

Can I Play With You?

SOCIAL SKILLS AND THE PRESCHOOLER

children as well as with new, unfamiliar adults. To do this successfully, the child will have to call upon a range of social skills, many of which are not quite fully developed in a child of three or four.

The social skills a child acquires in the preschool years are important ones, for they are the same skills that will help him or her into adulthood.

Social skills in children are acquired primarily through play. For children to play successfully with other children,

they must be able to join a group, to share, to take turns, and to respond to other children's feelings and emotions. They must learn to "use their words" when presented with conflict, rather than resort to physical violence. They must be able to follow directions and concentrate.

By the time a child goes to preschool, he or she has probably had some experience playing with children his own age in the informal setting of home or playground. Preschool, however, presents a young child with a new and sometimes difficult challenge. The child must learn to interact with a roomful of

They must learn to listen to others, not to interrupt, and to enter a conversation on topic. Finally, they must learn to be helpful and caring in order to make and keep friends.

The common denominator in all these
(continued on page 6)



TIPS FOR TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS

Good social skills require the ability to understand one's own feelings as well as the feelings of others. Understanding oneself is a key to self regulation, the ability to manage feelings and impulses, a crucial social skill. Effective communication and problem solving abilities are also necessary components of social skills.

These ideas will help bolster your child's social skills.

Set a routine at home — Children perform best when they know what to expect

Help children verbalize their needs — Children often act out when their needs are frustrated. Teach children to verbalize what is bothering them. "You look upset. Tell me about it." "Use words to tell me what you need." "How can you ask for that toy nicely?"

Help children label their emotions — Give your child the vocabulary to express what he feels. Labeling your own emotions can teach him to do this. "It is so frustrating to wait on line for so long."

Play together — Playing with your children, building something together, for example, can teach them to cooperate and share. Board games and card games can teach them to take turns and pay attention to rules as well as how to win or lose graciously.

Work together — Having children "help" with chores gives children the opportunity to collaborate and cooperate. Talk about what you are doing and include opportunities for the child to help with making decisions. "What should we put in the salad today?"

Role play — If you know your child has difficulty in a certain area, practice with him. For example, if your child has a hard time making friends, talk through a scenario with him. Then give him the words to use, "Can I play with you?" Using puppets can help make this more concrete for a young child.

Model how you would like your child to behave — Children learn social skills by observing others. You are the most important person in your child's life. Your own behavior will be a model for his.

If you feel that your child needs more intense intervention, talk to your child's Head Start teacher or director who can help you access professional services.

Social Skills *(continued from page 5)*

skills is what is called "self regulation." The child must learn to manage his or her emotions, so they do not get in the way of interacting with others. He must first learn not to be governed by impulse, but then must also learn to master his often unruly thoughts so he can figure out ways to deal with problems. Most children manage to learn to do this within the context of play. Children see what other children are doing and copy the ones who are successful at their play "tasks."

It is not uncommon, however, for children to have deficits in some, or even many, of the skills that are necessary to engage with others successfully. These skills are fairly complex; in fact, many people never master all of them. Since children with strong social and emotional skills are more likely to succeed in school — and in life — helping children gain these skills is an important task for both parents and teachers. The preschool years are in many ways the optimal time to tackle a child's social or emotional deficits.

Preschool classrooms are set up to facilitate children's interaction with each other. Small groups of children work together in different centers, doing different kinds of tasks that require both individual effort and cooperation. The dress-up area is a particularly important one. When children act out adult roles, they often mimic, and so learn, the adult behavior they have seen. On the playground, children must learn to play fair, negotiate taking turns, and handle both winning and losing gracefully. Play is the natural milieu for gaining and practicing a host of social skills.

Preschool teachers are trained to notice when children have trouble playing with other children. The bossy or aggressive child is, of course, easy to spot. But teachers also notice more subtle problems — the child who sits alone and can't seem to



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WILL YOU BE MY FRIEND?

When children are about age four, one of the most important questions they ask one another is, "Are you my friend?" They are right to be concerned with this question. Research suggests that having a friend is one of the most important factors in emotional health in young children. This friend does not have to be a particularly close friend,

just someone the same age with whom the child can have a social connection.

When children are young, parents can facilitate friendships. They can invite other children over for play dates, which will also give the children a chance to practice social interaction. In the beginning, parents may want to plan a structured activity to do together with the children. Decorating cookies or playing a game together will help break the ice as well as give the children practice in such essential social skills

as sharing, following instructions, and taking turns.

Teachers can often help parents foster friendships by suggesting suitable children to pair for play dates. Parents may also enroll their child in an after school activity that engages their child's interest or talent, such as art lessons or a sports activity, and then invite a child who shares their child's interest to their home for play.

play with others, the one who stands at the edge of a group but cannot figure out how to join, the one who cries when she wants to play with a toy another child has because she cannot figure out how to ask for it. Teachers can move in to solve a problem on the spot — little children can still be spoken to directly — and, if the problem persists, consult with the social worker in the school to plan a long-term strategy to help the child. Overt interventions are still possible when a child is young. Once a child gets older, it is more difficult to say something like, "Sara looks like she wants to play with you. Why don't we make room for her at the table?"

Fully participatory play is dependent on a lack of self-consciousness. One of the pleasures of watching children at play comes from seeing the joyous, uninhibited

nature of their playfulness. The child who feels comfortable with himself is able to play without self-consciousness, within the bounds of appropriateness, and with concern and respect for other children. One of the tasks of parents, teachers, and other caregivers is to help the child achieve the self-confidence this requires.

An international study on resilience in children found that one important component of resilience, the ability to handle and rise above adversity, is a child's social skills. The foundation for these skills is the child's knowledge that he has external supports that will assure his safety and security and his belief that he is a person other people can like and love. Once a child knows that there are adults who will set limits so that he will not do anything dangerous and that he can behave in a way that will make

others love him — by showing concern for others and by behaving responsibly — he can feel confident in his ability to navigate the world.

Parents and teachers are crucial in both laying the foundation for social skills and in the development of these skills so that children will feel safe, secure, and confident. Structure, rules, and routines are essential ingredients in all these areas. When a child knows what to expect and what is expected of him or her, he or she can behave with greater ease and comfort. A child learns to interact with others when the world around him is predictable and secure.

Since social skills are so important to a child's success and happiness in school and beyond, parents and teachers must work together to foster these skills which help all children flourish. †

BULLYING AND SOCIAL SKILLS

We are accustomed to thinking that children who are bullied become victims because they lack the skills to stand up for themselves. Much of the literature about bullying is geared to teaching the victims of bullying how to respond. However, we may not realize that bullying itself may also be a consequence of a lack in social skills.

Children who have trouble making or keeping friends may resort to aggression and control in order to have their own

way. They may see gaining power as the only way to be popular. Children who cannot express what they want verbally may use physical means or intimidation instead. Finally, a child who does not have problem solving skills may resort to aggression to get what he wants.

Parents whose children are aggressive may be able to help them

by pointing out the consequences of their behavior — ultimately they will not be liked — and getting them social skills training.

