

## Tips for helping your child develop social skills

When your child experiences difficulties in trying to navigate the social terrain of pre-school, he or she may begin to resist going to those places or engaging in activities that involve social interaction. You may hear expressions like, "I hate it," "I'm scared" or "I can't." If your child reacts with discouraging words such as these, it can be a sign that he or she is feeling left out of a circle of playmates. Here are some suggestions for handling this situation:

### **Cheer on your child when he tries to meet new friends.**

This might include playing with two new friends together, even if things don't go smoothly at first. Ask yourself each day, "What have I done to encourage my child rather than discourage?"

### **Read books that help your child learn about self-esteem.**

For instance, you might read the storybook *Chrysanthemum* (by Kevin Henkes) about a girl called "Chrysanthemum" who is teased because her name is different from others. It demonstrates how the child deals with this situation. *No David* (by David Shannon) is an autobiographical picture book about a child's behavior mistakes, and the value of unconditional love. There are many similar books available that might match your child's experiences, so explore your local bookstore or ask a librarian for suggestions.

### **Watch positive cartoons together that display good social skills.**

Some short TV shows or DVDs that feature your child's favorite cartoon characters may show how to overcome difficulties. Some popular choices include *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, *Sesame Street* and *The Little Engine that Could*. Even *My Little Pony* addresses how girls can navigate difficult social interactions in positive and respectful ways. When watching these programs with your child, gently point out how the characters make positive choices to get past their challenges.

The key is also to model good behavior in social situations. What would you as an adult do if left out of a threesome of "friends"?

## **How a child's emotional and social skills grow**

Think about what happens in early childhood—when two babies are playing together and a third one joins in, they are usually very accepting of others taking their playthings. They tend to be fascinated by each moment. Typically, they are more intrigued with watching another baby play with their toy rather than caring that the other little one took it. This easygoing behavior pattern can continue into the earliest toddler years, with tykes remaining content to play along with others one-on-one or in groups and share their toys.

### **You can help toddlers learn to play with others.**

Ages 2 to 3 are considered the toddler years. By age 2, kids start figuring out how to start a friendship with other children. Somewhere between 2 and 3, the older toddler starts to associate him or herself with certain belongings. For instance, he or she becomes the kid with a tricycle or playhouse or rain boots. The concept of sharing these possessions takes on a new meaning. After all, if this is the child with a fuzzy teddy, what happens if two other kids begin to play with his or her stuffed toy?

If your toddler is in preschool, ask a teacher if your child could be placed near kids who are more socially adept during small group activities. When at home, you can model how to share and cooperate with others.

### **Older Children can enjoy group activities, too.**

Children who develop positive and cooperative social skills by age four or five will enjoy smoother interactions with others, including:

- Self-confidence
- Strength to focus on and persevere, despite difficult challenges
- Ability to pay attention to instructions
- Natural skills for communicating feelings effectively