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Helping the Socially Isolated Child Make Friends

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Students who are people-oriented need to have positive and enjoyable relationships with their peers. Unfortunately, many children who experience academic learning difficulties also experience difficulties in the social arena. In fact, 70 percent of children with learning disabilities report having "major difficulty with peers," when only 15 percent of non-disabled students experience "major difficulty."

For many years, professionals believed that the social isolation experienced by children with learning problems was an indirect consequence of the learning disability. It was believed that the learning problem caused school failure and that this failure, in turn, caused social isolation or rejection. We now recognize that the social problems experienced by these children are the direct result of the learning disorder. Learning disabilities actually cause social rejection in many cases. Even if a child is enrolled in a responsive, individualized academic program and is progressing well in school, he still might have significant problems with peer and adult relationships. If the child is motivated by interactions with and approval of others in his environment, this lack of social competence can have an impact upon his progress and performance in the classroom.

The classroom teacher can, should, and must play an important role in the child's development of social competence and friendship skills. I have lectured on this topic for many years and have often found teachers resistant to helping children develop peer friendships. Teachers often voice the opinion that their responsibilities involve the teaching of academic skills and that it is the role of the parents to foster and promote social skills. As a teacher once said to me at a seminar, "My job is to teach reading, writing, and spelling... and there is barely time for that. If the child doesn't have any friends, I'm afraid that's Mom and Dad's problem."

Many teachers now take a far more enlightened view of this issue. They recognize that the child who is isolated and rejected by his classmates will likely not be responsive or receptive to instruction, and his academic progress will be greatly compromised. A teacher recently told me, "I used to think that social skill instruction was not in my purview as a classroom teacher. I now recognize that a child who is preoccupied with the fact that no one is going to sit with him at lunch or who is concerned that he will be bullied at recess, is going to function very poorly in the class that morning. I now realize that it is in his best interest—and mine—to help him make friends. He will be a better, more responsive student as a result." Pediatrician and author Mel Levine reminds us that the foremost dreaded words in the world of childhood are, "Sorry, this seat's taken."

The classroom teacher can facilitate the development of classroom relationships in a number of ways. First—and, perhaps most important—the teacher must consistently demonstrate that she likes, accepts, and enjoys the individual student who is being isolated and rejected by his classmates.

I am often asked to consult with schools regarding an individual student who is being isolated and rejected. I begin the process by meeting privately with the students who are tormenting the child. I remind these students that I have neither the power nor the interest to punish them in any way. Rather, I ask them, in a very non-threatening way, to identify the behaviors or traits that annoy them and are the basis for their rejection of the child. Invariably, the students respond, "But, Mr. Lavoie, even the teachers don't like him!" As teachers, we need to understand that our verbal or nonverbal rejection of a child is readily observed and replicated by the children. When you demonstrate that you do not like a particular child, you are in effect placing your imprimatur on the students' feelings for him. You are giving tacit approval to their rejection or isolation of the child. As I often

reminded my faculty, "You can dislike a child if you wish to, but you can't dislike a child on company time!"

By demonstrating that you enjoy a child's company and that you genuinely like her, you greatly increase her "social stock" among her peers and often cause her classmates to reexamine their feelings about the rejected child. ("Well, if Mrs. Richardson likes Elizabeth so much, maybe she's not such a bad kid after all.") Of course, you want to avoid treating the child like the teacher's pet. That can serve to make matters worse. Simply demonstrate that you enjoy the child by talking, walking, or laughing with her within view of the other children. Give the isolated child high-status responsibilities and chores in order to show your acceptance of and affection for her. Encourage her to publicly demonstrate her skills and interests.

Another technique to improve the child's social standing involves emphasizing her personal islands of competence. Find an area of skill and interest that is unique to that child. Perhaps Mark has an extensive knowledge of meteorology or Gretchen has little-known talents in cooking. Celebrate these affinities in a very public way. Have the students read *Robinson Crusoe* and let Mark make a presentation on the nature of tropical storms. Ask Gretchen to make some tapas to supplement the class study of Spain. By spotlighting the affinities and interests of an isolated child, he becomes a more attractive partner.

Collective rewards are another effective strategy to foster peer relationships. Teachers often develop the unfortunate habit of issuing collective punishments. ("The last time we went to the media center, Joseph was fooling around and knocked over an expensive projector. So we are not going to the media center for a week.") This common strategy of punishing the group for the behavior of an individual is inherently unfair and certainly has a negative impact upon the offending student's relationship with his classmates. Most likely these students have been punished for Joseph's misbehaviors for several years as they've progressed through the grades together.

Collective rewards are an effective alternative to this strategy. Rather than punishing the entire class for Joseph's misbehaviors, try rewarding them when Joseph behaves appropriately. ("Class, I think we can all agree that Joseph was terrific on yesterday's field trip and he worked very hard to stay with the group and listened carefully to the museum guide. I am so happy with this, I have decided to give the whole class ten minutes of extra computer time this afternoon.") This strategy can have a remarkably positive effect on the manner in which his classmates view Joseph.

Another way to promote social acceptance is to make the isolated child more appealing by giving him something the other kids want. For example, suppose your students truly enjoy the Friday chores of watering the plants, returning the books to the school library, and cleaning the whiteboards. Appoint Joseph as the "foreman" of the Friday crew. ("Class, I know that you enjoy doing the Friday chores and I keep forgetting to schedule the crew to get that done. Joseph, I would like you to be the foreman of the crew. Every Thursday, please give me the names of six children whom you would like to assist you.") Someone will be nice to him at least on Wednesday. Small steps.

If a child has a particular medical, social, or learning problem that will impact significantly on her day-to-day performance, it may be beneficial to discuss this with the entire class. Some teachers have found it useful and beneficial to have the child participate actively in the discussion. I once observed a fourth grader explaining his diabetes to a group of spellbound classmates who later asked very probing and sensitive questions about the child's illness. ("Does it scare you?" "Will you outgrow it?" "Does it hurt to draw your blood?") His teacher reported that the child's courage and candor resulted in a marked and lasting improvement in his social standing among his peers.

During these discussions, point out that all of us have unique differences that make us individuals. But emphasize that we are all far more alike than we are different, and that these differences should not be feared or ridiculed. Further, explain that there will be no tolerance for humiliating or embarrassing one another. Deliver this part of the message in a

non-threatening and supportive way by addressing the fact that such behavior is cruel and that cruelty is simply unacceptable. Emphasize the fact that acceptance of differences is a mark of maturity.

Discuss ways that the students can assist their classmate. ("It's helpful if you talk slowly when you are talking to Heather." "When John has trouble with his temper, let me handle it. It is unfair and embarrassing to stare at him when he is having a bad time. Just go about your business.") Some children will become overly solicitous to the child and will provide an overabundance of help or assistance. Encourage the child to do the things that she can do independently. Discuss the concept of dignity.

Some schools use peer partners or buddy systems to facilitate social acceptance of isolated children. These strategies can be effective if students are selected and matched with careful and sensitive forethought. Be sure to recognize, praise, and reinforce both students in the pairing, not just the non-disabled child. These paired activities should be monitored closely at the outset.

Teachers tend to construct intra-class groupings based upon the academic skills of the students by placing students with similar skills in the same group. In order to facilitate student relationships, occasionally base your groupings upon the children's interests. For example, group students together based on their interests in sports, music, or movies. As a result, you will create groups that are heterogeneous (diverse) in their academic skills but that share a passion for a specific activity. These diverse groupings can work on projects in a very dynamic way. These activities can be conducted in a club format and often enable students who would normally never interact to share time and knowledge with one another.

Understanding Friendship

When attempting to facilitate and promote friendships, it is important for parents, teachers, and coaches to understand the nature of friendship among children and preadolescents. The Council for Exceptional Children has identified the following themes among childhood friendships:

Intimacy, affection, and loyalty

Children desire friends who can be trusted. They want their friends to share thoughts and feelings sensitively, and they demand loyalty from them. They need to feel that the friend will keep confidences and shared secrets. They also expect that the friend will not criticize them to others and are deeply hurt when this occurs. Children expect the friend to view the relationship as a true commitment. Most childhood friendships that dissolve are destroyed by a perceived lack of commitment by one of the parties.

Similarity and proximity

School-aged children have a tendency to develop friendships with others who share similarities with themselves (gender, age, race, IQ, social status). As the child grows older, these traits become less important and he establishes friendships based upon similar interests and attitudes. As adolescence emerges, friends begin to seek conformity by dressing similarly and listening to the same music.

Mutual activities and shared interests

Childhood friendships often develop during school or extracurricular activities. Children who are involved in such activities (e.g., sports teams, stamp clubs, chorus, drama) have common interests and values and often are quite compatible as social partners.

Reciprocity and support

Beyond loyalty, children must share a degree of mutual respect and affection for each other if the friendship is to be lasting and meaningful. There needs to be a degree of equity

between the two friends and a willingness to assist, guide, or comfort each other as necessary.

The teacher should carefully observe the interactions of the students in an attempt to find a child who may be a good "friend match" for the isolated student. Be sure to observe the youngsters in formal classroom settings and less structured settings as well (e.g., recess, hallways, physical education). If you see that two students seem to be developing a relationship, seat them together or allow them to work as a pair in classroom activities. Perhaps you could even contact the parents of the isolated child and suggest that they may want to promote and nurture the relationship by setting up a playdate between the two children. It may seem strange for adults to be so deeply involved in the social life of a child, but in the case of the isolated or rejected child, this intervention is both appropriate and necessary. School life is difficult for any child who is isolated by his peers. But if the child is people-oriented, this rejection is particularly painful and will impact upon his motivation in and outside of the classroom.

I once saw a poster in a school's teacher's lounge that read:

"Coming to school every day can become a hopeless task for some children unless they succeed at what they do. We teachers are sentries against that hopelessness."

Sound counsel, indeed.