

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

My Child Only Wants to Play His Way

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 gets angry and refuses to play with his friends when they don't want to do what he wants to. How can I help him understand that he is not always the boss?

As your child grows older, relationships with other children become a bigger part of his daily life. As he develops a sense of who he is, he is also learning how to deal with the social world of other children. By promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking, you can help set your child up for successful relationships with others.

1. Look at what is really going on when your child gets angry. You can ask yourself:

- What seems to be the most difficult part for your child in his relationships with other children?
- Is he having trouble getting his ideas out with other children?
- How do the other children react to him when he doesn't want to do what they want? Is that what triggers his anger?
- Does he want to play one particular game because he is working on getting better at it, like throwing a ball, or does he want to stick with activities that he is good at?

When you fully understand the problem, you are in a better position to help your child.

2. Acknowledge your child's experience. According to the late Daniel Stern of the Université de Genève, growing up can be seen as a process of "learning to be with others." Make sure your child knows it is okay to disagree with his friends and that different people have different opinions. When he knows that you understand and support his feelings—even when you don't support the way he is behaving—he will be more open to learning to behave in a better way.

- Let your child know that you understand his experience: "It can be frustrating to disagree with your friends. There are times when I feel frustrated with my friends, too, like when we disagree about politics."

According to Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis, when parents express empathy for their children's feelings, children "realize that there are human needs underlying these emotions."

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley has found that children learn Perspective Taking better when they have opportunities to talk about how they feel about their experiences. She notes that Perspective Taking is central 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.

3. Talk about feelings. The research of Larry Aber of New York University confirms that children need to learn how to figure out the intentions of others when they're in tough situations. Practicing the skill of Perspective Taking helps children make sense of their own and others' thoughts, feelings and actions. Find time every day to talk about feelings, your own, your child's and those of others.

- Before your child can take the perspectives of others, he needs help in understanding his own feelings. Help your child name his emotions: “You seem really angry that your friends didn’t want to play tag with you.”
- Talk about your own feelings: “I had a hard day at work, and then I sat in traffic on the way home. So, I’m feeling stressed.” Make sure that your child doesn’t feel responsible for your emotions, though,
- Share the strategies you use for handling your own upset feelings: “When I disagree with my sister, it works best when we talk about our differences and see if we can find something we can agree about.”
- Help your child take the perspectives of his friends. Ask him why he thinks his friends might not want to play a game he suggests. How does he think they feel when he tells them he doesn’t want to play?

Being able to slow down, reflect on a situation and evaluate what to do next are important parts of Perspective Taking that rely on what are called the Executive Functions of the brain. These are the parts of the brain that help us manage our thoughts, feelings and actions in order to reach a certain goal. Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia describes the role that self control plays in social relationships:

There’s [self control] at the level of behavior where you want to resist doing what might be your first impulse, but would not be the most appropriate or the best thing to do in that moment ... Let’s say there’s a friend you haven’t seen in many years, and maybe your first impression when you see your friend is: “My God, how much weight you’ve gained!” But you don’t want to say that; you don’t want to hurt your friend’s feelings. You inhibit that statement, and instead say something to make your friend feel good.

- 4. Help your child practice self control when relating to others.** Although your child’s abilities to take the perspective of others and to control his behavior are developing during the school-age years, there are many things you can do to support these skills now.
 - Help your child take a step back from the emotions of the situation and think about it logically. Point out to your child how his words and actions might make others feel, like: “When you yell at your friends and tell them you don’t like their ideas, they don’t want to keep playing with you.”
 - If you are with your child when a disagreement occurs, take the time to talk with your child and his friends, if you can. Ask them to each take turns talking about what happened and how it made them feel. Then, see what ideas they can come up with for activities they all can enjoy together.
 - Increasingly, let your son handle his disagreements with his friends on his own, so that he learns that he can do it and doesn’t always need you to step in.
- 5. Use a problem-solving process.** After there has been a conflict, wait for a calm moment and involve your child in creating a plan for how to handle future problems:
 - **Identify the issue:** “You seem to have trouble playing with your friends when you don’t all agree on what to do.”
 - **Talk with your child about the goal:** “Let’s try to find some ways that you can all enjoy what you are playing without starting to boss each other around.”
 - **Work together with your child to brainstorm for solutions.** See what ideas he comes up with. You might suggest some ideas, such as taking turns in deciding what to play.
 - **Encourage your child to think about the perspectives of others** and how they might respond to his ideas.
 - **Have your child choose a plan and see how it works.** Select a plan that your child will try the next time he is playing with this friends and a problems comes up. After your child has tried out the plan, talk about how it is working and, if needed, choose a new solution.
- 6. Use books and television as opportunities to promote Perspective Taking.** When you read, tell stories or watch TV shows and movies with your child, take the time to point out what the characters might be thinking and feeling.
 - Ask your child why he thinks characters are acting in a certain way. What happened to make them feel like that?
 - Look for storybooks about characters who are set on getting their own way. How does your child respond to these stories? Ask him what he thinks the characters are thinking or feeling and what they should do.
 - Encourage your child to make emotional connections between what he sees and reads to his own experiences. Has he ever felt like those characters?

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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