

# Building Social Skills

Just like reading, writing, and arithmetic, social skills take practice. Whether your child tends to be quiet and shy, or talkative and outgoing, she can learn to make friends, cooperate with others, and resolve conflicts.

Try these suggestions for improving your youngster's social skills.



## Making friends



Children with friends have more confidence and tend to do better in school. Help your youngster make and keep friends with these ideas:

- Suggest that your child get to know kids who like the same things she does. If she joins an after-school activity (science club, scouts), for example, she might find a new

friend to invite over. If your youngster notices a classmate reading a book she enjoyed, she can say, "That's a great book. Have you read any others in the series?" Then, she could follow up by suggesting they look for books together when their class goes to the library.

- Teach your child to help friends feel comfortable in your home—they'll be more likely to want to come back. Before a playdate, ask your youngster what his friend enjoys. If it's comic books, for instance, he might have his collection sitting out when his playmate arrives. And if more than one friend comes over at a time, he should do his best to make sure no one feels left out. They could play games for three or more players or build a fort.

## Cooperation

Being able to share and take turns is important in school, at home, and when children play. Here are ways to help your youngster practice:

- Plan activities in which each family member has a different job. You might prepare a favorite meal together—you make the spaghetti while one child puts salad fixings in a bowl and another sets the table. Then, everyone can help with the dishes. Or wash the car. Your youngsters can clean and rinse the tires and the sides of the car while you wash the roof and hood.

## Differences make the world go 'round

Getting to know people from different cultures is important while your child is young—and for a lifetime. Share these ideas with your youngster:

- Teach your child not to judge a person based on her appearance. Discuss what it would be like if everyone looked and acted the same. She'll learn that differences make us interesting.

- Help your youngster make friends with children from other cultures. For example, she could strike up a conversation by asking questions such as "What's your favorite food?" or "What kind of music do you like?"
- Expose your child to different cultures. You might read books set in different countries, try ethnic restaurants, or attend international fairs in your community.

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- It's tough to resolve conflicts when you're mad. Help your child recognize signs of anger (rapid heartbeat, clenched teeth). If she feels these things happening during an argument with a friend, she might take a deep breath and suggest they talk later. They'll have a better chance of finding a solution with clear heads.

## Respecting others' feelings

Thoughtful words go a long way. Use these suggestions to teach your youngster to think before he speaks so he's sure not to hurt anyone's feelings:

- Teach your youngster to be a good sport, even if he's disappointed. Say a friend makes the soccer team, but your child doesn't. Let him talk to you about his disappointment, but remind him to choose his words carefully when he sees his friend. He might say, "Congratulations on making the team" or "I'm happy for you."

- Explain that it's okay to disagree with others. It's how you say it that counts. Encourage your child to find something nice to say about her friend's viewpoint. Then, she can follow up with her own opinion. "The blue dress is a pretty color. But I like the design on the green one better."



- Play games that require your youngster to wait her turn, such as Twister or Go Fish. Take turns writing one line of poetry to create a shared poem, or alternate reading pages of a magazine. Explain to your child: "Okay. Now it's my turn. Then it will be your turn."

## Problem solving

Getting along with others isn't always easy. Share these strategies to help your child know what to do when conflicts arise:

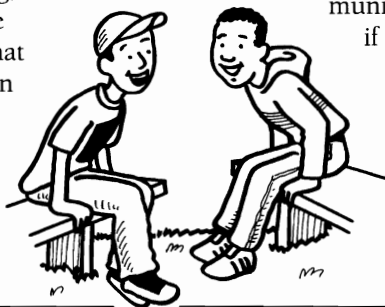
- Compromising can solve many problems. Teach your youngster to "POP!" when he and a pal can't agree. Say he wants to work on his model airplane, but his friend would like to play Frisbee. First, they should state the **Problem** ("We want to play different things"). Next, they can come up with **Options** (do each one for 20 minutes; choose another activity). Finally, they can come up with a **Plan** (do one activity first and then the other, and flip a coin to see which activity comes first).

## The art of conversation

Holding up your end of a conversation is an important social skill. Help your child practice with these tips.

**Choose topics.** Before your youngster visits a friend, discuss a few things they can talk about. He can come up with ideas by thinking, "You, me, us." That means choosing one topic that interests his friend, one that he's interested in, and one that they both know something about.

**Read body language.** Nodding, smiling, and eye contact all show your child that the person he's talking to is listening to what he's saying. Moving or looking away can signal that it's time to end the conversation. If your youngster senses these cues, he might excuse himself politely ("Well, I've got to go. Nice talking to you!").



**Talking in a group.** Participating in a group conversation may take a little extra practice. Remind your child to wait for a break in the chat before jumping in. He should stay on topic when possible, or use what one person says as a springboard to a new subject ("I liked that movie, too. It reminds me of the time ...").

**Don't let language get in the way.** Your youngster doesn't need to speak the same language as another child to communicate. They'll just have to be creative! For instance, if they're working together on a class project, they might draw pictures to explain ideas to one another. On the playground, your child can use hand motions to ask someone to swing or play catch. *Tip:* Remind your youngster to speak in his normal tone while using pictures or gestures. A student who is learning English probably understands more words than he speaks.

## Home & School CONNECTION