

## **Coping with Peer Problems and Teaching Friendship Skills**

C. Webster- Stratton Ph.D.

My son, Robbie, is a 7-year-old, and he is never invited over to other classmates' homes after school. He doesn't get any invitations to birthday parties either. One day Robbie came home from school in tears saying, "No one likes me. Why don't kids like me around?" I decided to send him to summer camp so he could learn some social skills and make some new friends in a different setting. Two days after camp started, the camp director met me at pickup time and told me that Robbie was disruptive and noncooperative with the other children. He was not fitting in -- the other children were isolating him. The director wondered if he was ready for camp. What can I do to help him be liked by other children and to be more cooperative? Should I take him out of camp?

It is so sad for me. My son doesn't have any friends at school. He's alone most of the time. The kids tease him constantly. It is heartbreaking to see your son be that one kid in class you remember when you were in school that everyone went, "Yuck, we don't want to be with him, he's weird." My goal for him is to be happy, find some friends and have some peace.

Stories such as these are not uncommon among parents. As an adult, you know the lifelong value of friendship, and you want your child to develop close, abiding friendships. Yet you also know you cannot make other children (or adults) like your child.

Watching your child be left out and rejected over and over by peers can be emotionally devastating. You see the impact of this isolation on your child's self-esteem and the loneliness it creates. Even though you know you can work with your child at home to solve problems and teach social skills, you feel helpless in terms of what happens with peers at school or in other social settings. You may even find you are avoiding enrolling your child in summer camps or outside school activities for fear you will receive negative calls from the supervisors about his or her behaviors. As a result your child is spending more and more time alone, which you realize is counterproductive.

### **Why are children's friendships important?**

Few parents or teachers really need to be convinced that friendships are important for children. Through the successful formation of friendships, children learn social skills such as cooperation, sharing and conflict management. Friendships also foster a child's sense of group belonging and begin to facilitate children's empathy skills -- that is, their ability to understand another's perspective. The formation of friendships -- or their absence -- has an enduring impact on the child's social adjustment in later life. Research has shown that peer problems such as peer isolation or rejection are predictive of a variety of behavior problems and later maladjustment including depression, school drop out, and other psychiatric problems in adolescence and adulthood (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Ladd & Price, 1987; Parker & Asher, 1987).

### **Why do some children have more difficulty making friends?**

For many young children, making friends is not easy. It has been found that children who have a more difficult temperament -- including hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention -- have particular difficulty forming and maintaining friendships (Campbell & Ewing, 1990; Pope, Bierman, & Mumma, 1991). 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. It has also been found that children with poor conversation skills are more likely to be peer-rejected. They have difficulty knowing what to say to get a conversation going and how to respond positively. As a result, they have difficulty joining in groups. Because they don't know how to enter in and play appropriately -- they are disruptive when entering the game, have trouble sharing or waiting their turn, act impulsively and make critical remarks -- such children are often annoying to other children, especially if the other children are trying to play a game together or concentrate on their individual work. In short, they are not much fun to play with. Other children are threatened by how easily the impulsive child becomes emotionally upset or aggressive. They may respond by isolating or rejecting them or by making fun of them. Young impulsive children who are having these kinds of peer difficulties also report internal distress,

such as loneliness and low self-esteem (Asher & Williams, 1987; Bukowski & Ferber, 1987; Crick & Ladd, 1988; Kurdek & Krile, 1982). These self-perceptions contribute further to their peer difficulties by causing them to be overly sensitive to peer comments, to lack confidence in approaching other children, and eventually to withdraw from interactions and group activities. The end result can be a bad reputation among classmates and other peers.

### **What parents can do?**

Trying to teach a child social skills can be a major challenge for parents -- because parents normally aren't there to prompt their child to inhibit impulsive urges or to stop and think about how to behave with peers. But the first step is to teach and practice these skills at home. Once a child has learned the appropriate behaviors, the parent's task becomes one of encouraging their use when friends come home to play and working with teachers to foster their use with peers at school and other settings.

**Teach children how to start an interaction.** One of the first social skills to teach children is how to enter a conversation or begin an interaction with another child or group of children. As we discussed, some children will be shy and afraid to start a conversation or to ask to join in when a group of children are already engaged in an activity. Other children have trouble not out of shyness but its opposite: They barge into a group of children engaged in play without asking or waiting for an opening and as a consequence they are frequently rejected by the group. Both groups of children need to learn how to approach a group, how to wait for an opening in the conversation, and how to ask to join in. They need to practice these skills, for behavior is learned by doing. Parents can teach this behavior by role playing scenarios where the parent first models the appropriate behaviors and then the child practices them.

#### **Role Play Example:**

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

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

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

Child: "Okay."

Parent: "Thanks, which pieces can I work with?"

**Alternative Variation:**

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

Parent: "Gee, that's an interesting game." (waits for child 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:** Parent role plays child and child practices skills.

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

Parents will need to teach impulsive, inattentive, and hyperactive children how to play appropriately. They can do this by setting up daily play periods (lasting 10-15 minutes) utilizing unstructured and cooperative toys such as blocks, Lincoln Logs, drawing materials, and so forth. During these play periods parents can model taking turns, sharing, and waiting. Whenever they see their child doing the same, they should praise the behavior. It is important that these play periods be "child-directed" -- that is, the parent does not give commands, intrude on the child's play, take over, or criticize, but rather follows the child's lead by listening, commenting descriptively, and praising the child's ideas.

**Practice communication skills.** 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 are communication skills which children can be taught through practice, role plays and games. We suggest that parents work on one or two of these at a time by first practicing the behavior and then praising and rewarding it whenever they observe it occurring at home.

**Invite friends home -- and provide careful monitoring.** Encourage your child to invite classmates over after school. We suggest that the classmates you invite be positive role models for peer relationships. You can ask your child's teacher which classmates s/he thinks would have similar interests to your child and would work well with your child's temperament. We do not suggest inviting home another child who is impulsive and hyperactive but rather someone who would complement your child's temperament. Help coach your children when setting up these invitations 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.

When friends are invited over, do not leave this play time 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. Plan with your child what the other child would enjoy, and set up the visit so that it has a clear purpose and structure. Monitor these play activities closely and watch for signs that interactions may be getting out of control. Increased silliness, horse play, roughhousing, escalating frustration or hostility are signs that the children need to take a break with a snack, or change to a more structured or calmer activity. Show interest in your child's friend by asking what s/he likes to do after school, what sports s/he is involved in, whether s/he has a favorite food, and so forth. Avoid letting the children spend their time together watching TV as there will be very little social interaction and less chance 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. This chart will serve to remind you and your child of the specific behaviors you are working on. Then when your child invites a friend over to play, watch for these behaviors to occur. When you see them, call your child over quietly, praise him or her for remembering the behavior, and give him or her a point, sticker or token for the positive behavior. Children aged 7 and older will be less

embarrassed if you call them away from the play group to praise and reward them out of earshot of others.

When praising, be sure to wait for a natural break in the interaction so that you do not disrupt the conversation and play activity. Don't just praise your own child for the target behaviors; praise both children for their cooperative behavior and talk about how they are becoming good friends. For example, you might say when they are building a tower together, "You two are cooperating and working very well together! You are being very friendly with each other and helping each other make this a cool structure." Several times during the week review your child's chart and the social skills you are working on. Remind the child to use the skill when s/he goes off to play at someone else's house. Once these first one or two social skills have become reliable and consistent, move on to some different behaviors and put these on the chart.

**Teaching problem-solving/conflict resolution.** Starting a friendship is one thing; keeping a friend is another. The key skill a child needs to keep a friend is knowing how to resolve conflict. In the absence of this skill, the most aggressive child usually gets his or her way. When this happens, everyone loses -- the aggressive child may learn to abuse friendships and will experience rejection by peers for the aggression, while passive children may learn to be victims. And yet it is important for parents to help children settle conflict without taking over. We recommend that parents take the role of "coach" on the sidelines and when disagreement occurs involve the children in the process of defining the problem, brainstorming solutions and picking a solution to try.

For instance, let's say that 6-year-old Anna and 7-year-old Cary both want to play something different. Anna shouts, "I want to play house!" and Cary shouts, "No, I want to make beads, we played house last time," and Anna retorts, "No, we didn't, we did what you wanted." In this case, their father might say, "Okay, we have a problem here. You both want to play something different. Do you have any ideas how to solve this problem?" They might then come up with solutions such as taking turns, combining the activities, or doing something different.

Once they decide which solution to try, they both may have had to compromise, but they have begun to learn how to handle conflict.

One game we encourage parents to play with their children is the "pass the hat" game. In a hat we place small, rolled-up pieces of paper with questions written on them. The children and parents sit in a circle and we pass the hat while the music is on. When the music stops, the person who has the hat in his or her lap gets to choose a piece of paper and try to answer the question. If s/he can't answer the question, s/he can ask someone for help. Some suggestions for the hat include:

- How could you help a child who won't share?
- A friend comes to you and wants to know what to do when he is teased. What would you say?
- You see your friend being left out of a game and even bullied and pushed away by some kids on the playground. What should you do?
- What is a solution?
- How do you know when you have a problem?
- What is a consequence?
- What questions can you ask yourself to decide whether your solution will have a "good" consequence?
- Your friend just lost his new shoes. What can you say?
- What can you think about when you are in your shell?
- Your dad seems angry and says he's having a bad day. What can you say?
- You notice someone crying on the playground. What can you say or do?

**Positive self-talk.** When children experience a peer's rejection or a disappointment, often they have underlying negative thoughts which reinforce and intensify the emotion. These thoughts are sometimes referred to as "self-talk," although children will often express them aloud. For example, a child who tells you, "I am the worst kid, no one likes me, I can't do anything right" is engaging in negative self-talk which s/he is sharing with you. Children can be

taught to identify negative self-talk and to substitute positive self-talk in order to help cope with their frustrations and to control angry outbursts. For example, when a child's request to play is refused by another child, s/he can say to herself or himself, "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." In this way children learn to regulate their cognitive responses, which in turn will affect their behavioral responses. Positive self-talk provides children with a means of emotional regulation with their peers.

**Managing anger and controlling impulses.** Aggression and inadequate impulse control are perhaps the most potent obstacles to effective problem-solving and successful relations in childhood. There is also evidence to suggest that aggressive children are more likely to misinterpret another peer's or person's situation as hostile or threatening. When a child becomes agitated (with a racing heart and rapid breathing) due to anger, fear, anxiety or aggression, they cannot use problem-solving or other social skills. Therefore, children need to be taught emotional control strategies to use in situations that provoke their anger. We recommend the "turtle technique" where the child is asked to imagine s/he has a shell, like a turtle, that s/he can retreat into. The child is asked to go into his or her shell, take three breaths, and say, "Stop. Take a deep breath. Calm down." The child is asked 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 emotionally dysregulated. Teachers might also use this cue in the classroom and respond by putting a turtle stamp on the child's hand or giving out an "I can control my anger" sticker.

**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 and inattentive we suggest you choose programs which offer structured activities with adequate adult

supervision. Small groups will work best. Try to avoid peer group activities which involve a great deal of coordinated activity or complex rules, and stay clear of activities that involve passive sitting time such as Little League. The worst place to put a distractible child is in a field position because he will quickly become disengaged from the game -- it would be better to have him close to the action because it will maintain his attention. Avoid too much competition, which can trigger emotional arousal, frustration, and increasingly disorganized behavior. Of course, an exception to this rule would be if the child has a clear talent in a particular sport. In such cases, you would want to encourage that activity as it will increase his or her self-esteem.

**Collaborating with teachers.** Parents have relatively few opportunities to see their children in settings where they are with large groups of children -- and these are the very settings where children need to practice these skills! Behavior in the classroom may be very different from behavior at home. While the child might be doing well when a single friend comes to visit at home, s/he may still have substantial peer problems in larger group settings. It is important to meet with your child's teacher to discuss your child's behavior management at home and at school. Collaborate with the teacher to identify a few positive social skills you both want to start working on with your child. Set up a chart for these behaviors, and offer to make copies of the charts for the teacher so s/he has one for each day. The teacher can put check marks on this "friendly report card" for 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 be sent home with the child, and the parents can add checks earned at school to their home reward chart. For example, earning 5 checks at school might equal an extra story time or a special activity at home.

It also is ideal if the teacher can have an incentive program at school. For example, each day the child earns an agreed-upon number of checks s/he gets to choose a special activity such as extra computer time or starting the lunch line or leading a class discussion. It is also helpful if the teacher assigns your child some special responsibilities so other children can see him or her in a positive light.

We have also found for highly distractible children, it is helpful to assign a school counselor, aide or teacher as a "coach." This coach would meet with the child 3 times a day for a brief 5-minute check-in. During this check-in the coach would review the child's behavior chart and praise any successes in interactions with peers. S/he would also review to make sure the child has his or her books ready and his or her assignments written out in his or her notebook for the rest of the morning. At lunch s/he would review expectations for lunch period or recess and again, before going home, s/he would review the day's behavior as well as see that the child had his or her behavior chart, books, and homework ready to take home.

It is helpful if teachers have regular discussions about friendship and what it means to be a good friend. These discussions should be held regularly (e.g., once a week), perhaps with students sitting in a circle on floor. In these class meetings teachers can read stories about friends and the different situations that come up such as the friend who is uncoordinated and can't hit a ball but wants to be on his friend's baseball team, or the friend who is being excluded by some other kids. These stories can prompt teachers to ask questions such as, "What would you do if you saw your friend being left out by a group of children?" Concrete examples from the classroom and playground should be used to help students think of ways they can counteract social isolation.

Cooperative learning activities in the classroom, where students work in small groups, also help prevent peer rejection. It is important that the teacher split up the more hyperactive and impulsive children and put them in different groups with socially skilled students. Students who are isolated or who tend to be victimized should be placed with positive, friendly students. Carefully planned cooperative group activities, where the focus is on the performance of the entire group, create mutual positive dependence among group members and by extension a feeling of cohesiveness in the whole classroom. When each member of the group is given responsibility for every other member's learning of the prescribed task, students begin to feel responsible for each other.

**Empathy training.** A key aspect to your child's social success is his ability to begin to consider 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 the development of empathy takes years, and all children are self-centered and "egocentric" at this age, it is still possible to promote children's awareness 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.