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Friendships, Social Skills and Adoption
by Dr. Julian Davies

In our practice we see a unfortunate number of children with friendship problems. It can be one of the more painful issues that arises for our clients. But there is also hope - some good resources are available to help children with social skills difficulties, and there is much that parents can do to help.

What we hear from some of our families is that their children "feel" and act younger than they are, and gravitate towards younger children, or are more drawn to adults than peers. It can be hard for them to share conversation; they may divulge too much personal information, or have difficulty finding interests in common. They may have trouble joining their classmates in play. They often lack a sense of how to be a good host when having friends over (controlling the play, etc). Boys may take things too far, getting too rough or out of control. Girls may be clingy or bossy. Children may not get invited to play-dates or parties, and may lack a good friend. All of this may be confusing for both parent and child.

Childhood friendship problems is a topic that raises strong feelings in many adults. I don't know anyone that had a perfectly socially successful childhood, and just reading the previous paragraph can bring up memories of loneliness and rejection. When we see our children having such difficulties, it's truly challenging to stay present and clear-minded about what's going on. But it is important to find a balance of appropriate concern and involvement. Blaming the peer group, assuming things will be better in another school, or otherwise neglecting the issue isn't helpful; neither is overreacting, anxious hovering in social situations, or trying to bribe or force other children to include your child.

Causes of Friendship Problems in Foster and Adopted Children

Social skills problems in the context of foster care and adoption have not been well-researched, but the causes likely lie in a combination of:

- Lack of early secure attachments leading to more anxious/controlling behaviors in later relationships
- Rough and unsupervised early interactions with peers
- Poor social boundaries and judgement, difficulty reading others' social cues
- A higher prevalence of impulsivity, ADHD, and externalizing (acting-out) behavioral problems

- Poor emotional regulation (quick to anger at perceived slights and rejection, etc)
- Delayed social/emotional development
- Challenges in social communication and language, making it hard to keep up with the increasingly fast-paced world of their peers

These risks are not shared by all of the adopted children that we see, but they are more common. In the world of social skills interventions, many of the participants are children (boys, usually) with ADHD, acting-out behavioral problems, or autistic spectrum issues. If you substitute "institutional autism", or general lack of appropriate formative social experiences, that's a combination of issues that fits many adopted and fostered children.

Patterns of Peer Problems

The literature on social skills problems in general suggests that there are a few patterns of peer problems that are most worrisome, and deserving of intervention. Researchers in this field often categorize children by interviewing their peers to come up with how liked (or not) and influential they are. This all sounds a bit harsh, but no one knows better how children are doing socially than their peer group, and the categories that follow aren't nearly as hurtful as peers can be. In this research context, children are grouped as:

- Average (well-enough liked and influential)
- Popular (desired as a friend and influential)
- Neglected (not influential)
- Controversial (both liked and disliked, also influential)
- Rejected (disliked)

Interestingly, "popular" as derived from peer ratings is not the same as just asking who's popular. The "sociometrically popular" kids are well-liked, good problem-solvers, and trustworthy, in other words: a good friend. The "popular kids" are actually seen as dominant and "stuck-up". Neglected children may be shy or less motivated to join peers; they seem do well academically, and can start over in new groups and shed the "neglected" status. Controversial children are sociable but tend to use more social aggression and hostility; this also may not be a very stable category over time.

But the "rejected" group is the most concerning. Children with rejected status in one group tend to be rejected in new groups as well. Without intervention, they are likely to stay rejected over time, and are more likely to have later difficulties with delinquency and adult maladjustment.

Children who are classified by observers as socially withdrawn, plus rejected by peers (thus, not withdrawn by choice), are more likely to have internalizing problems like depression and anxiety. There are two sub-groupings of boys who are rejected: rejected plus aggressive (verbal aggression, rule-breaking, etc), and rejected with odd, immature, or "quirky" behaviors. The rejected-aggressive boys are more likely to have academic difficulties and ADHD. Girls have rates of rejection similar to that of boys, but are a lot less likely to be referred to social skills interventions; it may be that rejected boys stand out more and have more externalizing behaviors, while rejected girls have fewer overt problem behaviors.

If this sounds like your child, you should consider learning more about how to help your child with play dates and friendships (since you've got the potential to make a big positive impact), and explore local options for social skills groups.

Ways To Help Your Child

Help your kids with the basics of social interactions

- Teach your child learn appropriate social greetings-and-responses, and what degree of physical contact is appropriate for whom (how not to be a "space invader")
- Encourage and model use of positive statements like praise and agreement
- Help your kids learn to share a conversation (reciprocity)
- Practice these skills over and over and over

Help children have frequent, successful play dates

- For younger/less mature children, having shorter, more structured play dates can help
- Practice being a good host beforehand, and come up with possible activities that their guest may enjoy
- When it comes to games, emphasize shared fun over winning/losing, and "good sport" behaviors (make sure to model these as well!)
- As a parent, stay aware of how things are going without hovering

Support your child in making and keeping friends

- Make friends with neighbors with children, allow your kids to get to know each other
- Get to know the parents of your kids potential friends (and enemies!)
- Make your child's friends feel welcome in your home (greet them warmly, compliment them directly and to their parents when they pick them up)
- Socialize across generations: make time for extended family, hang out with other entire families together, look for a range of ages for your child to get to know. Such shared family gatherings can provide models of interaction, unhurried time for children to get to know each other, and can keep parents in touch with how their kids are doing socially.

Help your children deal with the pain of rejection

- Remember that some pain around peer issues is inevitable and a normal part of childhood; try not to overreact or get too caught up in your own issues
- Don't nurture resentments, add fuel to feuds, or attempt to coerce other children into including your child
- But do employ "active listening"; acknowledge and reflect back the emotions that you see your child having
- Once your child feels heard and understood, help your child with self-soothing strategies like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and active play
- If bullying at school is involved, insist that it be appropriately addressed; most schools these days have policies, if not effective interventions, in place to deal with bullying
- If your child falls into the "rejected status" category above, seek further help (see below)

Resources for Parents

Best Friends, Worst Enemies by Michael Thompson, Catherine O'Neill-Grace, and Lawrence J. Cohen.

It's So Much Work to Be Your Friend: Helping the Child with Learning Disabilities Find Social Success by Richard Lavoie, Michele Reiner, Rob Reiner, and Mel Levin.

Source

Article by: Dr. Julian Davies from the Center for Adoption Medicine

Source

Register for our May 23rd Matching Event!

Our next Matching Event is on May 23rd at 1PM PST! You can read the biographies of the children who will be featured in the event here, and you may sign up for the event here.

If you have a current home study that approves you to adopt from foster care, sign up for our Child Matching Events! These events are free, and are a great way to connect with caseworkers that have children on their caseload that are looking for their forever families. As the family, you will be presented with a child's biography by their worker, and will be able to ask the worker questions. At the end of the event, you may choose to have your home study submitted for any of the children presented. To learn more about our upcoming Matching Events and sign up, please visit http://www.afamilyforeverychild.org/Adoption/MatchingEvent/General2.php