I dare you!

“Go on, I dare you!” said Ella. The children were using the neighbour’s fence post for target practice.

Tao picked up a stone and took aim. The stone hit the post and then bounced off onto the neighbour’s car breaking the windscreen. “Oh no!” said Tao. “Good shot, Tao!” cheered Ella. “We’re in trouble now,” said Harry. “Come on, let’s go before anyone sees us,” said Tao.

Later that day, their neighbour came over. He wanted to know if anyone had seen what happened to his car. “Do you know anything about it?” asked Harry’s mother. “We don’t know anything about it,” said Ella. But Tao began to cry, “They dared me to do it.” “It wasn’t his fault, Mum,” said Harry. “It was that stupid game.”

‘Dare’ games like this story are a common way for children to test the limits that adults set for them. At the same time, children try out their own strengths and each other’s. While this kind of behaviour is a normal part of childhood, effective guidance from adults is needed to help children develop skills to make responsible decisions and to stand up to social pressure.

Influences on children’s social development

Children’s understandings of responsibility are influenced by their families, by school staff, by community members, by other children and also by the things children see and hear in the media. Young children especially watch and copy the attitudes and behaviour of those closest to them.

As children grow older, they become more aware of peer group values and of the behaviours of role models such as sporting heroes or media personalities. They learn to think through and discuss the values and attitudes they observe in others and use themselves. They think about whether decisions that are made are fair or whether someone is being ‘mean’ to them or to others.

When adults are fair, caring and respectful, children feel a greater sense of trust and belonging. Children are more likely to cooperate with adult guidance when they feel valued and respected. By contrast, when children feel they have been treated unfairly they are less likely to listen and more likely to try to avoid or resist discipline.
Teaching children values

Values are the internal guides we have for our behaviour. They help us to make choices, and to make judgements about what is right and wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair. While cultures differ in the emphasis they place on particular values (eg individual freedom or duty to family) there are many which are common to all cultures like respect, caring, and justice.

Parents and carers are children’s first and most important teachers of values. Schools also have a major role to play in teaching values. Some of the ways that schools help children learn positive social values include:

- teaching children how to think about values and how to behave in ways that are caring, respectful, etcetera
- teaching cooperative behaviours inside the classroom and in the playground
- making sure that behaviour and discipline issues are managed in ways that are positive, consistent and fair
- providing opportunities for children to practise good citizenship – through peer mentoring, student representative council, community projects, etcetera.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can use a range of strategies to help children learn about social values. The following ideas can help.

Teach by example

Children often learn more from what you do than what you say. Your own behaviour is important for showing children how you would like them to behave. Talking about the reasons for your behaviour can help to make your values and expectations clear.

Read and discuss stories that demonstrate positive values

Choose children’s stories that reflect the kinds of values you want children to learn. Talk about the story and what can be learnt. You might ask questions like: “How do you think that person feels? Why do you think he/she did that? Was it a good idea? How could he/she have done it better?”

Check what children are watching on TV

Make sure that the programs children watch and the electronic games they play are suitable for their age and reflect positive values. Watching violence on television and playing violent video games can lead to aggressive behaviour.

Teach children to learn from mistakes

Mistakes provide opportunities for teaching and reinforcing positive values. Support and acknowledge children when they admit mistakes and help them find ways to make up for them. Ask them to suggest ways of repairing any damage they have caused to relationships, people or property.

Help children to think about values

Talk with children about the social values and attitudes they encounter in everyday situations and on TV. Teaching children to question and think about social values helps them to be clear about their own values and strengthens their ability to resist pressure from peers, advertising and other media.

Teaching children about values supports their social development. It helps them develop the knowledge and skills they need to play a positive role in society.
Social development involves learning the values, knowledge and skills that enable children to relate to others effectively and to contribute in positive ways to family, school and the community. This kind of learning is passed on to children directly by those who care for and teach them, as well as indirectly through social relationships within the family or with friends, and through children’s participation in the culture around them. Through their relationships with others and their growing awareness of social values and expectations, children build a sense of who they are and of the social roles available to them. As children develop socially, they both respond to the influences around them and play an active part in shaping their relationships.

Influences on children’s social development

While parents and carers are clearly the first and most important influences on children’s social development, there are many other influential aspects of the social environment. Examples of the many influences on children’s development are shown in the diagram below.

The people and settings that are most closely involved with the child – family, school and peers – are shown at the centre of the diagram. Through their daily contact with parents, carers, family members, school staff, as well as with their peers, children learn about the social world and about the rules, practices and values that support it. By actively participating in these relationships, children also affect the ways that adults and their peers relate to them.

In addition, children’s development is influenced by wider networks of social support (represented in the diagram’s central circles), including extended family, friends and any community, cultural or religious groups a child may be part of. These networks provide opportunities for children to develop their social awareness and skills as they relate with different people and experience a range of roles and expectations.

As shown in the outer circle in the diagram, children’s lives are also shaped by the broader social circumstances that impact on their families and communities, such as access to social and health services, parents’ employment and income, or their ability to balance work and family time. In particular, children’s sense of social connection is often influenced by community attitudes and by cultural values, including those they encounter in the media.

Through their relationships and connections with others, children build a sense of who they are and where they fit in the social world. Coming to an understanding about self and others is therefore a central goal of children’s social development.
Developmental trends in children’s self-concept

The ideas, beliefs and knowledge that children have about who they are, what they can do and where they fit in society help to shape their understanding of themselves. Children base their self-concepts on feedback they receive from others as well as their own judgments. The kinds of things that primary school children take into account in developing their self-concepts include how well they are able to succeed with schoolwork and other activities, how they look, and how they get on with family and peers. Developmental patterns in the ways children typically describe themselves are related to their developing capacities for thinking and for understanding and managing their emotions and behaviour. As shown in the following table, preschool children often have very high opinions of their abilities. During primary school, children become much more aware of how their abilities and achievements compare with those of others.

Typical developmental changes in children’s self-concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental stage</th>
<th>What children might say about themselves</th>
<th>What it shows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Preschool           | “I am four years old. I live with my Mum and Dad and my little sister. I love to play football. I can kick the ball really far. Watch me!” | • Describes physical appearance, family context and favourite activity  
• Has high opinion of own abilities and wants to show you |
| Primary school      | “I am pretty good at maths because I get good marks. But I’m not so good at English, not like Sophie. Kids like to play with me because I’m happy most of the time and I’m kind.” | • Compares self with others  
• Determines own ability level by ranking performance against that of peers  
• Able to make a (more) realistic assessment of own abilities |
| Secondary school    | “I’m pretty talkative and funny with my friends. I’m an extrovert. At home I can be pretty moody. I get annoyed with my parents because they always seem to be on my back. But, I guess, where would I be without them?” | • Able to reflect on and evaluate own qualities  
• Understands and accepts that personal characteristics can be changeable and inconsistent  
• Is able to integrate them into a coherent sense of self |

It is very important for children’s strengths and efforts to be recognised in order to support the development of a positive self-concept and to motivate children to be positively engaged in learning and in their relationships. Poor self-concept can be a significant contributing factor to children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties.
**Culture and self-concept**

Having a strong cultural identity enhances children’s self-concept and promotes a sense of connectedness and belonging. Children’s cultural identity is nurtured when they learn about their own cultural traditions and when those around them show respect for their cultural values. Teaching children to respect and appreciate variations and differences between cultures is therefore very important for all children’s social development.

Children from minority cultural groups can encounter differences between the rules and expectations required at school and those they are used to at home. When the differences are not acknowledged, or when the cultural traditions children identify with are ignored or minimised, it can negatively affect children’s cultural identity development and sense of belonging.

Children from minority cultures may be subjected to stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity, religion, gender, appearance, social class or sexuality. Discrimination and bullying can have serious effects on children’s mental health and wellbeing as well as their social development. By contrast, overcoming discrimination has been found to have positive effects on self-concept. It is very important for parents, carers and school staff to encourage and support children to take positive action against discrimination and bullying by speaking up and reporting incidents.

**Learning social values**

Children’s ability to understand others and take their needs and views into account develops over time. Young children are naturally self-focussed. They often play beside, rather than with, other children and tend to think that everyone sees things the same way that they do. In early primary school children learn that others may see things differently from them. Then, as their thinking skills develop, children are more able to understand another person’s point of view and, finally, to appreciate multiple ways of looking at the same event or situation.

Teaching children how to put themselves in someone else’s shoes helps them to relate better to others and manage conflict more effectively. It promotes caring, respect and fairness. Research shows that children who have learned to value others are more likely to include and appreciate children who are different from them or who are viewed negatively by others.

Research into moral development has highlighted how social behaviour reflects the attitudes people hold about social conventions and about themselves. Learning to take account of others’ feelings, perspectives and expectations contributes to children’s understanding of social values, and to the values and ethics they choose for themselves. Using an example where children have broken the window of a neighbour’s car playing a game, the following table shows how children use different moral reasoning to decide what to do and say.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Kind of moral thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ella says: “I dare you.”</td>
<td>• Thinking is focussed on impact on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao says: “Let’s go before anyone sees us.”</td>
<td>• Decisions about right and wrong are based on avoiding punishment or on personal gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella says: “We don’t know anything about it.”</td>
<td>• Emphasises responsibility and what others think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry says: “We’re in trouble now.”</td>
<td>• Decisions are based on gaining approval from others and/or on meeting laws and social obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao says: “They told me to do it.”</td>
<td>• Emphasises understanding the particular circumstances and coming to a fair outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry says: “It wasn’t his fault. It was that stupid game.”</td>
<td>• Decisions are based on principles of justice and compassion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children learn to make ethical judgments through having practice in putting themselves in others’ shoes and through being encouraged to reflect on issues that involve social and moral values. Families and schools can work together to help children understand and learn to act on values like respect, responsibility, caring for others, honesty, cooperation and acceptance of people’s differences.
Key points for supporting children’s social development

Children’s earliest and most extensive learning about social relationships occurs in the family. Parents and carers can support positive social development when they model respect and consideration and encourage children to be similarly respectful in all their relationships.

• Provide care and support by tuning into children’s needs. Show you are willing to listen and take children’s feelings into consideration.

• Help children to develop social skills by providing coaching and teaching them to think through and solve the day-to-day social difficulties they encounter. Supervise and support children’s social activities without taking over.

• Ask questions that encourage children to put themselves in someone else’s shoes. Questions like, “How would you feel if…?” help children learn skills for perspective-taking. Asking questions in a supportive way helps children to think through situations and encourages them to take others’ feelings and perspectives into account.

• Discuss moral issues with children and encourage them to state their opinions and reasons.
Family relationships and expectations have a major influence on children’s social development. Family relationships set the foundation for children to relate to others. Children learn how to manage relationships by observing the ways that parents, carers and other family members relate to others.
How parents and carers can help

Teach social and emotional skills
Teach children social skills such as listening to others, taking turns, making friends and resolving conflict. Emphasise skills for cooperative and respectful relationships and acknowledge children’s efforts to use them. For ideas about how you can teach social and emotional skills, see the range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning.

Use positive discipline
Setting reasonable expectations for children’s behaviour, and communicating them clearly and respectfully, sets the tone for cooperation. Being consistent and positive in your approach to discipline communicates to children that they are valued, even if a particular behaviour is not. For further ideas, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on effective discipline.

Talk about values
Read stories that emphasise values with your children. Ask their opinions on whether they think a particular action is respectful, responsible, caring etcetera. Discuss the pros and cons of different kinds of values for promoting effective social relationships. Make talking about values and opinions part of everyday conversation, for example, by talking about things you see on TV.

Capitalise on ‘teachable moments’
When something happens that requires a response which draws on values, it presents a ‘teachable moment’. Ask children to think about what the problem is and what they could do to improve the situation. For example, when feelings have been hurt you could ask your child’s opinion of what the person might be feeling hurt about. Extend your child’s thinking through asking questions like, “How could you find out what Jo is feeling sad about?” and “What do you think you could do to help?”

Involve children in family discussions and decision-making
Encouraging children to contribute to family discussions and decision-making gives them practice in listening to others’ views and seeing things from different angles. Listening and contributing to family discussions helps children understand what your values are and shows them that their voices are valued. Involving children in these ways in family discussions and decision-making promotes respectful and responsible behaviours.

Promote a strong sense of identity
When parents and carers notice and acknowledge what children do to help, it shows children that their contributions are worthwhile. This gives them a sense of pride and encourages them to ‘do the right thing’. Help children to work out ways to stand up for what they believe in and let them know that you are proud of them when they do. This helps children to build confidence in their own strengths and values.

Supervise media use
It is very important for parents and carers to supervise children’s media use and ensure that the things they view are appropriate for their age and level of understanding. When children are repeatedly exposed to violent or inappropriate media images they can see these things as normal. Children often imitate the behaviour they see on TV or on the internet.