

A group of children in school uniforms are playing on a wooden structure with a blue rope net. They are smiling and holding onto the ropes. The background shows a grassy area and trees under a bright sky.

A playful start to school:

The importance of play and peer relationships at the transition to Reception

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**US**  
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# Play in childhood

- ✓ Object play
- ✓ Construction play
- ✓ Physical play
- ✓ Rough and tumble play
- ✓ Playground games
- ✓ Games with rules
- ✓ Pretend play
- ✓ ...and lots more



## Play as relationship building

- ✓ Young children form relationships with peers based on play interactions (Dunn, 1983, Schaffer & Emerson, 1964)
- ✓ Many young children, especially if they are in childcare, experience sustained interactions with other children providing opportunities to play and form friendships
- ✓ Friendships in young children are stable: By preschool, average length of time children tend to be friends is 2 years (Dunn, 1993)





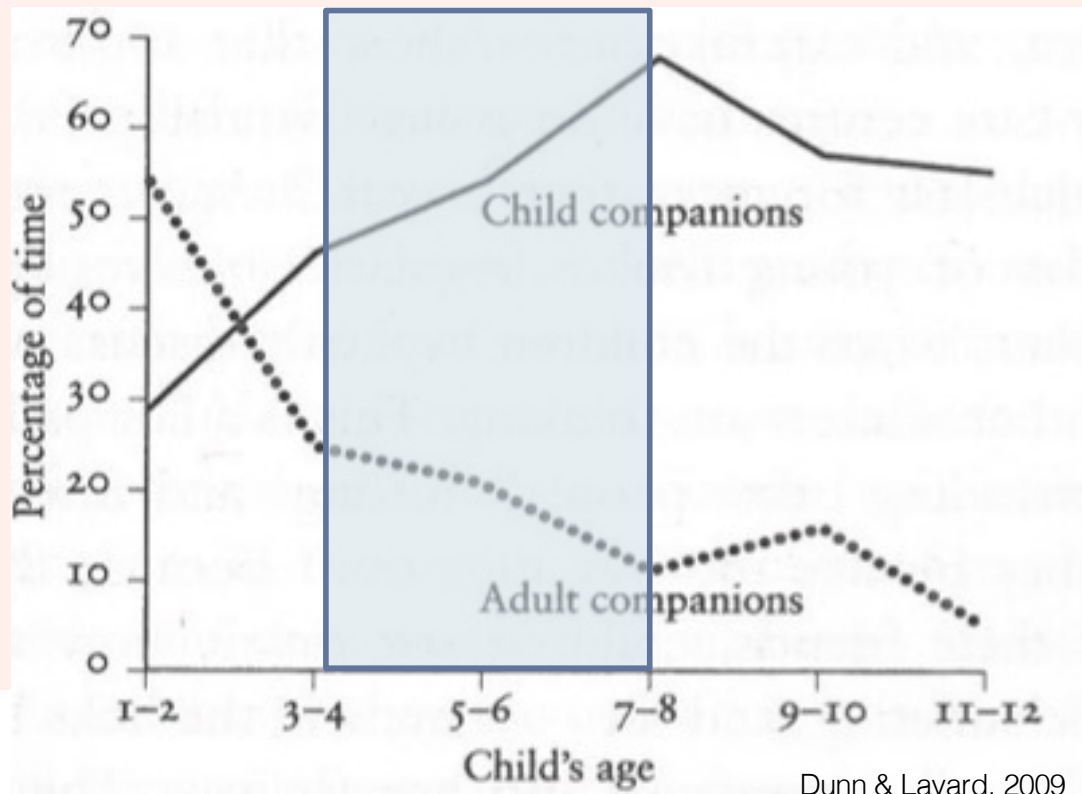
## Peer relationships as ‘play-building’ ...

Between ages 2 to 4 years of age social play increases in complexity:

- More complex play between friends compared to non-friends
- Non-friends spend more time negotiating whether play will occur compared to friends who get on with play
- Friends more effectively negotiate conflict over content, structure and script of pretend play than non-friends (Howes, 1996)
- By 3 – 4 years of age, children use the skills they learn in their play with friends to access a wider range of playmates – and engage in play with new peers (Dunn, Cutting & Fisher, 2002).

# Increasing importance of peer relationships

- ✓ Establishing relationships with other children through play is one of the major developmental tasks of early childhood



Dunn & Layard, 2009

# What are the building blocks for play and peer relationships?

1. Self-regulation
2. Perspective Taking
3. Emotion Understanding
4. Empathy



# Self-regulation

- ✓ Suppressing impulsive responses
- ✓ Focusing on specific events in the environment and ignoring distractions
- ✓ Holding and using information over a brief period of time
- ✓ Shifting from one kind of response to another



# Perspective taking

*Perspective taking is the understanding that others have different thoughts, feelings, desires than oneself*

- ✓ Perspective taking supports conflict resolution, prosocial behaviour and pretend play (Bates et al., 2026)
- ✓ Slow start to perspective taking in Reception increases likelihood that children will be friendless in Year 2 (Fink et al., 2015)



# Emotion Understanding

*Emotion understanding is the ability to identify, predict and explain emotion in oneself and others.*

- ✓ Less sophisticated emotion understanding relative to peers puts children 'at risk' of responding inappropriately in social contexts
- ✓ Greater emotion understanding is associated with greater prosocial behaviour during Key Stage 1 (Kuhnert et al., 2016).




# Empathy

*Empathy is the ability to **share** and **understand** the emotional states of others, particularly in contexts of emotional distress*

- ✓ Greater empathy is associated with greater social maturity and social reputation in Reception (Fink & de Rosnay, 2023)





# These building blocks are *all* independently important

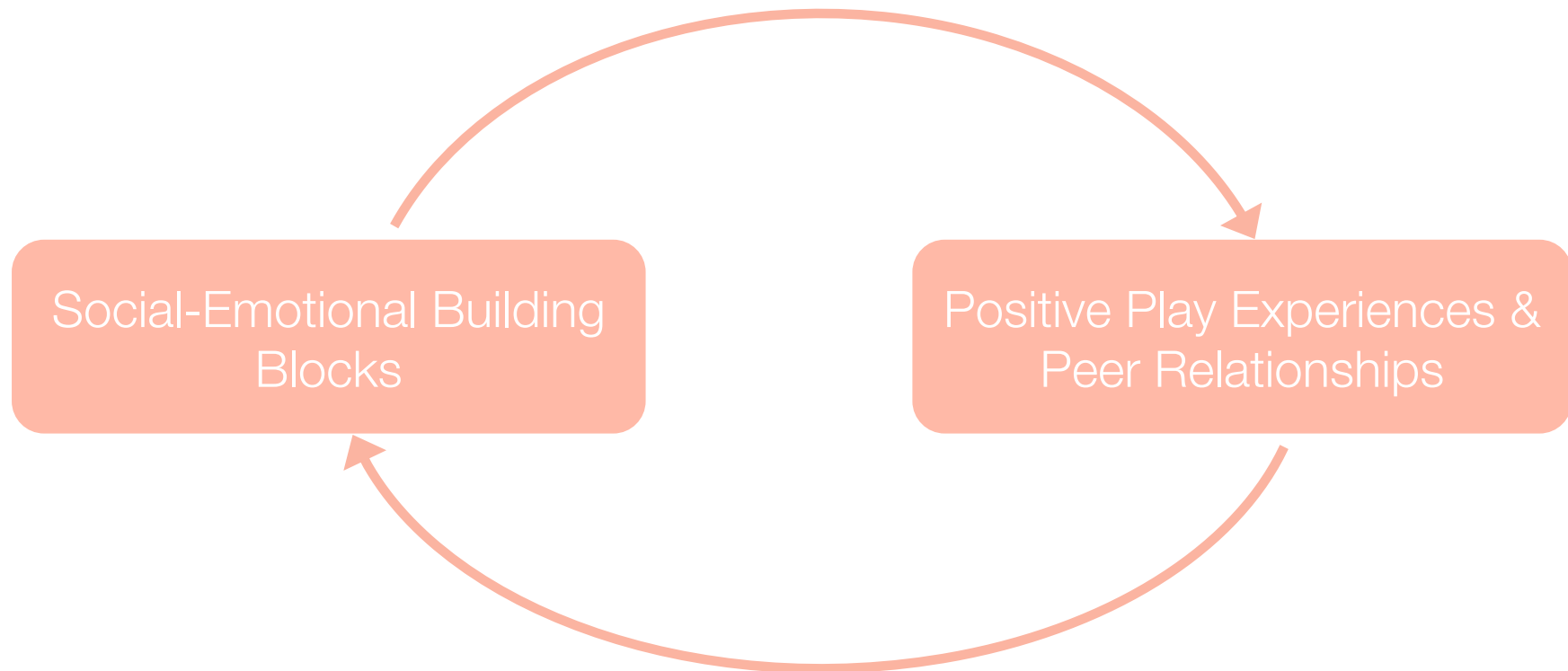
- ✓ **Perspective taking, emotion understanding and empathy** all independently play a role for children's social reputation in Reception (Fink et al., 2014)
- ✓ **Empathy and perspective taking** both independently important for social maturity with peers in Reception (Fink et al., 2023)
- ✓ **Self-regulation and perspective taking** important for making and maintaining friendships between Reception and Year 2 (Fink et al., 2015)

## Play interactions with peers supports children to:

- ✓ share
- ✓ take turns
- ✓ cooperate
- ✓ negotiate play
- ✓ listen
- ✓ manage conflict
- ✓ help and comfort others



Peer relationships play an increasingly important role in development



## Pandemic has delayed social skills of young children, says Ofsted chief

Rising numbers unable to understand facial expressions and have communication and self-care delays

**Rachel Hall**

Mon 4 Apr 2022 10.40 BST

Share



27 April 2021

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**BBC** For you



## Almost half of children start 'developmentally ready'

Nicole Weinstein  
Thursday, January 26, 2023

Over 1,000 teachers that were surveyed by organisation Kindred2, reported that 46% of Reception classes were not developmentally ready to start school.

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**BBC**

**NEWS**

Primary schools

This article is more than 1 year old

iPlayer

## School starters born during pandemic lack communication skills, Ofsted says

English primary schools having to help infants catch up on speech and language to cope with lessons

**Richard Adams** Education editor

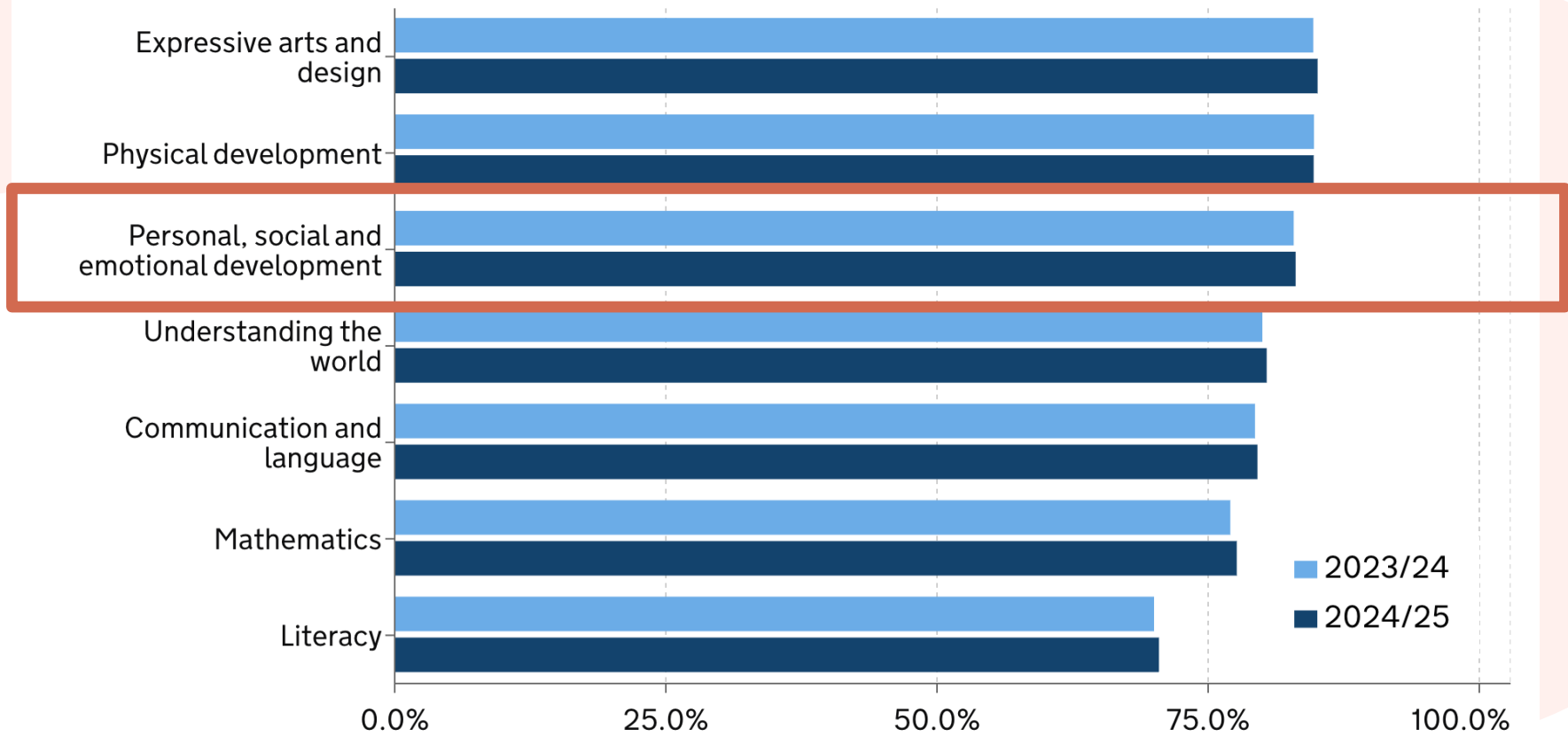
Tue 8 Oct 2024 16.02 BST

# Peer relationships at the transition to school

- ✓ 25% of Reception teachers reported that 50% or more of their class struggled to play and share with others in (Kindred, 2021)

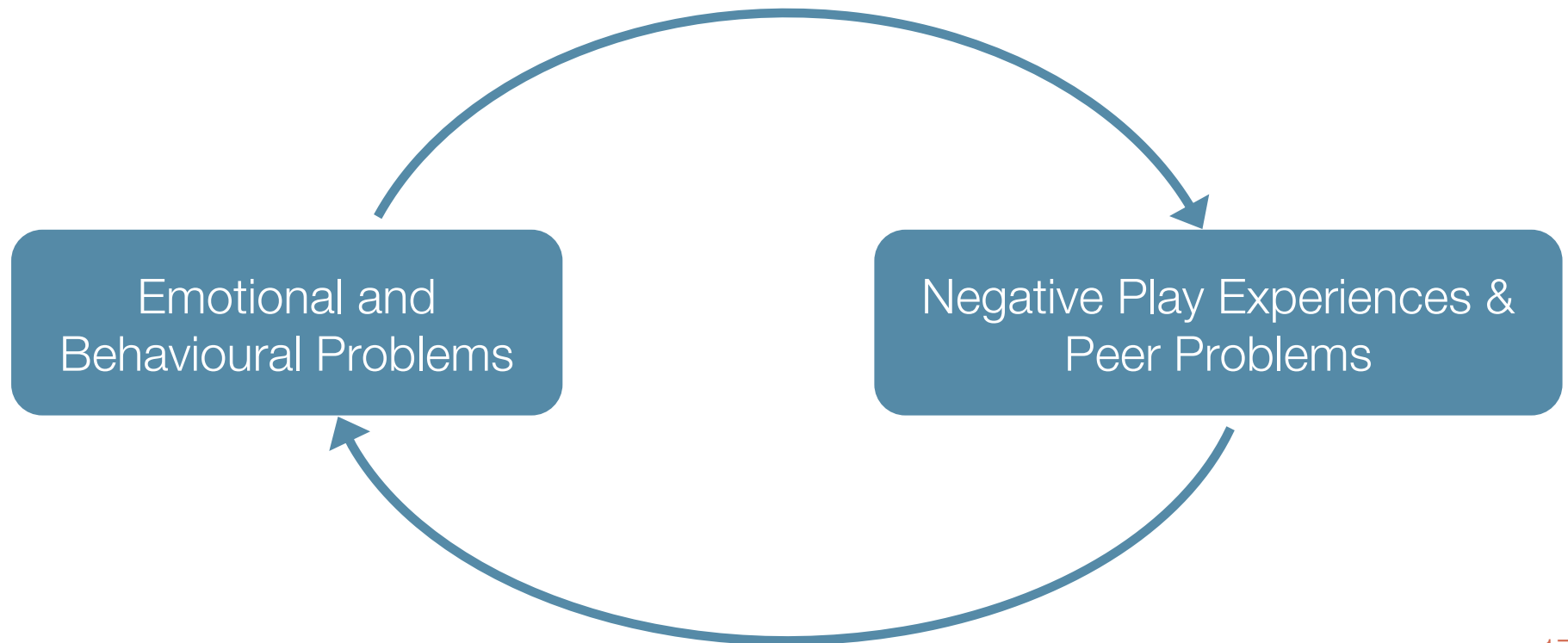


**Figure 2: Percentage of children at the expected level by area of learning, 2023/24 to 2024/25**



Source: Gov.uk

Peer relationships play an increasingly important role in development



# Early Years Educators

- Emotionally supportive and inclusive classroom environment
- Teacher-child relationship quality
- Provision of opportunities for scaffolded children's play and peer interactions
- Attitudes and beliefs about child development

**Funding and resource!!!**



# Play and peer relationships at the transition to school

1. Support further social-emotional development
2. Build children's confidence
3. Provide a sense of belonging and connection to school
4. Support developing academic skills



# Useful resources

- ✓ Hay, D. F., Payne, A., & Chadwick, A. (2004). Peer relations in childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45(1), 84-108.
- ✓ Dr Weston talks with Dr Rory Devine: Interacting with children in the early years

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/episode-95-dr-weston-talks-with-dr-rory-devine/id1450644258?i=1000555381120>

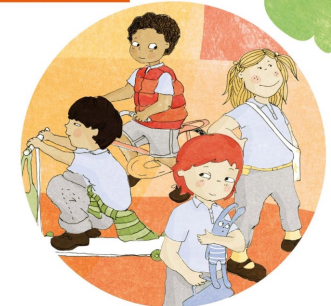
## The Psychology of Starting School An Evidence-Based Guide for Parents and Teachers



Claire Hughes, Caoimhe Dempsey  
and Elian Fink



Anita Lehmann  
Illustrated by Karin Eklund  
Advised by Professor Claire Hughes,  
Dr Elian Fink  
and the Ready or Not Study Team



How I Feel About  
My School  
A Story to Identify and Reflect on  
Children's Emotions

