

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Getting Along with Classmates

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in School Age Children

Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My six-year-old son has some trouble getting along with his classmates. He complains that other kids are “mean” to him, and sometimes he hits them when he feels that he has been treated unfairly. His teacher does not think that he is being bullied, and she suggested that he might just need some time to mature. How can I help him deal with his friends more successfully?

Children who understand their own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others are better able to deal with challenging or frustrating social situations. You can help your child learn to get along with his classmates by promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley explains why Perspective Taking is fundamental to children's future:

If we want to be successful and deal with other people, [we need] to understand the people around us—particularly what's going on in their minds.

1. Make sure it isn't a bullying situation. Even though the teacher does not think this is a bullying situation, you might want more information. Ask the teacher to describe exactly what is happening in school, using specific examples. See if your son can tell you the situation from his perspective. Knowing the details will enable you to help your son more effectively. If you think it is bullying after hearing the details, you may want to get further help from a counselor in the school or outside.

Larry Aber of New York University has been studying aggression in children for many years. Children were more likely to behave aggressively if they had what Aber called a *hostile attribution bias*. In other words, some children jump to the conclusion that someone is being hostile (or “mean”) towards them even when there isn't enough information to be certain of the other person's intention. In his studies, he and his colleagues have found that when they helped children understand others' feelings and behavior, the children were much less likely to act mean, to get into the conflicts, and to fight with each other.

2. Help your child see the whole picture. Learning to step back from a situation and make sense of it is an important part of Perspective Taking. You can help your child learn how to evaluate and interpret complex social situations by:

- Encouraging him to think about people's responses to everyday situations by asking questions like, “Why do you think your aunt got upset when her friend said she looked tired?”; and
- Asking your child to think about characters' intents in books, movies and television shows. You can prompt your child to think about what the characters do and how the characters are feeling and ask questions like, “I wonder why the main character yelled at his little sister? How do you think he was feeling?”

You can then have your child apply this kind of thinking to what is happening at school.

3. Practice developing social skills by role playing with your child. When children pretend, they are “trying on” different perspectives and experimenting with how others think and feel.

- Try re-enacting a time when there was a conflict or making up a scenario like one your child might face at school.
- Ask your child to switch roles with you. You can be your child and he can be you.

- After pretending together, brainstorm with your child to think of other possible ways to deal with this situation beside hitting back—thus, promoting problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

The goal of this kind of play is to help your child see experiences from new perspectives, while helping him problem solve the situation at school. Keep it fun!

Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis concluded through his and others' research that how children gain insight into "what goes on in people's hearts and minds" depends on how parents interpret "the everyday events of their lives."

- 4. Continue to talk about others' feelings and thoughts—beginning with yours.** You can promote the skill of Perspective Taking every day by talking about thoughts and feelings. Your child looks to you to show him how to label his emotions and how to respond to the world around him.
- Let your child in on your feelings without burdening him. You can say things like, "I had a hard day so I am feeling grouchy."
 - Then share your strategies for coping like, "I am not going to yell at people but wait until I calm down and then talk with my boss about what is bothering me and see if we can come up with a better solution."
 - Use movies and television shows to discuss characters, their feelings and the situations they are in. Try to tie the conversation back to your child's life.

The American Academy of Pediatrics makes several suggestions of ways to help your child manage difficult emotions. You can let him know:

- **"Everyone gets angry at times, but if you hit others rather than solving the problem, it just makes them want to hit you back."**

- 5. Help your child understand the impact of his or her behavior on others.** Parents' use of discipline strategies influences the types of behaviors children show, as well as their ability to understand others' perspectives.

Martin Hoffman of New York University studied discipline techniques and found that what he called *other-oriented discipline* was most effective. This means that parents make the child aware of the impact of his behavior on others. For example, if you see your child hit another child, an other-oriented approach would be: "I bet when you hit your classmate he gets angry and doesn't want to hang out with you. What other ways could you work things out with him?"

- 6. See discipline as teaching.** Hoffman also found that, with other-oriented discipline, children were more likely to listen to others and be more considerate. When children learn about the impact of their behavior on others, they begin to make connections between actions and the meanings behind them.

However, if parents combined the other-oriented discipline with harsh discipline (threats or physical force), the other-oriented discipline was not effective. The power of harsh discipline blocks the lessons of other-oriented discipline. When you need to say no, to stop a child from misbehaving, or set a consequence, do so as firmly but as calmly as you can.

These six strategies will promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers', and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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