

# ACTION STEPS FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS: MEETING BEST PRACTICES IN SOCIAL EMOTIONAL HEALTH



Go NAPSACC — short for Go Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care — is a trusted, no-cost tool available to Michigan child care providers. This online program guides simple policy, practice, and environment improvements that help promote healthier outcomes for children in early care and education (ECE) centers.

Each change supported by Go NAPSACC is based on best practice recommendations. These are research-proven, outcome-supported strategies to **achieve high-quality child care** and **desired health outcomes**, such as lowering risk of obesity and associated chronic diseases and supporting childhood growth and development. They also align with multiple licensing and accreditation performance standards.

“**Action Steps for Child Care Provides: Meeting Best Practices in Social Emotional Health**” is a resource that **highlights simple and concrete action steps** that ECE programs can take to achieve each of the best practices listed in one Go NAPSACC module:



Social  
Emotional

This resource is not meant to replace any part of Go NAPSACC. Rather, it can be used as a brainstorming tool and companion to Go NAPSACC’s planning guide.

**Before using this resource, make sure you:**

- Read MSU Extension’s Go NAPSACC Starter Guide.
- Contact a MI Go NAPSACC consultant to set up your free account.
- Complete the online self-assessments to identify where your program is meeting best practices and where it still has room for improvement.

**Using the outcomes of your self-assessment, you are ready to start using this resource to identify concrete, practical steps your ECE program can take to promote the social emotional health of children in your care.**

## Who is this resource for?

Anyone at a child care program can work to follow recommended practices in order to support the health of the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in their care. Change champions may be:

- Directors
- Teachers
- Food service staff
- Family (home-based) child care providers
- Center-based child care providers

## Tips for using this resource

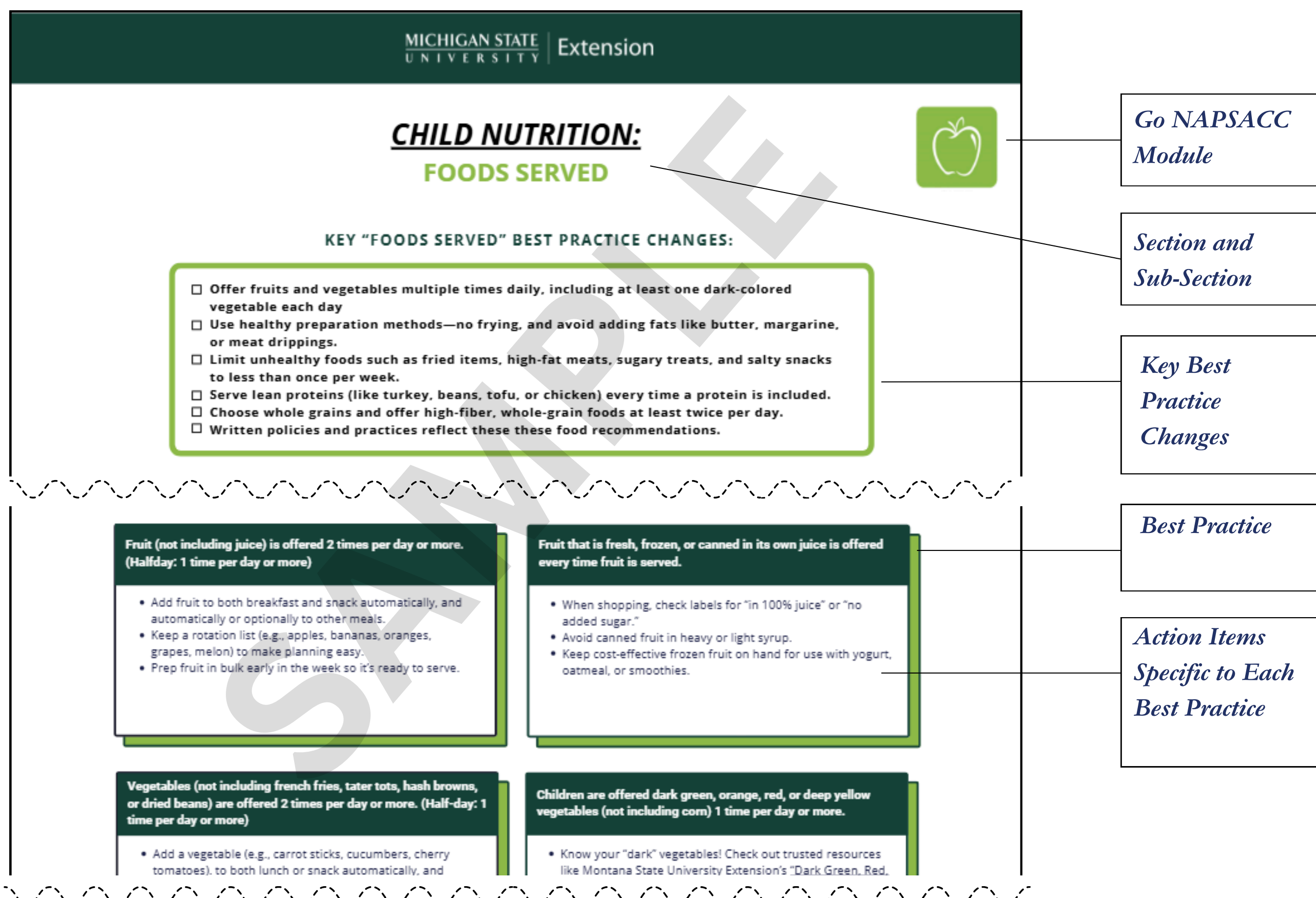
- Read one section at a time, starting with the topic introduction and “Key Best Practice Changes” highlighted at the beginning of the section.
- Circle 1–2 “Key Best Practice Changes.” These are high-impact changes that can help you meet more than one best practice at a time.
- Find more details and practical action steps in the “Best Practice” boxes related to the “Key Best Practice Changes” of your choice.

## Beyond this resource

The action ideas proposed here are only a few of the possibilities you can try. You might find additional ideas and innovations that are good fits for your program. Find more resources on these topics from MSU Extension and other trusted sources to help you make healthy changes in the [Healthier Child Care Environments Toolkit](#). It lists free, practical resources for providers, children, and families and touches upon topics of nutrition, physical activity, and social emotional health.

## How to navigate this guide

Use the graphic below to understand the layout of this guide:



## Social Emotional



This module focuses on creating a warm, inclusive, and supportive environment where every child feels safe, valued, and able to grow socially and emotionally. Educators can build strong relationships with children by greeting each child positively, using supportive language, and engaging with them individually in respectful, bias-free ways. Classrooms should follow clear, consistent routines and expectations, use positive guidance, and offer plenty of time for child-led play. Learning spaces should include materials that reflect diverse cultures and promote belonging.

Teachers can actively teach and model social-emotional skills—like recognizing feelings, solving problems, and calming down—with individualized support when needed. Families should be true partners, with regular communication, conferences, shared decision-making, and access to resources. Staff should receive ongoing professional development to strengthen their social emotional practices. Finally, written policies should support inclusive care, positive behavior guidance, and the prevention of suspension and expulsion.

### KEY “RELATIONSHIP BUILDING” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Educators consistently build warm, positive relationships by using personal supportive, and encouraging language throughout the day.
- Each child receives intentional, meaningful one-on-one engagement daily, ensuring every child feels seen, heard, and valued.
- Children are free to explore all activities and materials, with educators actively avoiding limitations based on race, gender, class, or other identities.

### KEY “ROUTINES AND EXPECTATIONS” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Classrooms use visual, child-friendly posted schedules and expectations, reviewed daily and written positively, with visuals and home-language support.
- Educators actively teach and model classroom expectations, reinforcing them proactively and consistently for all children, without bias.
- Adult-directed activities are kept short (under 20 minutes) to match young children’s developmental needs.
- Children have daily opportunities for self-directed play, both indoors and outdoors, to support exploration and autonomy.
- Transitions are supported with multiple positive strategies such as visual cues, songs, movement, and advance warnings, to keep routines smooth.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL CONTINUED...



## KEY “STAFF PRACTICES” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Educators affirm each child’s cultural and social identities by using inclusive materials, honoring names and languages, and reflecting children’s backgrounds in the classroom.
- Children receive planned weekly social emotional lessons covering emotions, identity, friendships, and problem-solving, supported by varied tools like stories, visuals, and structured activities.
- Educators model social-emotional skills throughout the day, demonstrating sharing, expressing feelings, calming strategies, and respectful communication.
- Teachers use individualized, safe, developmentally appropriate calming strategies and help children use previously taught emotional regulation tools.
- Educators support children in problem-solving by offering guidance, visuals, and prompts while allowing children to try their own safe solutions.
- Staff understand each child’s unique developmental needs and partner with families and service providers to implement consistent strategies.

## KEY “BEHAVIOR GUIDANCE” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Use clear, positively stated expectations and provide children with more positive attention and descriptive encouragement than redirection.
- Emotional humiliation and physical punishment are never used, and adults address behavior calmly and respectfully (without shame or embarrassment) and by offering developmentally appropriate guidance and co-regulation strategies.

## KEY “PLAY ENVIRONMENT” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Classrooms and play spaces include diverse, inclusive social emotional learning and cultural materials, ensuring children see their identities reflected while also exploring people, cultures, and emotions different from their own.
- Indoor and outdoor environments are intentionally designed to support social emotional development, offering cozy calming areas, cooperative play zones, and materials that promote connection, problem-solving, and emotional growth.

## **SOCIAL EMOTIONAL** **CONTINUED...**



### KEY “FAMILY PARTNERSHIP” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Daily two-way communication with families is provided in writing (and verbally when possible), in each family’s home language.
- Family–educator conferences are held at least twice per year, focusing on each child’s strengths, needs, and the family’s goals and perspectives.
- Families receive monthly engagement on Go NAPSACC topics such as nutrition, physical activity, and more, with practical ideas to support healthy routines at home.
- Families receive social emotional learning information at least three times per year, highlighting classroom practices and ways to support learning at home.
- Programs share community resources and offer referrals to support family needs in a respectful, confidential manner.
- Families are partners in shaping program practices and policies, with multiple opportunities to provide input and collaborate in decision-making.

### KEY “PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- Staff receive at least four professional development trainings per year on Go NAPSACC content, across multiple modules (nutrition, physical activity, and more).
- Educators receive annual professional development on social-emotional topics, covering child development, positive behavior guidance, support for all children, and building inclusive environments.
- Educators receive monthly informal support on Go NAPSACC’s social emotional content through micro-trainings, coaching tips, or brief resources.

### KEY “POLICY” BEST PRACTICE CHANGES:

- The program maintains a written no-suspension/no-expulsion policy that outlines supportive strategies for addressing challenging behaviors, including documentation procedures and the use of outside specialists and referral resources.
- A written social-emotional development policy guides practice, detailing positive behavior guidance, family engagement expectations, staff requirements, and commitments to reducing bias and promoting equitable, inclusive environments.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING



## Educators and staff positively acknowledge and greet each child by name when they arrive and throughout the day.

- Create a daily greeting routine that includes calling each child by name, making eye contact, and exhibiting warmth and care.
- Use children's names during transitions, play, and conversations to reinforce belonging.
- Train all staff, including substitutes, that using terms such as "Hey, you!", "Boyl/Girl!", or unwanted nicknames to call children is unacceptable.

## Children are spoken to in a positive and supportive tone by all adults.

- Model calm, warm communication even during challenging moments.
- Replace corrective statements with supportive ones (e.g. "Let's try that together" to replace "You should have done this").
- Provide ongoing evaluations and coaching to staff on tone, phrasing, and positive reinforcement.

## On a daily basis, educators intentionally engage in warm, responsive back-and-forth communication or play interactions individually with each child in the classroom, seeking it out if necessary.

- Set a goal for each educator to have one-on-one, warm interactions with every child at least once per day.
- Sit at children's level, listen actively, and show genuine interest in their activities.
- Use a simple daily checklist or classroom system to ensure every child — not just the most vocal or outgoing — is intentionally reached.

## Children are allowed to develop and engage in activities without being limited by biases based on their race, gender, class, or other identities.

- Offer all materials to all children without gender-typed or other restrictions (e.g. everyone can play with dolls).
- Invite children into activities without making assumptions of interest based on race, gender, culture, or ability.
- Audit classroom materials regularly to remove biased or stereotypical books, posters, and props.
- Provide staff training on implicit bias, cultural responsiveness, and affirming language.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL ROUTINES AND EXPECTATIONS



**The posted schedule for toddlers and preschoolers is current, accessible, visual, and reviewed with the children throughout the day.**

- Place the schedule at children’s eye level.
- Use pictures or icons on the schedule so toddlers and preschoolers can understand it.
- Review the schedule at transitions using first/then language (“First we clean up, then we go outside!”).
- Update the schedule whenever routines change and discuss changes with the children.

**Toddler and preschool classrooms have posted (5 or less) classroom expectations/rules that are positively stated and include visual representation and children’s home languages.**

- Phrase expectations positively (e.g. “Use gentle hands,” “Take care of our materials”).
- Include visuals plus translations in children’s home languages to promote understanding.
- Review expectations daily during circle time and before key routines.

**Educators proactively provide instruction to toddlers and preschoolers on the posted rules/expectations.**

- Make discussion of rules/expectations part of a daily/weekly routine. Model each through roleplay or simple examples to help children understand.
- Practice expectations such as lining up, cleaning up, and sharing during transitions and activities.
- Reinforce rules with consistent, warm reminders — not warnings or threats.

**Classroom rules/expectations and potential outcomes are applied consistently, fairly, and in a respectful manner to all children—regardless of past behavior or children’s social identities.**

- Respond to all children the same way, regardless of past behavior.
- Avoid assumptions tied to race, gender, ability, or temperament.
- Use calm, respectful language when guiding behavior.
- Model tone and behavior you wish children to exhibit.

**Each adult-directed activity is always shorter than 20 minutes.**

- Plan short, developmentally appropriate lessons.
- Break longer activities up by integrating movement.
- Follow children’s cues and end early or shift activities if engagement drops.

**Children are provided opportunities for self-directed play indoors and outdoors daily.**

- Offer blocks of uninterrupted indoor and outdoor free play.
- Make materials easily accessible so children can choose independently.
- Rotate materials regularly to add novelty and spark exploration.

**Multiple strategies are used to ensure positive transitions for toddlers and preschoolers.**

- Give advance warnings (e.g. “5 minutes until cleanup”).
- Use songs, visuals, or movement (marching, stretching) to ease transitions.
- Keep routines predictable so children know what comes next.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL STAFF PRACTICES



## Educators and staff affirm each child's cultural and social identities.

- Learn about each child's family background, languages, traditions, and interests through conversations, enrollment forms, and family sharing activities.
- Incorporate children's cultures into the classroom through books, music, art, photos, and materials that reflect them authentically.
- Pronounce each child's name as accurately as possible and do not use or create nicknames unless invited to.
- Celebrate cultural holidays/traditions in inclusive ways.

## Educators plan and lead lessons/activities on social emotional topics one time per week or more.

- Schedule a dedicated social emotional learning lesson at least once per week, using topics like emotions, friendship, problem-solving, calming strategies, identity, and empathy.
- Use tools such as puppet scenarios, picture books, social scripts, and social emotional curricula to structure lessons.
- Build lessons around real classroom experiences to help skills feel relevant and meaningful.

## Education for children on social emotional development covers a variety of topics about emotions, identity, and interactions.

- Teach children to identify emotions, name their feelings, and understand others' feelings.
- Incorporate lessons about identity, similarities/differences, and celebrating diversity.
- Teach skills like sharing, turn-taking, conflict resolution, cooperation, and asking for help.
- Take the opportunity to respond to classroom situations by shifting lessons to talk about social emotional topics as necessary.

## Educators use a variety of strategies, such as class lessons, scripted stories, and structured activities to teach social emotional skills to toddlers and preschoolers.

- Use scripted stories, role-play, puppets, visuals, breathing exercises, and calm-down games.
- Integrate social emotional learning into daily routines like morning meetings, transitions, and small-group activities.
- Reinforce skills through practice during real interactions (e.g. sharing materials).
- Make effort to notice children's positive behaviors and praise them in order to reinforce learning.

## Educators and staff model social emotional skills, such as sharing, expressing emotions, and problem solving throughout the day.

- Intentionally demonstrate healthy emotional expression (e.g. "I feel frustrated, so I'm taking a deep breath").
- Verbally walk through conflict resolution steps to reinforce other learning.
- Continuously demonstrate kindness and empathy through tone, body language, and problem-solving with all adults and children.

## Educators and staff use a variety of individualized, safe, and appropriate methods for calming and/or comforting an upset child.

- Offer calm-down options such as breathing exercises, sensory tools, quiet corners, soft objects, or movement breaks.
- Observe each child to learn what helps them regulate, and adjust strategies as needed.
- Teach calming strategies during calm moments, not only when children are upset.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL STAFF PRACTICES CONTINUED...



## Educators and staff assist children to use previously taught emotional regulation strategies when needed.

- Prompt children to use previously taught skills (e.g. “Let’s try belly breaths,” “Can you use your calm-down spot?”).
- Offer guided support until children can use strategies independently.
- Celebrate attempts, not just success.

## Educators and staff support children in problem-solving as needed.

- Teach simple problem-solving steps (e.g. “Stop → Think → Try a solution”).
- Offer choices, prompts, or visuals during conflicts.
- Provide time for children to try appropriate solutions before stepping in.

## Educators are knowledgeable of the individual development and needs of each child and, when applicable, partner with the family and the child’s identified service providers to implement recommended strategies in the program.

- Observe children regularly to understand their strengths, needs, and learning styles.
- Partner with families to share successful strategies and understand home routines.
- Coordinate with service providers (e.g. therapists, specialists) when children have identified support needs, ensuring strategies are used consistently across environments.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR GUIDANCE



## Directions are worded positively and clearly stated to ensure children's understanding.

- Phrase all rules as what to do rather than what not to do (e.g. "Use gentle hands" or "Use walking feet" as opposed to "Don't hit" or "Don't run").
- Keep expectations short and simple; use pictures or gestures to support understanding.
- Review and model expectations frequently.

## Children receive more positive attention and descriptive comments than redirection.

- Use a 5:1 ratio of positive comments to corrective ones ("I like how you're helping clean up!").
- Notice and describe specific positive behaviors ("You waited for your turn — that was kind").
- Continually scan the room and intentionally reinforce positive actions before problems start.

## At the program, emotional humiliation is never used by anyone in contact with the children.

- Train all staff to avoid sarcasm, shame, yelling, or public correction.
- Address behavior privately and calmly, focusing on problem-solving, not blame.
- Use reflective supervision and peer coaching to maintain supportive communication norms.

## At the program, physical punishment is never used by anyone in contact with the children.

- Provide clear written policies stating that no hitting, grabbing, restraining, or physical force is ever allowed.
- Train staff in positive guidance techniques, including redirection, co-regulation, and conflict resolution.
- Use observation and coaching to ensure all adults follow safe, developmentally appropriate practices.
- Foster a supportive environment in which staff feel comfortable asking for help or breaks from stressful classroom situations.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL PLAY ENVIRONMENT



## A large variety of learning materials are available that promote social emotional learning.

- Stock the classroom with items such as books, puppets, emotion cards, mirrors, and calm-down tools that help children identify feelings and practice regulation and expression skills.
- Include materials that support problem-solving, cooperation, sharing, empathy, and self-regulation.
- Use materials across subject areas to reinforce learning.
- Rotate materials regularly so children encounter new social emotion learning prompts.

## A large variety of learning materials are available about various cultures and identities, including all those represented in the classroom.

- Include books, dolls, dramatic-play props, photographs, music, and art materials representing all cultures and identities in the classroom.
- Ensure materials reflect racial, cultural, disability, family-structure, and linguistic diversity, including but not limited to those of enrolled children.
- Regularly audit the classroom to remove stereotypical or non-inclusive materials and replace them with authentic, affirming images and objects.

## The program's indoor and outdoor play spaces are designed to promote social emotional learning.

- Create cozy spaces indoors (pillows, soft lighting, small nooks) for calming down, emotional reflection, and peer connection.
- Arrange play areas to support cooperative activities (e.g. block building, pretend play, group art).
- Include outdoor spaces that encourage teamwork, negotiation, and shared problem-solving such as sand areas, garden work, loose-parts play, and cooperative games.
- Label spaces with visuals to help children understand expected expression and behaviors in different areas.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL FAMILY PARTNERSHIP



## Educators engage in written, two-way communication with families of infants and toddlers daily.

- Use a daily communication sheet, notebook, or app to share information about meals, naps, diapers, moods, and activities.
- Leave space for families to write back, ask questions, or share updates from home each day.
- Encourage families to share notes during drop-off or pick-up.

## Educators provide opportunities for two-way verbal and/or written communication with families in their home language.

- Plan for daily communication at key times, such as pick-up and drop-off.
- Invite families to share preferred communication methods (texts, notebooks, apps, voice memos).
- Offer verbal or written communication in families' home languages using bilingual staff, translated forms, or translation tools. Post signs or share information about how parents can request services in other languages.

## Individual family/educator conferences are offered for all families and held 2 times per year or more.

- Schedule conferences in fall and spring (or similar intervals).
- Provide flexible meeting formats (virtual, in-person, or phone).
- Share reminders early and provide multiple time options.

## Family/educator conferences center around the child and their family, their strengths, and needs.

- Prepare ahead with observations and examples showing what the child is doing well in so that conversations stay positive, personalized, and collaborative.
- Invite families to share their goals, concerns, and cultural context.
- Co-plan next steps or strategies with families.

## The program engages families a minimum of monthly on topics encompassed in any of the Go NAPSACC modules.

- Include health topics in monthly virtual or in-person meetings.
- Send monthly newsletters, handouts, or videos on topics like nutrition, physical activity, outdoor play, screen time, breastfeeding, or oral health.
- Provide simple, practical ideas families can use at home.
- Offer occasional hands-on activities (taste tests, garden days, active play events) related to these topics.

## The program engages families three times/year or more on social emotional topics.

- Host family workshops, story nights, or social emotional learning take-home activities.
- Share resources on emotions, calming strategies, routines, and friendship building.
- Highlight how social emotional skills are taught in the classroom and how families can reinforce them.

## The program uses and shares information about community resources with families and offers referrals as appropriate.

- Maintain an updated list of community services (health clinics, food banks, housing support, early intervention).
- Provide resources in family areas, newsletters, or one-on-one conversations.
- Offer referrals sensitively and confidentially when a need is identified.

## The program utilizes a variety of strategies to collaborate with families in the developing, revising, and implementing of practices and policies.

- Use surveys, suggestion boxes, family committees, or informal conversations to gather input.
- Include families in reviewing or updating policies, routines, and menus.
- Give feedback on how family input influenced program decisions (“You asked...we changed...”).

## SOCIAL EMOTIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



### Educators and staff receive professional development on Go NAPSACC content areas a minimum of four times/year.

- Create a year-round professional development calendar that includes quarterly Go NAPSACC trainings across multiple modules (nutrition, physical activity, outdoor play, screen time, infant care, and oral health).
- Use a mix of formats such as staff meetings, short workshops, online modules, and coaching sessions.
- Track staff attendance and revisit topics when new staff join.

### Educators and staff receive professional development on social emotional topics (in addition to child abuse and neglect) one time per year or more.

- In a yearly professional development calendar, schedule at least one dedicated social emotional training (separate from child abuse/neglect training).
- Include topics like emotional development, trauma-informed care, identity affirmation, and building relationships.
- Partner with mental-health consultants or social emotional specialists when possible.

### Professional development on social emotional topics covers a variety of subjects about child development, behavior guidance and fostering inclusive ECE settings.

- Offer training that includes:
  - Understanding developmental stages of emotions and behavior
  - Positive behavior guidance strategies
  - Creating inclusive, bias-free environments
  - Supporting children with diverse needs
- Use real classroom scenarios and videos for practice and reflection.

### Educators receive informal education or support on Go NAPSACC social emotional module content one time a month or more.

- Build social emotional “micro-learning” into monthly staff meetings or coaching check-ins.
- Share short resources such as handouts, quick videos, tip sheets, and classroom tools for monthly focus topics.
- Highlight real examples from classrooms and offer brief modeling or problem-solving support.

## SOCIAL EMOTIONAL POLICY

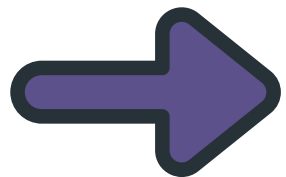


**There is a written policy that the program does not allow suspensions or expulsion/dismissal and that specifies strategies for managing and documenting challenging behaviors, including the use of outside resources and referrals.**

- Write a clear policy stating that suspensions, expulsions, or dismissals are not used under any circumstance.
- Outline specific steps for supporting challenging behavior, such as observation, documentation, communication with families, and individualized plans.
- Include a process for using outside resources — early intervention, mental-health consultants, behavior specialists — when additional support is needed.
- Train all staff on the policy and ensure consistent implementation across classrooms.

**There is a written policy on promoting children’s social emotional development, including behavior guidance, family engagement, and reducing biases in ECE settings.**

- Include guidance on positive behavior support, co-regulation, problem-solving, and using developmentally appropriate strategies.
- Describe expectations for family engagement, including how educators will partner with families to support children’s social emotional needs.
- Add components addressing equity (e.g. reducing bias, preventing disproportionate discipline, and honoring children’s cultural and social identities).
- Clarify expectations of staff, including professional development, observation, and coaching requirements.
- Review the policy annually with staff and families and revise as needed to reflect program practices.



For more free ideas, tools, and materials, check out the corresponding sections of the [Healthier Child Care Environments Toolkit](#).

