



Sensitive Periods: Social Relations

Before the age of six, human beings are in a unique period of learning and development. At this time in our lives, certain information is absorbed by our personalities without conscious effort. Young children learn to walk, talk and do hundreds of things without formal instruction or being aware of learning. Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), an Italian physician, described these stages as sensitive periods of development.

Sensitive periods are characterized by five observable behaviors. Children seem to be drawn to certain work and we see 1) a well defined activity with a beginning, middle and end; 2) the activity is irresistible for the child once he or she starts it; 3) the same activity is returned to again and again; 4) a passionate interest develops; 5) a restful and tranquil state comes at the finish of the activity. Once the sensitive period is over, children are not drawn to certain activities as before. Three-year olds love to wash their hands because they are in a sensitive period, whereas ten-year-olds are not.

There are five sensitive periods of development from birth to age six: Language, Order, Refinement of the Senses, Movement and Social Relations.

Between ages 2 1/2 to 4 1/2 children are learning social skills and manners that will be the foundation for their social interactions. Between the ages of 12 to 15, there is another developmental period when young teens are open to developing and polishing social skills. This is one reason that

dance lessons and cotillion are offered at this age.

Between ages three to six, children are learning social cues, such as, when to say please and thank you and to whom, how to meet people, shake hands, and on and on. Children are also learning how to care for themselves: dressing, tying shoes, eating, washing, bathing, brushing hair and teeth are among the many self-care skills children are learning at this age. Also children are interested in learning to care for their home and family by making beds, cleaning, sweeping, cooking and gardening. These early practical skills strengthen social skills and relationships throughout our lives.

We can assist our children in acquiring skills by modeling and giving simple instructions. Allowing our children to watch and interact with us as we work, models vital skills. We can also give short "lessons". For social skills, though, the teachable moment is not when we expect a certain behavior, but rather beforehand, with indirect preparation.

Perhaps neighbors are coming over for coffee. What social skills will your child need to be successful in this situation? Some of the social skills you might want to teach are greeting the neighbor, introducing oneself, offering a place to sit, offering food or drink, thanking guests for the visit, and saying goodbye. A short lesson for self-introduction might go like this:

"William, our neighbors are coming for coffee on Saturday. When they get here

I'd like for you to introduce yourself. This is how you introduce yourself. Extend your hand and shake hands. Then say, 'Hello. My name is William. I'm glad to meet you.' Now let's pretend that I am Mr. or Ms. Jones. I'll walk through the door and you can practice greeting me."

Your child can practice with you several times before the visit. When the neighbors arrive, welcome them, and cue your child, by saying, "I'd like you to meet my son."

If William cannot remember what to do, forcing him to perform is not recommended. Just smile and go ahead and introduce him, knowing that some additional preparation is necessary. Remember, the teachable moment is not at the moment we are asking them to perform a new skill. Shyness, embarrassment, tiredness, and hunger can all contribute to an inability to perform a new skill, as we've all experienced.

To develop social skills, analyze what needs to be learned according to the situation and your child's behavior. Model with your own behavior and prepare your child indirectly with short lessons. In this way you can assist your child in acquiring social skills for a lifetime of successful relationships.