



Nobody likes me

Coaching your child's friendship skills

By C. Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

Our hearts break when a child comes home and says "No one will play me" or "Why didn't I get asked to the birthday party?" As adults, we know the lifelong value of friendship, and we want our children to develop close, abiding ties. Yet we also know you cannot make other children (or adults) like a child.

It's emotionally devastating to watch the impact of social isolation on your child's self-image. Even as you work at home to solve problems and teach social skills, you feel helpless to help with peers at school or in other social settings. You may even avoid enrolling your child in summer camps or other activities for fear that he won't get along. As a result he spends even more time alone, becoming increasingly lonely and socially unsure.

Why do some children have more difficulty making friends?

Not all children make friends easily. It

has been found that children who have more difficult temperaments — including hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention — have particular difficulty. Their inadequate impulse control leads to aggressive responses, poor problem-solving, lack of empathy and a failure to consider the potential consequences of their actions.

Children with language difficulties or poor conversation skills are more likely to be rejected. Not knowing what to say to get a conversation going or how to respond positively makes it hard to join in groups.

Those who don't know how to enter in and play appropriately — are disruptive when entering the game, have trouble sharing or waiting their turn, and make critical remarks — often annoy other children.

Threatened by how easily impulsive children become emotionally upset or aggressive, other youngsters may isolate or ridicule them. This in turn leads them

to be overly sensitive to peer comments, to lack confidence in approaching other children, and eventually to withdraw.

What can parents do?

The first step is to teach and practice social skills at home. Once a child has learned the appropriate behaviors, parents can encourage those skills when friends come home to play and work with teachers to foster their use with peers at school and other settings.

Teach how to start an interaction.

Some children are shy and afraid to start a conversation or to ask to join a group of children already engaged in an activity. Others barge in without asking or waiting for an opening and, as a consequence, they frequently are rejected. Children need to learn how to approach a group, wait for an opening in the conversation and ask to join in. Parents can help them practice by role playing, like this:

Parent approaches the child (pauses and watches child play for a while):

Parent: "Gee, that's an interesting game." (waits for child's response)

Parent: "Would you mind if I played with you?"

Child: "OK"

Parent: "Thanks, which pieces can I use?"

Alternative Variation:

Parent approaches the child (pauses and watches for a while):

Parent: "Gee, that's an interesting game." (waits for response)

Parent: "Would you mind if I played with you?"

Child: "No, I'm working on this by myself."

Parent: "Okay, maybe another time. When you're done, if you want to work on my model with me, that would be fun."

Change roles and play the child so your child can practice these skills.

Play daily with your child to teach how to share, cooperate, take turns and wait.

Impulsive, inattentive, and hyperactive children need extra help learning to play appropriately. Do this by setting up daily play periods (lasting 10-15 minutes) with your child. Use unstructured and cooperative toys such as Lego blocks or art materials. Model taking turns, sharing and waiting, and praise your child for doing the same. Be careful not to give commands, take over, or criticize, but rather follow the child's lead by listening, commenting descriptively and praising the child's ideas.

Practice communication skills.

Practice, role playing and games can teach important communication skills such as introducing oneself, listening and waiting to talk, asking another child's feelings, taking turns in conversation, suggesting an idea, showing

interest, praising someone, saying thank you, apologizing and inviting someone to play. Work on one or two of these at a time.

Invite friends home — and provide careful monitoring.

Encourage your child to invite classmates over after school. Try to invite positive role models. Your child's teacher may be able to suggest youngsters who would play well with your child. Help coach your children by practicing what to say on the telephone and by talking with the friend's parents so they know about the invitation and you can arrange transportation.

Do not leave this playtime unstructured. Plan cooperative activities such as building a tree fort, conducting an experiment, building a model, working on a craft, baking cookies, playing basketball and so forth. Talk with your child about what the other child would enjoy, and set up the visit with a clear purpose and structure.

Monitor these play activities closely. Increased silliness, horse play, roughhousing, escalating frustration or hostility are signs that the children need to break for a snack, or change to a more structured or calmer activity. Keep the television off, or there will be very little chance for them to get to know each other. Make these first visits relatively short and pleasant.

Establish a reward system at home.

Start by choosing one or two social behaviors you would like to see increase (e.g., sharing, taking turns, keeping hands to self, speaking quietly, staying seated, not being bossy, asking other children what they want to play). Practice the behaviors so that you are sure your child understands them, then list them on a chart. When your child invites a friend over to play, watch for

these behaviors to occur. Praise your child over quietly, privately, and award a point, sticker, or token.

Avoid embarrassment by speaking out of earshot of others and wait for a natural break so you don't disrupt the conversation and play activity. Don't just praise your own child; praise both children for their cooperation and talk about how they are becoming good friends. For example, when they are building together, you might say, "You two are cooperating and working very well together to make this a cool tower."

Several times during the week review your child's chart and the target social skills. Remind the child to use the skill when he goes to play at someone else's house. Once these first few social skills become reliable and consistent, move on to other behaviors and put them on the chart.

Teaching problem-solving/conflict resolution.

Starting a friendship is one thing; keeping a friend is another. The key skill is knowing how to resolve conflict. Without this skill, the most aggressive child usually gets his or her way — and everyone loses. The aggressive child learns to abuse friendships and will be rejected by peers for the aggression, while passive children learn to be victims. It is important to help children settle conflict without taking over. Think of yourself as a coach on the sidelines; when disagreements occur, involve the children in defining the problem, brainstorming solutions and picking a solution to try.

Positive self-talk. When children feel rejected or disappointed, they often have underlying negative thoughts that magnify the emotion. While sometimes referred to as "self-talk," children often express these thoughts aloud. For example, a child

who says "I am the worst kid, no one likes me, I can't do anything right" is engaging in negative self-talk and sharing it with you. Children can learn to identify negative self-talk and substitute positive self-talk to help cope with their frustrations and to control angry outbursts.

For example, when a child's requests to play is refused by another child, she can say to herself: "I can handle this. I will find another child to play with," or "I can stay calm and try again," or "Count to 10. Talk don't hit," or "Stop and think first."

Managing anger and controlling impulses.

Aggression and inadequate impulse control are perhaps the most potent obstacles to effective problem-solving and successful relationships in childhood. There is also evidence to suggest that aggressive children are more likely to misinterpret another person's actions as hostile or threatening.

When children become agitated (with a racing heart and rapid breathing) due to anger, fear, anxiety or aggression, they cannot use problem-solving or other social skills. They need emotional control strategies to use in situations that provoke their anger.

Try the "turtle technique," in which the child imagines having a shell, like a turtle, to retreat into. Ask the child to go into his or her shell, take three breaths, and say, "Stop. Take a deep breath. Calm down." Teach the child to visualize a happy and relaxing scene during this slow breathing and then to say to herself, "I calm down. I can do it. I can try again."

Once parents have taught their children this technique they can use the word "turtle" as a cue whenever they see their child beginning to get agitated. Teachers might also use this cue in the classroom.

Encourage positive peer contacts in the community. Enroll your child in organized community activities such as Scouts, sports and summer camps. If your child is impulsive, inattentive or hyperactive, choose structured activities with adequate adult supervision. Small groups work best. Try to



avoid peer group activities that involve a great deal of coordinated activity or complex rules, and stay clear of activities (such as baseball) that involve passive sitting time.

Collaborating with teachers.

Parents have relatively few opportunities to see their children with large groups of children — the very settings where children need to practice these skills! While the child might be doing well when a single friend comes to visit at home, he may still have problems in larger group settings. Meet with your child's teacher and identify a few positive social skills you both can work on with your child.

Ask permission to set up a chart and offer to make copies for the teacher. The teacher can mark this "friendly report card" each time that the child puts up a quiet hand, cooperates with peers, participates appropriately (versus impulsive talking out), etc. At the end of the day this "report card" can go home with the child and be added to the home reward chart. For example, earning five checks at school might equal a special activity at home.

Empathy training. A key aspect to social success is the ability to begin considering the concerns, goals, and feelings of others. If the child cannot take the point of view of another person, then s/he may misperceive social cues and not know how to respond. While all children are self-centered and "egocentric" and take years to develop empathy, they still can become more aware of others' feelings and perspectives.

Finally of course, a warm trusting parent-child relationship greatly improves your child's chances of developing healthy friendships. Reinforce your child's self-image as a valuable person who can be a friend. Self-acceptance and confidence affect how much a child craves the approval of peers. Strive to be a model and a coach. ■

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