoped to support the creation of a tool that can be used universally, to increase awareness of and knowledge about social and development.

Our ultimate aim, of course, has been to encourage and enable people to nurture their own and others' social and emotional skills, particularly among the youngest members of society.

As this report details, The Shaping Us Framework has been developed by The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood through consultation with academic, clinical and practitioner experts from a range of disciplines and countries, as well as being tested extensively with the general public in the UK.

By engaging a multi-disciplinary and international audience, the framework has been designed to apply to the various contexts in which social and emotional development occurs across the lifecourse

The result is a robust yet flexible and highly accessible conceptual model of the social and emotional skills that enable each one of us to lead a happy and healthy life.

This report sets out how the Shaping Us Framework was developed, the content of the framework, and how a wide range of audiences can start thinking about adapting and using the framework in their specific contexts.

We hope that reading the report will affirm your commitment to the vital importance of social and emotional development, and inspire you to learn more about how you can nurture your own and others' social and emotional skills. In doing so, we can all play a part in building a happier, healthier society.

Shaping Us Framework
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Acknowledgements

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood was established in 2021 and is part of The Royal Foundation of The Prince and Princess of Wales.

The Centre's vision is of a healthier, happier and more nurturing world, transformed by our collective approach to early childhood. It works to achieve this by increasing awareness of, and action on, the extraordinary impact of early childhood – translating compelling scientific advances to change what we all think and do for children between pregnancy and the age of five.

The Centre drives change by supporting, producing and showcasing high-quality research, insights and creative campaigns; practically partnering, convening and collaborating with others for maximum impact, and by designing and delivering interventions to enable and inspire behaviour change.

The Shaping Us Framework is a major part of driving that change and will underpin a significant proportion of our work going forward. The framework took over a year to develop and would not have been possible without contributions from many of our supporters.

First and foremost, I would like to thank everyone who participated in the research which informed the development of the framework. This includes academics, clinicians and practitioners from multiple countries who participated in the Delphi study, as well as the members of the public and colleagues at The Royal Foundation who generously gave their time to test the concepts and language used in the Shaping Us Framework.

I am grateful to the following individuals who formed the Delphi Study Advisory group, who have provided unwavering support throughout the framework development process:

- Lynn Ang Phd., Professor of Early Childhood Education, UCL Institute of Education, UK

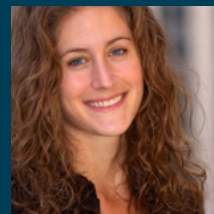- Marc Brackett PhD., Founding Director, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, US

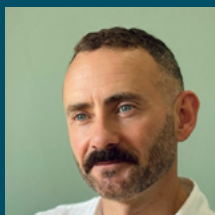- Katherine Jenkins MSc., Head of Family Support and Specialist Programmes, The Forward Trust, UK

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Finally, to the team here at the Centre, and in particular to Jennifer Holly, for their vital contribution throughout the process. This has been a hugely important undertaking which has moved us forward significantly towards making our ambitious vision a reality.

Christian Guy
Executive Director
The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood

Executive Summary

The Royal Foundation of The Prince and Princess of Wales was established in 2012 to tackle some of the world's most difficult problems.

We bring together the brightest and boldest minds to inspire new answers to serious challenges and offer hope for the future. Our collaborative programmes are wide-ranging and complex, and we strive to reach powerful goals: to prevent homelessness, nurture our young and care for our planet. Through shared effort, we believe we can create a happier, healthier and fairer world for everyone.

Crucial to that mission is the need to protect and strengthen the delicate, interconnected ecosystem we are each a part of, especially by supporting our human nature to strive for love, safety and security.

Understanding about the factors that contribute to us meeting these needs – to living long and fulfilling lives – has deepened significantly in recent years

A bank of evidence now shows how positive connections and relationships with others create so much of the joy and purpose in our own lives and families, across our communities and within wider society. This is crucial for our mind,body and overall wellbeing.

In turn, the research also demonstrates that the foundations for this flourishing are laid by strong social and emotional skills – all of which have their roots in early childhood, the period from pregnancy to five years of age, but continue to develop throughout our lives as we encounter new situations and experiences.

These skills are therefore of crucial importance as we seek to build a more positive future for our society and planet together - particularly in the context of an increasingly complex environment and shifting economy, growing social disconnect and seismic technological advances

There has been a growing focus on social and emotional learning in various contexts, including in early childhood care and education settings, workplace professional development programmes, and self–improvement or personal wellbeing initiatives.

Over time, a proliferation of definitions and frameworks has emerged, each underpinned by a specific theoretical discipline and for a specific audience. This has resulted in the lack of a shared and accessible language to support efforts to drive awareness of and action on this vital area of human development at a societal level.

To address this challenge, in 2023, The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood designed and conducted a global listening exercise to develop consensus on the universally relevant skills and capabilities that matter most throughout our lives, within different contexts, and across diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

The views of academic, clinical and practitioner experts in human development were ascertained through a two–round Delphi study, to inform the development of a draft framework. The framework was then tested with the public to ensure the language and structure were accessible to – and resonated with – a general audience.

The resulting framework – The Shaping Us Framework – comprises thirty social and emotional skills grouped into six clusters: knowing ourselves, managing our emotions, focussing our thoughts, communication with others, nurturing our relationships and exploring the world.

The framework defines social and emotional skills as two groups of closely related skills that shape who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate with and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us. These are the foundations of a happy, healthy life. Social and emotional development is defined as the process of nurturing these skills in childhood and adolescence, and social and emotional growth as how we continue to enhance and refine these skills throughout adulthood.

This new conceptual model is not exhaustive[1] and does not intend to replace existing frameworks, but rather offers – **for the first time** - a universal way to talk about social and emotional skills that cuts across disciplines and engages a broad audience. It offers a holistic view of development that starts in early childhood and continues through to adulthood, recognising that our social and emotional skills underpin all areas of human development.

Our aim is that this helps those working across disciplines to communicate effectively, raise awareness and build understanding of the critical importance of social and emotional skills – inspiring greater commitment, action and investment in their development during early childhood and beyond. The framework can also have a tangible impact across society by being used to design and deliver programmes and interventions, to inform decision-making and support organisational development.

1. Research indicates there are over 700 competencies that could be covered in a social and emotional learning programme (Cipriano et al., 2023) which effectively prohibits any framework or programme including all social and emotional skills

It is by prioritising and nurturing our social and emotional skills, and our relationships with others, within communities and across society, that we can build resilience and hope for the future

1. Introduction

Understanding of the factors that contribute to us living long and happy lives has evolved rapidly in recent decades (Werner, 2005).

Evidence from multiple cohort studies that follow individuals for years – often over decades – has shown that well-developed social and emotional skills are at the heart of our mental and physical health. For example, data collected by the Harvard Study of Adult Development for over 80 years has conclusively demonstrated that social connectedness – or simply put, our relationships – is a better predictor of a long and happy life than IQ, social class or even our genes (Holt-Lunstad, 2022). Forming and maintaining close, positive relationships draws on a variety of social and emotional skills such as empathy, communication, managing disagreements, and even curiosity (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). Similarly, the Dunedin Study in New Zealand has tracked over a thousand individuals since the early 1970s and has found that self-control – being able to regulate our emotions, thoughts and behaviour – is robustly associated with both our health status and overall life satisfaction as we age (Moffitt et al., 2013; Richmond-Rakerd et al., 2021).

The concept that these wide ranging social and emotional skills have their foundations in early childhood is not new (Fairbairn, 1994). Since the 1940s, researchers have worked to scientifically validate these ideas (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). There is now clear consensus that

our social and emotional development is deeply influenced by our early relationships and interactions with the people who care for us the most (Sroufe, 2005).

The association between the nurturing of social and emotional skills in early childhood and later life outcomes, however, is not straightforward (Miyamoto et al., 2015). Rather than a single skill directly influencing a certain outcome, the social and emotional skills founded in early childhood combine with factors such as cognitive skills and individual temperament and personality to result in positive outcomes. For example, in children's ability to build positive relationships with those around them and develop behaviours that allow them to be academically productive (e.g., Wright & Jackson, 2022). In turn, this combination of competencies results in academic success, and better emotional and physical health in childhood and adolescence, and contributes to positive outcomes in adulthood. In academic circles, this process is referred to as developmental cascades, or 'skills begetting skills' (Masten & Ciccetti, 2010).

Collectively, this evidence points to the importance of taking a lifecourse approach to understanding social and emotional development. Whilst it is true that our brain develops more rapidly in early childhood – from conception to age five – than at any other time in our lives (Centre for Early Childhood, 2021), the process continues through adolescence and into early adulthood (Fuhrmann et al., 2015). Moreover, as we encounter new situations and experiences at any age

in life, we continue to refine and enhance our social and emotional skills and capabilities (e.g., Fingerman et al., 2013).

Reflecting this reality, there are diverse opportunities for social and emotional learning available, whatever our stage of life. In England, for example, personal, social and emotional development is a core component of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework. This underpins the activities early childhood education and care provided to babies and children. Similar frameworks and curricular exist in the other UK nations. Social and emotional learning is also established in many primary and secondary education settings. Over the past twenty years, for example, hundreds of interventions for 4–18 year olds in the US have been evaluated as being effective in improving educational outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023). As understanding of the importance of social and emotional development continues to increase, growing numbers of programmes and other initiatives for children and young people are being rolled out in countries around the world. This has occurred not least as a result of international efforts by bodies such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and the Commonwealth Secretariat, to increase awareness of the importance of nurturing social and emotional skills and capabilities alongside physical and cognitive development, e.g., through the development of the Nurturing Care Framework (World Health Organisation et al., 2018).

Social and emotional learning also has a long history in the workplace, under the guise of personal or professional development of 'life skills', 'soft skills' or – more recently – '21st century skills' . These skills are recognised as increasingly vital for the workforce,[2] as the workplace becomes more automated through the growing sophistication of AI and advent of new technologies (Joynes et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). Equally, countries such as the US and UK have seen the rise of personal development or self-improvement cultures that typically aim to improve individual wellbeing. This cultural shift has resulted in a proliferation of apps, books, courses and other interventions such as coaching that provide instruction and support for developing or refining a range of social and emotional skills. These include building our self-awareness, our ability to manage our emotions and thoughts, to persevere and bounce back when we face challenges, and to form lasting positive relationships (Slovak & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

As social and emotional development has evolved as a topic of discussion and intervention, an increasing number of definitions and frameworks have emerged to support the varying programmes and endeavours. Over one hundred social and emotional skills frameworks now exist (Schoon et al., 2015), each designed in different contexts and for different purposes. This means each framework has different theoretical and methodological underpinnings that capture a different aspect of our social and emotional skills. A comparison of the frameworks, for example, included in the Explore SEL portal designed by the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL)

2. 21st century skills refers to a diverse set of skills that are increasingly in demand by employers and, depending on the definition, typically includes social and emotional skills such as creativity, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, team work and acceptance of others. For more information, 21st_century. pdf (publishing. service.gov.uk)

Laboratory at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, demonstrates that the most widely adopted programmes are aimed at school aged children in education settings, with a smaller proportion being focussed on early childhood or employment settings.

The diversity of frameworks and approaches has resulted in a divergence in the way people talk about social and emotional development, referring to the same concepts using different terms, but also referring to different concepts using the same terms (Jones et al., 2019). The lack of consensus about what is meant by social and emotional development is viewed – in the UK at least – as potentially impeding efforts to drive actions that support such development in early childhood and further across the lifecourse.

To address this challenge, in 2023, The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood embarked upon a global listening exercise to find a common bridge between the various lexicons of social and emotional development and to assess the level of consensus on the universally relevant skills that matter most throughout our lives, within different contexts, and across a diversity of socioeconomic and cultural contexts. We drew together experts from different disciplines, professional groups, countries and cultures to consider one question:

In your view, what are the key social and emotional skills and capabilities that develop across the lifecourse, starting and continuing from early childhood, which enable us as individuals to lead happy, healthy lives?

Using the findings of the listening exercise, we developed a draft conceptual model of social and emotional skills. We tested this with the general public until we were confident that the structure and language would be accessible to a broad audience. Full details of the development process can be found in the accompanying technical report, 'The Shaping Us Framework: Developing a conceptual model of social and emotional skills'.

The resultant Shaping Us Framework (see Chapter 3 for full details) does not intend to replace existing frameworks, but rather offers a universal way to talk about social and emotional development and growth that cuts across disciplines and reaches across audiences. It provides a foundational structure upon which individuals and organisations can design resources, interventions and programmes to build understanding and support everyone in society – in their own individual role – to nurture social and emotional development not only in early childhood but across the lifecourse (see Section 3d for more details).

The Shaping Us Framework also serves to inspire a collective shift towards recognising the vital importance of social and emotional development for our healthy and happiness as individuals, communities and society as a whole. Together, we can generate meaningful change that benefits us all.

Box 1: Diversity, equality and inclusion in social and emotional development

The Shaping Us Framework was designed with the differing ways in which children can experience and interact with the world around them in mind. As a result, the framework integrates space and flexibility to celebrate diversity across all areas of skill, health, ability, cultures and ages. The approach reflects The Centre for Early Childhood's strongly held belief that every child should exist in an environment where they feel they belong and which fosters their unique sense of self and their potential.

In childhood, our early experiences set the foundations for the rest of our lives and how we engage with and make sense of the world around us. They can shape how we view and value ourselves and how our sense of self develops. A child's development of a sense of self is dependent on the network of systems around them - their experience of relationships, caregiving, culture, education, healthcare, social interactions and beyond. If these systems work well together, they will support a child to form a strong sense of self, giving them the tools and confidence they need to make informed choices, form positive relationships and live healthy, self-directed and interconnected lives.

Such systems however, often reflect the view of the majority in any given society. Those from racial and cultural minority backgrounds, with a disability or life-limiting illness, or who are neurodivergent, may find that their strengths go unrecognised or unnurtured, and they may not be provided with the environment they need to flourish.

In order to give every child the best start in life, and to harness the potential of all members of society, it is helpful to recognise that social and emotional flourishing will look different in different people. Each of us has a different profile of strengths and challenges, and need different environments and supports in order to thrive.

2. Understanding Social and Emotional Development

We all develop social and emotional skills through our experiences and interactions from pregnancy, throughout childhood and adolescence, and across our adult life.

In early childhood, parents[3] and other caring adults play a vital role in supporting the development of these skills. Just as children need exposure to books and words, practice, as well as support and encouragement to learn to read and write, they also need parents and other caring adults to support their development of social and emotional skills.

Human development does not typically happen in a simple, linear fashion, or according to a fixed timeline. Children's skills develop through complex interrelated mechanisms and build on each other. For example, children who learn to manage their emotions are better able to focus their thoughts and nurture relationships. Social and emotional skills are also influenced by other aspects of child development, such as physical and cognitive development.

Child development is shaped by a complex interplay of individual and contextual factors within and around the child, such as their biology and health, the relationships with people close to them, and the physical, cultural and social environment they grow up in. In this chapter, we focus on relationships and interactions between parents and young children because they are most crucial factor that can influence social and emotional development in early childhood (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). However, it is vital to remember that parenting does not occur in a vacuum:

3. We recognise that in different families, cultures, and communities, it might be more common for babies and young children to be cared for by different adults. The word 'parent' in this report can refer to anyone who is in the role of a parent or carer

Parents are best able to nurture their child's social and emotional development when they have good social and emotional skills themselves, when they are healthy, and when they have the resources and support they need (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019).

When thinking about the influence of parents on child outcomes, it is important not to be deterministic: many factors play a role in early development, and even a child who has had healthy early relationships may face challenges later. As Gopnik (2016) describes, parents are not carpenters who can shape a child into very specific final product, but rather gardeners, who nurture the growth of a child in the context of other factors. Children also do not need their parents to be perfect. Science proves that children just need 'good enough' parenting and actually learn when parents do not get everything right (Winnicott, 1973).

In this chapter, the focus is on the positive ways in which parents and caring adults support children's development.

These adults also play a vital role in buffering the impact of other factors in a child's life. Parents can protect children from experiences of adversity or reduce the impact of adversity through providing nurturing care (Hambrick et al., 2019).

Parents and other close caregivers play a central role in the development of babies and very young children: they remain important throughout life, but as children get older they will also start to have influential relationships with a range of different adults. Siblings and peers play a complementary role in development, challenging and supporting children in different ways to the adults in their lives.

Examples of how social and emotional skills develop are provided on the following pages. This chapter is by no means a comprehensive account of early development; it offers illustrative examples to provide a sense of the ways in which children develop and how this is influenced by early relationships.

As all aspects of social and emotional development are interconnected, many of the parental behaviours and strategies described over the following pages support a range of skills. For example, there is a description of how parents can 'scaffold' or guide children's social interactions – but scaffolding can also support children in managing their emotions, solving problems, and in keeping going in the face of challenges. The 'serve and return' interactions described on the following pages support language development, managing emotions and relationship building.

Know ourselves
The importance of talking about thoughts and feelings

To be able to perceive and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings, children need to be able to understand and recognise feelings, and to have the words to talk about them. Understanding our own thoughts and feelings, and how we respond to the world around us, is an important element of self-awareness.

Babies start to learn about their feelings when they see how parents notice and respond to their feelings with empathy and reflect them back to the baby. For example, if a baby cries and parents show sadness in their tone and facial expression, this helps the baby in recognising their emotion (Gergely & Watson, 1996).

When parents talk about feelings, this also helps children as they start to recognise and name their own feelings. This begins when babies are very young if parents talk to them about their feelings and experiences. *"What is making you smile, is it having your tummy tickled? Does that make you feel happy?"* As children get older, they benefit from having the opportunity to talk to parents about their feelings, and to reflect together on how they are feeling and why. Through talking about feelings, parents help children to notice feelings, to label them, and to respond to them.

When parents demonstrate social and emotional skills themselves, this is known as 'modelling', and this helps children to learn. It supports children's understanding of feelings if parents talk about

their own feelings and how they deal with them, for example, *"I am starting to feel cross, so I'm just going to take a moment to walk away and calm down."*

Sharing stories together can provide extra opportunities for parents and children to talk about thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Through reading stories and talking about people in books, children can expand their vocabulary in ways that helps them to talk and think about their own thoughts and feelings (Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2011).

Understanding thoughts and feelings is an important foundation for self-awareness. Armed with this understanding, as children develop, they can begin to reflect on their own experiences, preferences, and responses to the world around them. Children gain a sense of self but also learn how to share their experiences in ways that make sense to others.

Manage our emotions
The value of co-regulation

Babies are not born with the ability to manage their emotions and calm down when they are distressed. These skills develop over early childhood as a result of having an adult who provides 'co-regulation'. Co-regulation involves supporting another person to manage big feelings and return to being calm, such as when a parent cuddles a crying baby. When parents respond to babies' emotions sensitively, warmly, and consistently, this helps children begin to learn how to manage their emotions, and supports their development (Evans and Porter, 2009).

Having a nurturing adult to provide co-regulation is a critical resource to support children's development throughout childhood. Co-regulation strategies change with age. For babies, it might involve being cuddled, sung to, and rocked; for older children, it might come through someone being a reassuring presence, modelling being calm, talking about feelings or helping with strategies such as breathing techniques. As they develop, children need less and less support from adults, and eventually they will be able to manage their emotions, in many cases without any external support.

Focus our thoughts
Learning through play

When children play, they can experience problem solving and preserving with tasks to achieve a goal. This starts when a very young baby starts trying to grasp or hit a toy, and continues as children develop and play in more complex ways. Play can help children to develop a range of skills and strategies such as focussing attention, curiosity and creativity (Russell et al., 2023).

Children can play in many ways: it can be social or solitary, and can take different forms such as pretend play, building and construction, games with rules, or physical play. Different types of play can support children's development in different ways.

Children's development is nurtured when they play in ways that offer appropriate levels of challenge. Parents support children's play when they provide spaces, resources, ideas and encouragement that enable children to play in different ways - without explicitly directing the

child's play. Children's development is best supported when they are exposed to activities that provide a level of challenge just beyond their current abilities – not too easy, and not too hard! This is also known as the 'zone of proximal development' (Podolskiy, 2012). When parents provide words of encouragement and praise, this supports children to take on and persist in the face of challenges.

When parents join in children's play, they might model problem solving, creativity, and perseverance, which also supports children's learning. This could happen when a parent talks aloud about what they are doing, sharing strategies, or persisting and trying new approaches if something does not work. When playing with children, parents can support skill development by letting their child take the lead, so the child experiences agency in their play.

Communicate with others
The importance of early interactions

Babies start to respond to parents' communications even before they are born. Babies in late pregnancy can hear sounds and may move in response to their parents talking to them. From birth, babies recognise voices they have heard during pregnancy (DeCasper & Fifer, 1980).

Parents often naturally talk to babies in a particular way, known as 'parentese' or baby talk, which is often higher pitched, slower, and more exaggerated than normal conversation. This singsong speaking style is known to capture babies' attention and help babies to tune in to the sounds within words in ways that supports language development (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2017).

Early interactions, when parents respond to babies' cues and non-verbal communications such as gaze and pointing, are the basis for communication and language development. When a baby points at something and parents look at and label it, they help to build vocabulary. Children learn best when adults respond to things they are already interested in (Tomasello & Farrar, 1986). When parents respond to babies' cues, it also provides an important moment of connection as children know they are heard and understood. This is often called 'serve and return.'

As children grow and develop, these early interactions progress into conversations, where children practice and develop their abilities and confidence to express themselves, and to listen to and understand others. These interactions support language development and are the basis of strong relationships.

Nurture our relationships
The value of scaffolding

Babies are born to be social but need to learn how to navigate the complexity of a social world. Navigating social situations can be particularly tricky for toddlers and young children, who are still developing many of the skills needed to do this. When parents provide 'scaffolding' it helps children to navigate these situations and develop more difficult skills, such as sharing and taking turns.

Scaffolding involves parents supporting children to learn concepts or skills by offering guidance at the appropriate time. It involves being led

by a child and supporting them in their activities and interactions, rather than being directive or providing instructions. Scaffolding has been shown to play a role in helping children in their social interactions (Williams & Ontai, 2010).

Physical scaffolding is put around a building when it is developing, and removed as the building can support itself. Similarly, scaffolding in early development involves stepping back and giving children space when their skills are improving, so they can experience independence and grow in confidence.

When parents help a child to notice or understand things about a social interaction, they are providing scaffolding. For example, they might say, *"Look how Jude is smiling, he really likes playing with your train."* Or *"Mya looks sad, do you think she was upset when her tower got knocked over? What could we do to help her?"*

Parents can also facilitate social interactions between children, providing cues, prompts and encouragement that helps them to connect with others. For example, *"Look at Alife's fire engine, I think maybe he likes vehicles just like you do. Maybe you could show him your police car?"* When parents offer praise and acknowledgement in response to children interacting in positive ways, this further supports the children's growing confidence.

Modelling can be part of supporting children's social development. A parent might ask, *"Can I play?"* to support children who are learning how to join in and play with others.

Explore the world
Having a secure base

When babies have experienced nurturing care, and learned that their parent or caregiver can be relied upon to look after them, they see their relationship as a 'secure base' – a place where they can feel loved, safe, secure and protected (Bowlby, 1988). Knowing they can rely on their parent for support and protection, children have more confidence to explore the world around them. Children who see their parent as a secure base will also use their parents for safety and security if things do get scary or challenging. A toddler might return to a parent for a cuddle or reach out to hold their hand, to help them as they face a new experience.

A child is more likely to feel comfortable exploring new places and spaces, and taking on new challenges, if their parent provides them with words and cues of reassurance; that their parent is watching them over them, providing help if needed, and enjoying the experience with them: *"Go on Hallie, you can do this. I'll be right here watching… Well done, I'm so proud that you joined in the game".* A child is more likely to feel confident exploring if they see their parent encouraging their exploration and giving positive feedback, and if they believe their parent will provide protection and comfort if they need it.

Exploring the world might start with a baby crawling away from their parent to reach a toy at a toddler group, and will become more significant as a child gets older. A child will feel happy to explore when they know they can return to their parents for reassurance and support when they need it. With this knowledge, they can become increasingly independent.

The Centre for Early Childhood's

3. Shaping Us Social and Emotional Skills Framework

a. The Shaping Us Framework

The Shaping Us Framework is a conceptual model of the social and emotional skills that shape the way we think, feel and behave in our everyday lives. It comprises thirty social and emotional skills grouped into six clusters or domains.

A visual representation of the framework is provided overleaf.

For each cluster, we have set out a practical description along with a summary of the evidence about the nature of each individual skill, how it develops, and why it is important for our health and wellbeing in later life. You can find these descriptions in the Skills Library.

The **Shaping Us** Framework

Understanding the social and emotional skills that matter most

Know ourselves
Who we are as individuals

- Understand our own thoughts, feelings and beliefs
- Take charge of our life
- Have hopes for our future

Manage our emotions
How we understand, process and manage our emotions

- Understand our own and others' emotions
- Have ways to manage our emotions

Focus our thoughts
How we effectively learn, work and manage in life

- Focus our attention
- Be aware of and direct our thoughts
- Weigh up information
- Make decisions that are right for ourselves and for others
- Solve problems
- Pause before we act
- Be flexible
- Keep going
- Bounce back

Communicate with others
How we receive and share feelings, thoughts and information

- Listen to and understand others
- Express ourselves

Nurture our relationships
How we get along and build relationships with others

- Accept others for who they are
- Understand and feel someone else's emotions
- Understand what someone might be thinking
- Be kind
- Give freely
- Get on with others
- Build positive relationships
- Love and be loved
- Work well with others
- Set and respect boundaries
- Manage conflict

Explore the world
How we explore and discover the world around us

- Be creative
- Be curious
- Feel joy

b. Definitions

Based on the design of the framework, we developed a series of definitions that offer a consistent way of talking about social and emotional skills across the lifecourse. These definitions were tested with the public who found them easy to understand and informative (see Section 3c for more details of the framework and definition development process).

Social and emotional skills

Social and emotional skills are two groups of closely related skills that shape who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate with and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us. These are the foundations of a happy, healthy life.

Social and emotional development

Social and emotional development is the process of nurturing two groups of closely related skills in childhood and adolescence that shapes who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate with and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us. These are the foundations of a happy, healthy life.

Social and emotional growth

Social and emotional growth is the enhancement and refinement in adulthood of two groups of closely related skills that have their roots in early childhood which shape who we are, how we manage our emotions and thoughts, how we communicate with and relate to others, and how we explore the world around us. These are the foundations of a happy, healthy life.

It is important to note that while we refer to the goal of having a happy, healthy life, for some people achieving either can be difficult.

For example, people living with a life-limiting illness or condition may not consider themselves as having a healthy life. For others who may struggle with their mental health for many different reasons, happiness may also feel out of reach. Nonetheless, with the right support, those facing the most intense challenges can still find moments of satisfaction, contentment, joy and happiness.

c. How the Shaping Us Framework was developed

The framework was developed through a global listening exercise which was undertaken by the Centre for Early Childhood and supported by an advisory group. This group was set up to provide expert guidance on the Delphi Study process and inputted into the framework refinement (see Acknowledgements for details of the study advisory group members).

The development process comprised two phases:

1. **A Delphi Study.** The first phase involved a two-round Delphi study (a consultation and prioritisation process) that involved more than one hundred academic, clinical and practitioner experts in human development from 21 countries around the world. Seventy-two experts completed the first-round survey in July 2023 answering a single open-text question:

> In your view, what are the key social and emotional skills and capabilities that develop across the lifecourse, starting and continuing from early childhood, which enable us as individuals to lead happy, healthy lives?
>
> Please use the spaces below to provide:
>
> **1) a short description or definition** of up to 100 words for a maximum of ten skills or capabilities.
>
> **2) a term that you would use as a label** of up to 5 words for each skill or capability you describe.

Following review of the coded survey responses, internally and by the Delphi study advisory group, a final list of skills along with a consensus description based on the first-round survey responses was produced. These skills were tested in the second-round survey circulated in August 2023. Eighty-four experts completed the second-round survey: this was designed to ascertain how important each of the skills tested were in shaping humans and our lives on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 9 (very important). The results from the second-round survey and feedback from the study advisory group were used to create a draft framework.

2. **Public language testing.** The Centre for Early Childhood commissioned Savanta, an independent research agency in the UK, to qualitatively test the language and structure of the draft framework with members of the general public in the UK through two online community platforms that took place in October 2023 and February 2024. Insights from this public testing, alongside further discussion with experts, informed refinement of the framework.

Full details of the process of developing the framework can be found in the accompanying technical report 'The Shaping Us Framework: Developing a conceptual model of social and emotional skills', which is available on the Centre for Early Childhood website.

d. How to use the Shaping Us Framework

The Shaping Us Framework sets out a universal approach to understanding the core social and emotional skills which we must nurture in ourselves and one another if we are to realise our vision of building a happier, healthier society.

This new conceptual model does not intend to replace existing frameworks, but rather offers a flexible foundation for individuals and organisations across society – from health professionals, to employers and decision-makers – to use in their context and role. The Shaping Us Framework can be used:

- **To raise awareness.** Consistent language is the cornerstone of being able to communicate effectively with a broad audience – including families and communities, community organisations, health, social care, and education practitioners, decision-makers and business – about what social and emotional skills are and why they matter to us as individuals, communities and as a society. With this in mind, we suggest the use of the general definitions (see Section 3b) of social and emotional development, growth and skills in communications and resources. The more we can speak with one voice on the importance of these skills, the greater chance we have of strengthening the narrative about their vital importance across society.

- **To build understanding**. It is important to recognise that language is a complex phenomenon which often leaves people understanding terms such as empathy or creativity differently. This means we can find ourselves talking about something that another person does not understand, or might understand

differently from what we mean. This can hinder the effective knowledge transfer. As a result of testing with the general public, this framework provides a way of talking about social and emotional clusters and individual skills that we are confident will be accessible to a wide range of people, from families and communities to practitioners and decision-makers. This will enable us to build a shared understanding of social and emotional development across society.

- **To promote conversation.** The framework can support conversations with and between children, parents, wider families and communities about their social and emotional skills, and what they can do to develop and grow these skills in themselves, and in the children they care about. For example, midwives, health visitors, parenting practitioners and early educators can use the framework as they talk to parents about children's development.

- **To design and deliver programmes and interventions**. Our intention is that the Shaping Us Framework can be used as a basis for design work, for example when developing campaigns to engage specific audiences or to inform the development of funding calls or interventions. The framework is intended to be a high-level model that flexes depending on a programme or intervention's aims and audience. For example, a young people's mental health programme that is designed around building social and emotional skills may focus on different skills within the framework than a corporate leadership or mentoring programme, but each programme can still be grounded in the broader understanding of social and emotional development set out in the Shaping Us Framework.

- **To inform decision-making.** Similarly to programme and system development, the Shaping Us Framework can be used as an organising tool for decision-makers at local, regional and national levels and among different agencies as they develop system-wide responses to support social and emotional development.

- **To support organisational development**. People are the fabric of any organisation, and the social and emotional skills in this framework are central to nurturing workforce wellbeing as well as performance. The Shaping Us Framework can be used to inform wellbeing programmes, capability frameworks, team building, recruitment processes, human resources activities, and professional development strategies.

4. Conclusion

The importance of cultivating social and emotional skills from early childhood throughout life has never been clearer. These skills are essential not only for individual wellbeing but also for the flourishing of our communities and societies as a whole.

Decades of research underscore the critical role of social and emotional skills across various aspects of life. Most recently, social and emotional skills, such as being able to forge and maintain positive relationships, being creative, and being flexible, are recognised as essential in the workplace for navigating the rapidly changing and increasingly technology-driven world around us. This shift towards what is often termed 'personal development' reflects a broader cultural movement, empowering individuals to enhance their self-awareness and tackle life's challenges with confidence.

However, the multitude of frameworks and terminologies related to social and emotional development can lead to confusion, and can make it difficult to talk about social and emotional skills in ways that resonate with all audiences across society.

The Shaping Us Framework offers an inclusive approach to understanding these vital abilities, emphasising our collective potential to connect, grow, and thrive together. The framework's strength lies in its universality and flexibility – allowing a diversity of individuals and organisations to use it as a foundational structure for resources and interventions that meet the needs of their particular audience.

The Shaping Us Framework has been designed to inspire meaningful action across society to nurture social and emotional development, and our goal is to create a tangible impact in the real world.

To this end, we invite everyone to engage meaningfully with the framework and make a collective commitment to the development of these vital skills.

As we each have a different role to play in the endeavour, we will each use the Shaping Us Framework in our own way. Early educators, for example, may use the framework to review their activities and understand where there are opportunities to do more to strengthen different areas of children's development. It could be used by health visitors and parenting practitioners to talk to families about their children's early development, and how parents nurture children's different social and emotional skills. Employers might use the framework to think about how the skills of their workforce and how these can be enhanced through professional development.

At The Royal Foundation for Centre for Early Childhood, the Shaping Us Framework will underpin all our collective work with partners across society, to raise awareness of and build understanding of social and emotional development in early childhood. In doing so, together we can build the foundations of a nurturing society in which every individual has the opportunity to thrive.

5. Skills Library

The skills library is intended to be used as a source of information about each of the six clusters and the thirty skills within the Shaping Us Framework.

The description of each skill aims to offer a short overview of:

- What the skill is
- How the skill may be related to other social and emotional skills, in recognition of the interconnection between many skills and concepts
- How the skill is developed from early childhood onwards
- The importance of the skill for a range of outcomes in later life

The descriptions address each of these points to a varying degree based on the aspects of the skill that was considered most important to include and the strength of available evidence.

Know
ourselves

Who we are as individuals

These skills enable us to work out who we are in relation to ourselves, to other people and to the world around us. It involves knowing simple things such as what music we prefer, to being aware of how we respond in certain situations or what we feel is important in life. This knowledge can help build a picture of the life we want to have and how to get there.

The skills are:

- Understand our own thoughts, feelings and beliefs
- Take charge of our life
- Have hopes for our future

Understand our own thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions

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The ability to perceive and reflect on our own thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and actions is what is technically called 'self-awareness' (CASEL, 2020; Duval & Wickland, 1972; Rochat, 2003; Sutton, 2016).

While very young children have some understanding of the 'self', for example a baby recognising themselves in a mirror, self-awareness develops rapidly from the age of two thoughout childhood in an ever-evolving and dynamic process of reflection, observation and learning (Kagan, 1998; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Rochat, 2003; 2021).

Self-awareness contributes to children being able to recognise their own strengths, to understand themselves across different contexts, and to get along with others (Carro et al., 2022; CASEL, 2020; Fenigstein et al., 1975; Ickes et al., 1973; Rochat, 2021; Silvia & Duval, 2001).

As such, it has been described as 'a tool and a goal', that is a key mechanism through which other developmentally desirable outcomes can be reached (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Sutton et al., 2016). In the longer term, self-awareness is associated with positive mental health, goal setting, and leadership in workplace success (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Kreibeich et al., 2020; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023; Steffens et al., 2021; Sutton et al., 2016).

Take charge of your life

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You may know a toddler who likes to insist on doing things a particular way: maybe wearing a fireman's hat wherever they go, always eating dinner off their dinosaur plate, or wearing their sparkly t-shirt, even when it needs a wash! These are examples of young children starting to develop a sense of control – or 'agency' – over their life. In doing so, they exert their influence on the world: exercising personal preferences and desires, contributing to cause-and-effect relationships, and influencing their own experiences and learning.

Evidence suggests that agency begins early in infancy as newborns begin linking their actions to specific effects in the physical world (shaking a rattle to elicit a sound) and among loved ones (crying to summon a caregiver's attention). However questions persist about exactly which newborn behaviours are intentional (as opposed to reflexive), making agency's precise start difficult to pinpoint (Bednarski et al., 2022). What is clear is that agency explodes in toddlerhood as intentionality meets growing capacity. As toddlers become increasingly playful and mobile they delight in exerting themselves upon their environments and often enter phases in which they insist on doing virtually everything for themselves. These opportunities to exercise agency help children to "develop, demonstrate and refine sophisticated knowledge-making skills that are essential to their learning and growth" (Jones et al., 2023).

Have hopes for the future

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"What would you like to be when you grow up?" Many of us were asked this question as children. Having hopes or dreams for your life – technically called 'aspiration' – can be defined as being able to identify goals for oneself in the future, to take steps in the present toward achieving them, and (according to some theorists) be motivated to continue pursuing those goals (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2022; Niemiec et al., 2009; Snyder, 2002). We do not necessarily need to know what we will be when we grow up – many adults still are not sure! – but many of us still have some hopes and goals that we are working towards in the medium and longer term.

Aspiration is associated with many other concepts that spark a sense of ambition to strive for something greater, including self-efficacy, goal setting, optimism, hope, and motivation (Bandura, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Snyder et al., 2002). Aspirations are deeply influenced by one's environment, including peers and parents who provide support and shape expectations, as well as an individual's wants and preferences (e.g., Appadurai, 2004; Carranza et al., 2009; Sun & Shek, 2012; Rose & Baird, 2013; Hart et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2017; Lawson et al., 2020).

Aspiration helps children and teenagers to 'think big' and build the lives that they desire. Aspiring toward goals, whether personal, academic, or professional, shapes behaviour throughout development and is associated with higher levels of achievement and satisfaction across the lifecourse (Martela et al., 2019; McBride, 2010; Niemiec et al., 2009). However, children who, for example, are neurodivergent, have a disability, or live in socioeconomically deprived circumstances, may find their aspirations restricted by how their abilities are perceived by mainstream society or their environment.

Manage
our emotions

How we understand, process and manage our emotions

These skills mean we can deal with how we feel as we go through life, especially when facing situations that can cause emotions to run high. We might know that, for us as an individual, having trouble concentrating, feeling like our heart is pounding in our chest, or feeling physically sick might mean we are feeling very worried. Beyond that, we have words to describe how we are feeling, and perhaps someone we can talk to, and we know what helps us as individuals – maybe taking a short walk or spending time with friends – to cope with these feelings.

The skills are:

- Understand our own and others' emotions
- Have ways to manage our emotions

# Understand our own and others' emotions

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Happiness, sadness, anger and fear are common emotions. Can you tell when you are feeling each of them? What it feels like in your body? How you tend to act? Being able to recognise, name, and generally understand distinct emotions in yourself and others is referred to as 'emotion knowledge' (Denham et al., 2016; Izard et al., 2001; Morgan et al., 2010).

This ability equips people to differentiate between the emotions of oneself and of others, to make sense of complex emotional experiences (like feeling multiple emotions at once) and to process interpersonal information to inform interactions (Denham et al., 2015; Denham et al., 2016; 1994; Pons et al., 2004).

While evidence of this skill is found in early infancy, emotion knowledge develops rapidly between the ages of two and five (Bennet et al., 2005; Denham, 2019; Trevarthen, 2011) and refines throughout life as we navigate the complexities of the social world (Izard et al., 2011; Pons et al., 2004). Being able to recognise, name, and understand emotions has been found to predict children's ability to get along with others in social situations, engagement in school, and academic performance (Cavadini et al., 2021; Izard et al., 2001; Nix et al., 2013; Trentacosta & Fine, 2010; Voltmer & von Salisch, 2017).

Have ways to manage our emotions

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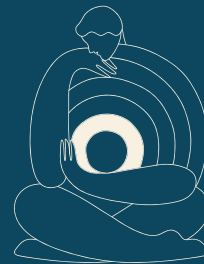
Have you ever felt really angry when a car suddenly pulls out in front of you? Lots of people would feel angry, shocked or frightened (or maybe all three), and most would be able to manage their emotions and calm themselves down relatively quickly. Being able to manage your emotions is often referred to as 'emotional regulation'. This includes influencing the intensity or frequency of an emotion, as well as the experience and expression of emotions (Gross, 2015).

A person who is able to regulate their emotions will use helpful strategies to soothe themselves when they experience strong emotions. For example, they may engage in 'self-talk', where they manage their feelings through rationalising them or practicing acceptance. They may use physical strategies such as deep breathing, or social strategies such as seeking support and comfort from others. There are also less helpful strategies, such as attempting to supress one's emotions, including by consuming alcohol or drugs.

Having ways to manage your emotions in early childhood has been identified as a predictor of resilience under adverse conditions, successful navigation of upcoming challenges, reduced risk for externalising behaviours, and reduced impulsivity in later childhood (Troy & Mauss, 2011). The ability to manage one's feelings is not fixed, and we can continue to develop this skill throughout our lives. One study found that skills in emotion management improve for young people following psychological interventions for mental health difficulties (Daros et al., 2021).

Focus
our thoughts

How we effectively learn, work and manage in life

These skills support us to manage day-to-day life and the variety and range of tasks we need to navigate. This includes tasks we engage in a lot of the time, such as weekly food shopping. This might involve focussing on what meals we want to cook so we can write a shopping list, deciding what to buy, choosing an alternative if what you want has sold out – and stopping yourself from buying only ice cream. It also includes much more complex tasks such as taking exams, managing a large work project, moving home, or coping with the practical aspects of a loved one's death.

The skills are:

- Focus our attention
- Be aware of and direct our thoughts
- Weigh up information
- Make decisions that are right for ourselves and others
- Solve problems
- Pause before we act
- Be flexible
- Keep going
- Bounce back

Focus our attention

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How are you getting on reading this report? Is it holding your attention? Are you sure you know what attention is? Back in 1890, the psychologist and philosopher William James declared: *"Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what may seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought … It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others."* (James, 1890). Simply put, it means being able to process information by tuning out other information, but – as with many psychological concepts – attention remains contested and without a single agreed definition (Lindsay, 2020).

Being able to maintain focus is critical to many social and emotional skills. For example, sustaining attention is a vital component of communicating with others as we need to focus on what is being shared with us. Research has shown that being able to voluntarily direct and control our attention is associated with the ability to manage emotions, i.e. by enabling us to direct our attention away from upsetting or threatening stimuli (Derryberry & Reed, 2002).

Reduced attentional control – resulting in both not being able to focus as well as hyperfocus - is often associated with conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism (Ashinoff & Abu-Akel, 2021; Henry et al., 2020). More generally there are concerns that our ability to focus our attention has diminished with the advent of the internet and the increased pace of life, however research has not been conducted to test this (Duffy & Thain, 2022).

Be aware of and direct our thoughts

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Organising and coordinating our thoughts are important skills, which help us to understand ourselves, navigate the world, and pursue our goals. These skills are sometimes known as cognitive control.

Cognitive control happens when we engage 'top down' control of our thoughts rather than relying on 'bottom up' processes like impulses and knee-jerk reactions. Cognitive control also allows us to filter out distractions and pay attention to particular thoughts.

Cognitive control is closely related to the set of skills known as 'executive functions' which develop in early childhood (Hendry et al., 2016). Our brain is like a busy airport, full of thoughts, emotions and experiences. Executive function skills are like the air traffic control system that helps us plan and control our responses, and juggle multiple tasks to achieve our goals (Harvard Centre for the Developing Child, 2011).

More complex executive function skills (such as metacognition) develop rapidly from the preschool years onwards. Metacognition, put simply, is thinking about thinking; It includes knowledge of our thoughts, and regulation of our thoughts. Between the ages of three and seven, children become more able to describe, be aware of, and use their thinking. Adults can support the development of metacognition by talking about thoughts and helping children to reflect on their thinking.

Throughout childhood, children also start to understand more about the link between thoughts, behaviours and emotions. As we get older, we learn that changing our thought patterns can influence our behaviours and emotions (Mischel & Mischel, 1987, McCoy & Masters, 1985).

Weigh up information

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Being able to weigh up information – or 'think critically' – is an important component of other skills in our model, such as making decisions or finding a solution to a problem. Critical thinking is purposeful and draws on a range of skills such as being able to analyse, interpret and evaluate information, as well as being connected to less obvious skills such as creativity (Bailin, 2002; Paul & Elder, 2006; Halpern, 2014; Facione, 2015). Critical thinking is also seen as relying on dispositions such as open mindedness, inquisitiveness and flexibility (Facione et al., 1995).

There is evidence that children as young as three or four years old can think critically, for example evaluating different sources of information, and that our skills in this area develop over time and can be improved with specific training or instruction (Koenig & Harris, 2005). However, many experts in this field suggest that, in normal daily life, critical thinking among most children and adults is poor, at least in the contexts that have been studied. One reason for this is that humans are programmed to seek out patterns that incline them towards explanations that make the most intuitive sense – often relying on personal experience – rather than seeking out alternative possibilities (Perkins, 1985; Van Gelder, 2001).

Improving critical thinking skills is important given the evidence that they support academic performance, active citizen involvement, and employability (National Academies, 2007; Barton & McCully, 2007; Holmes & Clizbe, 1997). In terms of employability, critical thinking skills are viewed as increasingly important in enabling people to cope with the constant generation of new information (Dwyer et al., 2014).

Make decisions that are right for ourselves and others

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Decision-making is a complex skill that shapes our lives in both mundane and magnificent ways. Imagine deciding what to do for a career, or even what to have for lunch. Theoretically, you will identify an aim or desired outcome, determine a set of options related to that aim, collect information to be able to compare options, and select the option that aligns most closely with your intended outcome (Beyth-Marmom et al., 1987; Byrnes, 2002). Of course, the process will also be influenced by other factors, including decision type, surrounding circumstances and individual characteristics (Appelt et al., 2011; Beyth-Marmom et al., 1987; Byrnes, 2002; Delgado et al., 2024; Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002).

Learning from our mistakes and incorporating that new knowledge into future decision-making is another key element of this skill (Byrnes, 2002; Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002). All decision-making skills strengthen as we age and develop: while young children make decisions, it is in later childhood and adolescence that we gain the experience, knowledge, and refined cognitive, regulatory processes that drive and enhance this skill (Jacobs & Narloc, 2001; Byrnes, 2002; Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002; Best et al., 2011; Diamond 2013; Bruine de Bruin & Parker, 2016; Bailey & Jones et al., 2019).

Decision-making skills are associated with the ability to assess ethical and safety concerns (CASEL, 2020), engage in less risk-taking behaviour (Parker et al., 2018), and experience greater psychosocial wellbeing (Páez-Gallego & Gallardo-López, 2020).

Solve problems

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From solving a difficult puzzle to navigating a challenging social situation – a disagreement with a friend, for example – we use problem solving skills throughout our lives. Problem solving can be thought of as the ways we find solutions to a problem by planning ahead, strategising, looking or asking for help, and/or using our existing strategies in a different way. Problem solving is related to (but distinct from) critical thinking skills: critical thinking can be used as a means of problem solving, but not all problem solving involves critical thinking.

There is growing evidence that children universally develop problem solving skills as a result of their experiences, and this is enhanced by adults modelling or providing guidance on how to solve a problem (e.g., Brown et al., 1988). Problem solving has been positively linked to academic success at school, university students' psychosocial functioning and academic performance, and career advancement in adulthood (Baker et al., 2003; Adachi et al., 2013; Mainert et al., 2015). However, there is currently very little evidence of how problem solving skills in early childhood are associated with outcomes in later life.

Pause before we act

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The ability to stop ourselves from doing something – or at least take a moment and think before we act – is often called 'impulse control'. It is hard for all of us to sit in front on an enticing treat, without being able to reach out and eat it. This is particularly difficult for young children.

Famous tasks such as the marshmallow task, which looks at whether children can resist the urge to eat one marshmallow now in exchange for four marshmallows later (Mischel et al., 1989), have popularised the idea that impulse control is important and predictive of a range of long-term child outcomes (Moffitt et al., 2011). However, we are increasingly realising that rating a child as either good or less good at impulse control may be overly simplistic. Other factors, such as desire and motivation, and even how often and how recently a child has performed the action, can all influence how good a child is at controlling a particular impulse at a particular time. Because of this, impulse control is heavily context-specific in ways we're only just beginning to understand.

Be
flexible

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Imagine a five-year-old coming out of school to find that it is raining heavily and the planned trip to the playground is cancelled. The child becomes frustrated as they were looking forward to the trip, but after listening to their parent's suggestions of what they can do instead, they choose a new indoor activity, like building a den or drawing a picture.

This is an example of being flexible. Psychological flexibility is scientifically defined as the capacity to adjust to situational demands, shift perspectives, and balance competing needs which helps us to cope with difficult situations (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Flexibility develops rapidly in early childhood and is closely linked with other skills, such as having ways to manage our emotions and being able to focus our thoughts (Buttelmann & Karbach, 2017; Doorley et al., 2020).

The ability to flex and adapt is considered important in humans as the environment around us is in constant flux, which frequently requires us to overcome unexpected challenges (Aldao et al., 2015). Being flexible is therefore linked with later life outcomes such as academic achievement in primary and secondary school aged children, and overall wellbeing in adults (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Masuda et al., 2011; Yenaid et al., 2013).

Psychological flexibility can be challenging for people who are highly sensitive to their surroundings, or respond to external stimuli in a particular way. This challenge can be experienced by people who are neurodivergent and who may feel as though they need to constantly 'mask' their feelings, thoughts and behaviour in order to fit in with social norms. This can result in stress and exhaustion , as well as exacerbating mental health issues and creating social strain (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017).

Keep going

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A baby trying repeatedly to stack blocks into a tower, a child grappling with a tricky maths puzzle, an adult pursuing long-term career goals: these are all examples of the ability to keep going towards a goal despite difficulties, or 'persevering'.

Perseverance is strongly associated with conscientiousness, with people high in conscientiousness typically being disciplined, dependable, and goal-directed (Credé et al., 2017). It is also closely related to (and often used interchangeably) with several other psychological concepts such as persistence, resilience and self-control, and in recent years has become synonymous with the term 'grit', although differences do exist (Khindri & Rangnekar, 2022; Moffitt et al., 2011). Grit is defined as equally combining passion with perseverance in the service of a long-term goal (Duckworth et al., 2007). Some academics, however, have suggested that the positive outcomes that people with more grit achieve are explained primarily by their ability to persevere rather than their passion (e.g., Credé et al., 2017; Disabato et al., 2019; Jachimowicz et al., 2018).

Research has demonstrated the importance of perseverance in multiple areas of life including academic and workplace performance, mental wellbeing and life satisfaction (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, 2016; Newman et al., 2019; Oriol et al., 2017; Van Doren et al., 2019).

Bounce back

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Have you ever wondered how some people seem to bounce back from a significantly difficult experience – for example, living in an area of war or conflict, or having a life-threatening illness – and go on to do well in life? The concept of bouncing back or 'resilience' refers to the process of adapting, changing and reorganising whilst coping with significant adversity and going on to thrive (Denckla et al., 2020; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Garzemy, 1985; Popham et al., 2021; Walker, 2020).

In line with current thinking on mental health more broadly, resilience in children is viewed not just as individual trait or skill but as the result of interdependent systems "within the child (immune system, stress response system, etc.), in relationships or family resilience, or in the larger sociocultural and ecological systems in which that child's life and development are embedded" (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016, p.276).

Resilience is strongly associated with positive mental health in children and young people, as well as being shown to predict wellbeing in adults, and both physical and mental health in later life (e.g., Mayordomo et al., 2016; Mesman et al., 2021; Taylor & Carr, 2021). Most recently, this was observed during the Covid-19 pandemic when resilience was associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety in young people (e.g., Liu et al., 2020).

Communicate
with others

How we receive and share feelings, thoughts and information

These skills provide a foundation for many other social and emotional skills by allowing us to understand what others share with us – a friend messaging information about where to meet up, a partner sharing their feelings about a great day, a singer expressing heartbreak through their music – as well as being able to share ourselves with the world. This means expressing who we are in many different ways to effectively share what we know, how we are feeling, and what we are thinking with the people around us.

The skills are:

- Listen to and understand others
- Express ourselves

Listen to and understand others

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"Are you free later?" Stop for a moment and think about hearing those words. What might you make of them? How do you process and respond to them?

Listening forms the foundation of all our communication skills. We learn to listen before learning to speak, read and write, and we typically spend more time listening than speaking, reading and writing combined (Purdy, 1997). Yet equal emphasis is rarely placed on our ability to listen, partly because we often forget that it is a learned skill.

Listening is an active and dynamic process that involves multiple other – mainly cognitive – skills, including focussing and sustaining our attention, understanding what is being conveyed (both verbal and non-verbal), remembering what is being shared so that we can respond, interpreting the message and its meaning (including any inferred or hidden meaning), and responding in a way that lets the speaker know how we have understood or interpreted what they have said (Bronwell, 2018; Drollinger et al., 2006; Purdy, 1997).

Listening, combined with being able to express ourselves, allows an exchange of information that is fundamental to our personal and professional relationships. Listening to and having a shared focus with another person connects us to them. It helps people to feel understood and valued, to be validated and empowered. In turn, this allows trust to flourish (Bronwell, 2018). Research has found that listening skills are associated with both professional performance, ranging from increased sales to improved patient satisfaction with their doctor, as well as safety and wellbeing at work (Jonsdottir & Fridriksdottir, 2019; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022).

Express ourselves

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How we express ourselves goes far beyond the words we use. Consider babies and toddlers and how they communicate before the emergence of conventional spoken language. From their cries and their coos, to their eye contact, facial expressions and gestures, babies convey meaning to the significant adults in their lives from birth (Määttä et al., 2012). As language – which includes a variety of expression including spoken and signed communication - emerges, children's verbal abilities are critical to the emergence of social and emotional competence, permitting young children to problem solve and solicit the adult supports necessary to help them overcome frustrations and interpersonal conflicts in emotionally healthy ways. We continue to use both verbal and nonverbal communication throughout our lives (Buckley, 2003), including eye gaze, vocalisations and body language, and – for some people – signed communication. Sometimes non-verbal communication is the last capacity we lose as we come towards the end of life.

Critically, babies and children learn to communicate not just by listening but through social interaction (Beuker et al., 2013), for example, adults sensitively responding to children when they do communicate helps to affirm the two-way joint nature of these exchanges. Given the vital importance of the early acquisition of communication skills for all aspects of human development, there is growing concern about "technoference" (technology-based interference, such as an adult looking at a smart phone during a conversation) impeding children's communication skill development by reducing critical child–caregiver interactions (e.g., Buckley, 2003; Rautakoski, et. al., 2021; Brushe et al., 2024).

Nurture our relationships

How we get along and build relationships with others

These skills enable us to get along with people in lots of different situations: the person standing next to you waiting for the bus, or the healthcare receptionist, the people you see regularly such as school friends or work colleagues, or the family and close friends that you have a deep connection with. The skills include helping us to make and maintain positive connections with others, even when we might disagree.

The skills are:

- Accept others for who they are
- Understand and feel someone else's emotions

- Understand what someone might be thinking
- Be kind
- Give freely
- Get on with others

- Build positive relationships
- Love and be loved
- Work well with others
- Set and respect boundaries
- Manage conflict

Accept others for who they are

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Young children will sometimes notice people around them that look, sound or behave differently from them. Maybe they have different colour skin or hair, they might speak a different language or have a different accent, or maybe they dress differently from most other people the child has contact with. This is typical during preschool years when children's awareness of others emerges. Importantly, their acceptance of people who are different from them is more easily influenced in early childhood than in later years (Kwon et al., 2017).

Acceptance of others who are different from oneself is closely connected with perspective-taking and empathy in the academic literature (Decety, 2007; Shih et al., 2009). However, there is also a growing literature on the relationship between self-compassion – which involves accepting your own imperfections as a human – and accepting others as they are, even if they make mistakes (Zhang et al., 2019).

Understanding of how to develop acceptance of others is growing. For example, recent research has shown that people who have direct contact with diverse groups of people, and who experience firsthand variations, for example, in ethnic background, gender identity and ability, are more likely to have a positive attitude towards them as they have better understanding of and greater sensitivity to them (Kwon et al., 2017).

Understand and feel someone else's emotions

"I feel your pain". A common expression in the English language, this figure of speech refers to the concept of 'empathy'. Empathy is technically defined as "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and that is identical or quite similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel" (Eisenberg et al., 2015, p. 611). In everyday language this means relating to the emotion that another person is feeling or you would expect them to feel in a certain situation. It is distinct from sympathy, which describes feeling sad or concerned about a person, or compassion, which relates to witnessing someone else suffering and wanting to help them (ibid).

Historically, empathy was considered a personality trait, but over time research has shown that it is a teachable skill. In childhood, parents can help to support the development of empathy by empathising with their child, e.g., helping them to identify and name their emotions which can help the child to feel their emotions are validated, and modelling empathetic responses of their own. Later in life, there is evidence that training programmes for healthcare professionals, for example, can increase empathy, which is viewed as critical to delivering quality healthcare (Riess, 2017; Han & Pappas, 2018).

Understand what someone might be thinking

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"I wonder why she hasn't replied?" Have you ever thought that to yourself when you're waiting for a friend to answer an invitation to meet up? Maybe they are too busy, or too tired after work, or maybe upset by something you said the last time you spoke. This is called 'mentalisation', which means the ability to imagine another person's mental states, including their needs, thoughts, feelings, and goals. Mentalisation also helps us to understand our own mental state (Fonagy & Allison, 2013).

The ability to understand oneself and see the perspective of others is a fundamental skill that enables people to navigate the complex social world around them (Luten et al., 2020). It is argued that the ability to mentalise stems largely from our experiences of caregivers displaying their emotional response to a baby's experience (Fonagy & Luyten, 2018).

Children who can imagine how other people are thinking and feeling have been found to be more helpful, cooperative, and comforting (Imuta et al., 2016). Improving mentalisation skills has been shown to improve a wide range of outcomes in relation to problems such as depression, personality disorders and self-harm (Bateman et al., 2021; Hajek Gross et al., 2024).

Be
kind

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Kindness is simultaneously a simple yet complex term. You probably know what it means without too much thought, but once you start to reflect on what kindness is it becomes less clear. Is it a skill? A behaviour? A value? A virtue? A trait? Opinion is divided on this among those who view it as a trait, a value or virtue, or a behaviour (e.g., Canter et al., 2017; Malti, 2021; Youngs et al., 2023). Researchers who have attempted to conceptualise or design measures of kindness have identified distinct aspects of kindness, e.g., a core kindness connected with broad acceptance and love of others, a more personalised reactive consideration of other people and their feelings, and proactive, altruistic behaviour (e.g., Canter et al., 2017). Put simply, it is about being caring towards others and also to ourselves.

Being kind comes in many different forms, such as helping someone with directions if lost or checking in on a friend who might not be feeling well. Being kind to others as a broad concept is associated with increased wellbeing; It has a positive impact on the mental health of both the person who is kind, and the person they are being kind to (e.g., Hui et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2012). There are many ways in which someone being kind might have a positive effect on them personally: it can improve our mood, buffer the negative effects of stress, and help strengthen our connections with others, which is fundamental to our physical and mental wellbeing (Aknin et al., 2018; Poulin & Holman, 2013; Helliwell et al., 2017).

Give freely

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Giving comes in many forms. On a day-to-day basis we might give – our time, attention, support, encouragement and/or resources - to others, for example, by going out of our way to spend time with a friend who is struggling, by sorting out pre-loved baby clothes and equipment to give to a baby bank, or by regularly volunteering with a local community group. All these actions are examples of people being generous, which can be defined as "the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly" (University of Notre Dame, 2024).

Generosity has been shown to start early in life. Many different factors including personality, levels of empathy, religious beliefs and seeing generosity being modelled, influence how generous someone grows up to be (Allen, 2018). Whilst humans have instincts for both selfish and generous behaviour, there are many potential motivators for acting in a way that benefits others.

A key evolutionary theory is that generosity was a necessary ingredient in cooperative social systems that enabled the survival of early humans, and which continues to be highly relevant today (ibid). Other research has shown that giving to others makes you happy and increases life satisfaction, which motivates you to give again and again (Kahana et al., 2013; Park et al., 2017; Rhoads & Marsh, 2023).

Get on
with others

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The ability to engage with others is a skill which can support us in all aspects of our lives. Interacting with others is an inevitable human experience, whether it is brief and purposeful (such as asking for directions from a stranger) or a deeper, interpersonal connection to a friend or family member. Getting on with others means being able to read social cues and feeling comfortable interacting with another person you might not know well. This can happen in situations such as going to the supermarket, navigating the playground when dropping children at school, or meeting new people at friend's birthday party.

Numerous attempts have been made to measure how easy people find it to read social cues and signals in others, and how enjoyable they find social interaction.

There is increasing recognition that atypical behaviours in social settings, such as those sometimes associated with people who are neurodivergent, should not be seen through the lens of deficit. Generally, at the population level, people who tend to rate lower on scores of sociability and the ability to interpret social cues also tend to rate more highly as pattern seekers and systematisers (Baron-Cohen, 2022). Our culture and society are heavily reliant on numerous inventions and other vital contributions from people who say that they sometimes find social interactions difficult (Silberman, 2015). This is not to say that is not also still helpful for all children to be supported to develop social skills. Getting on with people is an essential skill, but what this looks and feels like will be different for different people.

Build positive relationships

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How you interact with friends and colleagues you see regularly is likely to be different to how you interact with strangers at a bus stop. With those we know well, we are more likely to share personal information and develop shared interests. Building positive relationships also requires us to balance our needs with the needs of others. This ability begins early in life through the consistent and responsive interactions between a child and their caregiver, often referred to as 'serve and return' (Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2015). Serve and return describes the way in which a caregiver notices their child's cues and responds appropriately. Over time, these interactions teach children about the give-and-take necessary for building relationships, laying the foundations for future social competence (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

The ability to manage the inevitable challenges that arise in any relationship is equally important in building positive connections with others. In early childhood, caregivers cannot always respond perfectly to their child's needs, and distractions or other commitments may lead to missed cues, such as not immediately responding to a baby's cry or becoming a little cross with a toddler.

These moments are a normal part of caregiving and can be 'repaired' by picking up and comforting the crying baby. With an older child, this might also include explaining the situation or offering an apology. This process of rupture and repair teaches children that relationships are dynamic, flexible, and can overcome challenges (Tronick & Gold, 2020).

Building and maintaining positive relationships with important people in our lives is vitally important for a wide range of outcomes, including our health and wellbeing. Research increasingly demonstrates that our relationships with others – or social connections – are linked to improved health outcomes, and their absence is associated with higher risk of mortality (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; NASEM, 2020).

Love and be loved

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"I love you" is a simple sentence that conveys a powerful, complex sentiment. In the limited academic literature on this skill, the capacity for love has been referred to "the capacity for involvement, investment, and maintenance of a committed romantic relationship, resulting from complex developmental processes that begin in childhood and continue to be shaped throughout development" (Fernandes et al., 2023, p.1). That said, love is also a feature of many non-romantic relationships such as between parents and children as they grow older, or between good friends. A person's capacity to love is rooted in their early childhood experiences of being loved by their parents or caring adults, which forms the foundation of a child's attachment with their parents or caring adults (Wonderly, 2019).

It is an indication of the importance of love, a worldwide study concluded that a child's feelings of being loved and cared for by a parent seem to have a greater impact on developmental outcomes than any other single parental influence (Khaleque, 2017), which indicates the importance of love.. The outcomes associated with the capacity for love are wide-ranging and include improved self-confidence, self-esteem, mental health, life expectancy, and improved functioning of the immune system (Cameron, 2022). Despite the importance of the capacity for love, there are few interventions aimed at nurturing the capacity *to* love. This may be due to the relationship between the capacity for love and attachment security (Wonderly, 2019), which is often a target for interventions.

Work well with others

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Working with others – or 'collaborating' – is a common feature of our everyday lives as humans, whether on a school project or as a team in the workplace. Technical definitions often describe collaboration as a process of coordinated activity that involves people pooling their knowledge, skills and effort to achieve a shared goal (Evans, 2020; Rochelle & Teasley 1995). It is different from similar sounding concepts such as cooperation, which refers to working together to achieve your own individual goals.

Collaboration is highly valued in today's interconnected world and is often seen as part of a group of so-called 21st Century Skills, alongside other skills such as problem solving, creativity and critical thinking (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). These skills are viewed as vital to success in the contemporary world of work.

Research has shown that schools-based activities can increase children and young people's collaboration skills, often using group work and peer mentoring approaches (Gillies, 1996; Nemiro, 2020; Sills et al., 2016). Building collaborative skills has been shown to have a positive effect on students' learning and academic achievement (Evans, 2020), which in turn creates longer-term benefits when young people enter the workforce.

Set and respect boundaries

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Many of us have felt the discomfort of someone standing too close and crossing our personal boundaries. The process of setting and respecting boundaries requires a delicate balance between what is acceptable for ourselves and for others.

Research suggests that our ability to set and respect boundaries in a socially acceptable way develops in early childhood. Toddlers who struggle with boundary-setting are more likely to approach strangers or engage in overly familiar physical and verbal interactions (NICE, 2015). Conversely, children who navigate boundaries effectively tend to exhibit a healthy wariness of strangers and are more likely to seek closeness with their caregivers.

Two elements of caregiving seem to be especially important for managing interpersonal boundaries: parental sensitivity and intrusiveness. Parental sensitivity refers to the warmth, consistency, and attunement in caregiving, while intrusiveness involves failing to respond appropriately to a baby's cues or being excessively controlling in directing their behaviour. Greater parental sensitivity and lower levels of intrusiveness in the early years have been associated with improved abilities to set and respect boundaries (Kretcher & Jacobvits, 2002; Jacobvitz et al., 1991). This is a pattern that continues for parenting in adolescence (Soenens et al., 2007).

However, it is important to note that what constitutes a socially acceptable boundary, and what may be considered 'intrusive' parenting, is likely to vary across cultures (Diemer, Trevino, & Gerstein, 2021). This highlights the importance of considering cultural context when understanding what it means to set and respect boundaries.

Manage conflict

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Evidence shows that lasting, high-quality loving relationships are characterised not by the absence of conflict, but rather the ability to resolve conflict in respectful ways, without it causing lasting harm or damage (Gottman, 1993). We do not all get on perfectly all the time, but we can work to handle conflict well – and to recover quickly when it does occur.

"It's not fair, I was playing with that!" Any parent will agree that young children frequently encounter and express conflict, whether it is about sharing a toy, taking turns, or wanting to stay longer at the park. Perhaps the earliest examples of conflict are in the moments of 'rupture and repair' (as described in the description of Build Positive Relationships (p.68)). No parent can get it right all the time and parents can role model conflict resolution skills after moments of 'rupture' (Siegal & Hartzell, 2013). For example, *"I'm sorry that I shouted when we were getting ready to leave. I was worried we would be late for nursery, but I didn't want to make you upset. I'm going to try to allow more time to get ready so that I'll feel calmer."*

Early experiences of conflict play an important role in a child's social and emotional development. Research suggests that well-managed conflict plays a key role in acquiring new knowledge about oneself and others (Deutsch et al., 2011). Initially, young children rely on adults to guide them through conflict resolution before they start to apply these skills independently. Children in preschool have been observed to resolve conflict with peers on their own (Killen & Turiel, 1991). These formative early experiences support our ability to manage conflict throughout life – whether with friends, colleagues or romantic partners.

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Explore
the world

How we explore and discover the world around us

These skills help us to seek out and connect with the world around us. They are the skills that mean we notice the people, places and things around us, that make us want to ask questions and learn about the way things are, and that lead us to seeking out new experiences such as exploring new places or taking on a new challenge. With these skills we can take in the everyday wonders of our world – from the beauty of sunrise to a baby's giggle.

The skills are:

- Be creative
- Be curious
- Feel joy

Be creative

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When you think of the word 'creativity', what comes to mind? Is it being artistic – being able to paint or draw? Being musical or expressing yourself through dance? Creativity includes these skills but is also a much broader term that refers to an individual's ability to generate new ideas and associations (McCoy & Sabol, 2024). As such, creativity spans both having creative or imaginative ideas and producing something creative. Emerging evidence suggests, however, that creativity may not look the same everywhere. In some East Asian societies, for example, creativity may be considered as a collective or group-based concept, rather than an individual skill as in Western contexts (Taylor & Rogers, 2001).

Like many of the skills in our framework, creativity is the result of multiple other skills, including flexibility, originality and elaboration. Creativity is also closely related to playfulness, curiosity and imagination.

There is clear evidence of an association between creativity and intelligence, motivation and academic achievement at the same age (Kim, 2005; de Jesus et al., 2013; Gajda et al., 2017; Toivainen et al., 2012). Fewer studies have explored the relationship between creativity and later life outcomes, but those that have done indicate a positive association between creativity in childhood and later academic performance (Cropley, 1972; Toivainen et al., 2021). This evidence highlights the importance of using approaches and activities in early years and educational settings that have been shown to foster creativity (e.g., Zahra, Yusooff, & Hasim, 2013).

Be curious

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Humans are curious by nature – from the baby shaking a new toy to see what it does, to the toddler exploring the playground, and adults trying new foods. Curiosity is described as an individual's desire to know more, or their thirst for knowledge (McCoy & Sabol, 2024), and is often studied alongside other concepts such as exploration, novelty-seeking and asking questions.

There is evidence that curiosity can be fostered by interventions such as parental guidance which supports parents to be curious about their child's experiences, feelings and needs (e.g., Endsley et al., 1979; Kyazze et al., 2020). This is important because curiosity exposes children to new information and situations, which increases their motivation and ability to learn. For example, using data from a nationally representative sample in the US, one study showed correlations between curiosity and children's maths and reading achievement in early childhood (Shah et al., 2018). Similarly, research from Finland found that high school students' levels of self-reported intellectual curiosity were positively associated with their academic achievement (Froiland et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, currently there is insufficient evidence of how early-life intellectual curiosity (understood to be a personality trait) shapes adult outcomes (Powell et al., 2017; Powell & Nettelbeck, 2014).

Feel joy

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Take a moment to consider what brings you joy – maybe it is reuniting with a loved one, achieving a goal you have worked hard towards, or simply listening to your favourite piece of music. Although what brings each of us joy is very individual, joy is learned through social experiences and is one of most recognisable emotions across cultures (Izard, 1971; Ekman, 1992; Watkins, 2020; Arnett, 2023; Rogoff, 2003). Definitions of joy vary but tend to centre around a temporary emotional state that involves feeling elated or ecstatic. Joy can be caused by an alignment between one's lived experience and one's desired experience or a connection to something bigger than oneself (Emmons, 2020; Matthews, 2020; Arnett, 2023).

Although joy cannot be produced voluntarily, one can promote the capacity for joy by creating an environment which provides opportunities to experience the emotion (Izard, 1972; 1977). While joy can be experienced alone, it is most frequently experienced with others (Johnson, 2020), and in children it is often associated with play. As such, developing a capacity for joy might include a caregiver fostering a close-relationship with a child and supporting them to play, or playing with them.

Related to the wealth of literature on the importance of play, joy has been found to support one's willingness to play (Friedrisckson, 2004), ability to cope with challenges, and capacity to enjoy one's life (Izard, 1977; Tornare et al., 2017). Experiencing joy in social events has also been found to promote wellbeing and strengthen a sense of community (Gabriel et al., 2020). While joy is a distinct emotion, early positive mood – which includes joy – has been found to uniquely predict life satisfaction in adulthood (Coffey et al., 2014: Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

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