How to Boost Social Skills Before Day Care Starts

Why social readiness matters before day care

Starting day care is a big step for a young child. For many families, the first weeks bring separation anxiety, new routines, and a lot of unfamiliar faces. But the transition goes more smoothly when a child has had some practice with the social side of group care. Social skills - taking turns, sharing, reading another child's cues - are not something babies and toddlers pick up overnight. They develop gradually through repeated, low-pressure experiences. Parents who invest a little time before the first drop-off often see a child who feels more comfortable, joins in sooner, and builds friendships more easily. This article walks through practical steps you can take at home and in the community to build those skills, with tips on what to watch for at each stage.

Start with parallel play at home

Parallel play is the stage where two children play alongside each other without much direct interaction. It usually appears around age two, but you can encourage it earlier. Set up two similar activities - two puzzles, two sets of stacking cups, two crayon-and-paper stations - side by side. Sit with your child while another adult or older sibling does the same activity nearby. The goal is not to force interaction but to let your child get used to another person being close while they focus. Watch for signs of comfort: a glance, a smile, or a brief imitation of the other person's action. If your child seems anxious, move the activities a little farther apart and shorten the session. Over several weeks, gradually reduce the distance. This simple practice builds tolerance for close proximity, which is the foundation of every group care setting.

Practice turn-taking with simple games

Turn-taking is a core social skill that children use constantly in day care. You can practice it with a simple game like rolling a ball back and forth. Sit on the floor facing your child. Roll the ball gently to them and say "my turn" as you push it. When they roll it back, say "your turn." Keep the exchange short and fun. If your child loses interest after two or three turns, that is fine. The point is repetition over time, not a long session. Another low-stakes game is stacking blocks together: you place one block, then your child places one, then you place another. Watch for the moment your child waits for your turn without prompting. That pause signals they are beginning to understand the rhythm of exchange. If they grab the block before you can place yours, gently hold their hand and say "wait, my turn" before letting them go. Stay patient - toddlers learn turn-taking through many small corrections, not through explanation.

Read social stories together

Books are a powerful way to introduce social situations before a child experiences them. Look for picture books that show children sharing, saying hello, or joining a group. As you read, pause and ask simple questions: "What is the bunny doing?" or "How do you think the bear feels?" Even if your child cannot answer in full sentences, you are modelling the language of social interaction. Over time, point out similar moments in real life. At the park, say "Look, that girl is sharing the slide. She is waiting for her turn." Connecting the book to the real world helps a child build a mental script for what to do when they meet other children. What to watch for: does your child start to mimic the story's actions at home? That imitation shows they are internalising the social pattern.

Arrange one-on-one playdates

Before a child enters a group of ten or fifteen kids, a playdate with one other child offers a gentler introduction. Invite a neighbour or a family friend whose child is roughly the same age. Keep the playdate short - forty-five minutes to an hour is plenty for a toddler. Provide two of the same toy to reduce conflict. Stay close and help your child navigate moments of grabbing or pushing. Do not step in too quickly, though. Young children often resolve minor disagreements on their own if given a moment. Watch for signs of overload: turning away, rubbing eyes, or crying. If your child seems overwhelmed, move to a quiet corner and let them watch the other child from a distance. That is still valuable exposure. Over several playdates, you can gradually extend the time and reduce your direct involvement. The goal is for your child to feel safe enough to approach the other child without you as a shield.

Encourage independence in small tasks

Social confidence is closely tied to a child's sense of independence. When a child can put on their own shoes, pour their own water, or zip their own jacket, they feel more capable in a group. In day care, teachers cannot do everything for every child at once. A child who can manage basic self-care tasks will feel less frustrated and more willing to engage with peers. Start with one simple task: letting your child choose their own snack from two options, or pulling up their own pants after a diaper change. Praise the effort, not the result. If the shoes go on the wrong feet, let it go. The independence matters more than the correctness. Watch for frustration - if a task is too hard, break it into smaller steps or offer a little help. The sweet spot is a task that is just slightly beyond what your child can do alone, so they feel a sense of accomplishment when they succeed.

Model social language throughout the day

Children learn social scripts by hearing them over and over. Use phrases like "Can I have that?" "Thank you," "My turn," and "Do you want to play?" in your everyday interactions, even when you

are just talking to your child. Narrate what you are doing: "I am waiting for my turn to use the phone. Now it is my turn." When you are with another adult, say hello and goodbye clearly. Your child is watching and absorbing. What to watch for: eventually your child will start to repeat these phrases, even if the timing is off. That is a sign they are building a vocabulary for social situations. Do not correct the timing too sharply. If your child says "thank you" before receiving the toy, that is still a wonderful step. The precision will come later.

Visit the day care before the first day

Most day care centres, including those in the Mullins Day Care and Child Care network, allow families to visit before the official start. Take advantage of this. Walk around the classroom, let your child see the toys, the cubbies, and the outdoor play area. If possible, meet the teacher and watch how the teacher interacts with other children. This visit helps your child form a mental map of the new environment, which reduces anxiety on the first day. What to watch for: your child's body language. If they cling to your leg, sit down on the floor and let them watch from your lap. If they are curious and move toward a toy, let them explore while you stay nearby. A short, positive visit is better than a long one that ends in tears. After the visit, talk about it in simple terms: "Remember the red slide? You will play on it tomorrow." This kind of preview builds a bridge between home and the new setting.

Build a goodbye ritual

The drop-off itself is a social skill that benefits from practice. Create a short, consistent goodbye ritual: a hug, a high-five, and a phrase like "See you after snack." Practise it at home before the first day. When you drop your child off at a playdate or a relative's house, use the same ritual. This consistency helps a child predict what comes next, which makes the separation less frightening. What to watch for: if your child cries at drop-off, that is normal. The key is how quickly they recover once you leave. Peek through the window a minute later. If they have stopped crying and are watching the other children, the ritual is working. If they remain distressed for a long time, talk to the teacher about a gradual transition plan. Many centres, including those in the early learning daycare space, offer a phased start where a parent stays for the first hour and slowly shortens the stay over several days.

Watch for signs of readiness

Every child develops social skills at their own pace. Some children are naturally outgoing; others need more time to warm up. The goal of these steps is not to push a child into a social role that does not fit them. Instead, it is to give them the tools to navigate group settings with less stress. Watch for signs that your child is ready to try something new: showing interest in other children at the park, imitating social behaviour from books, or asking about day care. If

your child resists every step, slow down and go back to parallel play or one-on-one playdates for a while. There is no race. The steady, low-pressure approach builds genuine social confidence, not compliance.

Supporting social skills before day care starts does not require elaborate lessons or expensive toys. It takes time, patience, and a willingness to let your child take small risks in safe settings. The steps outlined here - parallel play, turn-taking, social stories, playdates, independence tasks, language modelling, a pre-visit, and a goodbye ritual - work together to prepare a child for the rich social world of **early learning daycare**. Start a few weeks before the first day and adjust the pace based on what you see. With consistent practice, your child will walk into that classroom with a stronger sense of what to expect and how to join in.