

Encouraging Social Skills in Children

Provide children with opportunities to play with peers

This can be through formal social groups such as cubs, sport activities, or through having friends over to play and visiting other children on a regular basis.

There is no substitute for the experience children gain from interacting with peers. Children who have many opportunities to play with peers from an early age are at an advantage when they enter formal group settings such as school. Children especially benefit when they can develop long-lasting relationships. Children develop more sophisticated social strategies when they are able to maintain stable relationships with other children over long periods.

Play with children in a “peer like” way, just for the sake of having fun

Children learn crucial skills through play with other children, but children also learn a great deal through play with their parents. Children whose parents frequently play with them have more advanced social skills and get along better with peers. Studies indicate that the parents of the most socially competent children laugh and smile often, avoid criticising child during play, are responsive to the child’s ideas, and aren’t too directive.

Talk with children about social relationships and values

Children who have more frequent conversations with a parent about peer relationships are better liked by other children in their classrooms and are rated by teachers as more socially competent. As part of normal, daily conversation, these parents and children talk about the everyday events that happen in school, including things that happen with peers.

Often these interactions take place on the way home from school or at dinner. These conversations probably serve two purposes: They communicate to the child an interest in his or her well-being and they also serve as a basis for information exchange and genuine problem solving.

Take a problem-solving approach

Parents don’t have to know the answers to all children’s problems to talk to them in helpful ways. They can provide support for the children to consider the problem themselves.

When problem-solving, parents can help children consider various solutions and perspectives. As teachers know, there are often no easy answers to most of children’s problems with peers. Therefore, it is helpful for children to learn how to think about relationships and weigh the consequences of their actions for themselves and others.

Of course, one of the most important factors to consider is the effects of any potential action on others. Children who are encouraged to think in terms of others’ feelings and needs are more positive and pro-social with peers, and children whose parents talk with them more often about emotions are better liked by their kindergarten peers.

Endorse positive, relevant strategies

While it's a good idea to problem-solve by helping children consider various options and perspectives, a parent does not need to treat all potential solutions as equally good. Children react more positively to peers who try to solve problems by negotiation or compromise rather than through tattling, aggression, or verbal coercion.

Reflect a positive, resilient attitude toward social setbacks

Exclusion by peers is a fact of children's lives. Children have different reactions to these rejections, ranging from anger to acceptance. Some children come to believe that others are "out to get them" or that other people are just generally mean. These children are likely to react with aggression and hostility to mild slights by peers. Other children may assume that these rejections are caused by an enduring, personal deficiency ("I'm just not much fun", "Other kids don't like me"), and are likely to withdraw from further peer interaction.

Socially competent children, in contrast, tend to explain these rejections as temporary or in ways that recognise that a social situation can be improved by changing their own behaviour ("I'll have to talk louder so they can hear" or "I'll try to be friendlier next time"). Sometimes these children recognise that the situation itself led to the rejection, such as the child whose request to play was refused by two of his peers. "Well, of course I couldn't play," he said, "I should have noticed they only had two trucks!"

Parents of these socially competent children endorse interpretations of social events that encourage resilient constructive attitudes. Rather than making a statement such as, "That's a really mean kid!" they say something like, "Gosh, maybe he's having a hard day." They make constructive attributions, such as "Sometimes kids just want to play by themselves," rather than expressing a sentiment like, "They're not very nice if they won't let you play."

These parents avoid defeatist comments such as "Maybe they don't like you," and instead offer suggestions like, "Maybe they don't want to play that, but there might be something else they think is fun." Such positive, constructive statements encourage children to take an optimistic view of others and themselves as play partners. They reflect an up-beat, resilient attitude toward social setbacks and the belief that social situations can be improved with effort and positive behaviour.

Intervene when necessary, but let older children work out problems themselves when possible

The preceding suggestions may convey the impression that parents and care-givers of socially competent children must spend all of their time strategically engineering peer play opportunities and looking for chances to talk to children about relationship values. This is not the case, however. While parents of socially competent children do take the time to structure play opportunities and assist their children in interpreting their play experiences, they do not interfere in children's ongoing play unless it is necessary. Indeed, research indicates that a gradual disengagement of parents from involvement in young children's play with peers is beneficial. In summary:

First, parents realise that children need practice to fully develop their social skills, and that children get their practice from playing both with other children and their parents.

Parents provide opportunities for their children to develop stable relationships

with other children. Adults are more relaxed and have more fun when they are with people they know well, and this is true for children as well.

Parents can find ways to offer their children helpful information about how social relationships work. Casual discussions about the events of the day can sometimes lead to conversations in which parents guide children to consider the reasons for peers' behaviours and various options for responding. Discussions that occur when children are interested and that use a problem-solving approach are likely to be most helpful.

Finally, parents show how important a positive attitude is for getting along with others. Most adults can relate to the fact that it is easier to behave in a friendly way when one has a positive attitude toward others, the situation, and oneself. Children benefit when adults offer them positive ways to interpret the events that are a part of their daily lives.

Children's social competence with peers is an important aspect of their social development. Teachers and parents who are aware of the elements of social competence in children can encourage and nurture these skills.

Taken from *Macquarie Primary School* newsletter.