

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Getting Along With Classmates

Question: My 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 interact 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.

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.

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 empower 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.

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.*

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 understand social situations by:

- **Use real life experiences.** Encourage 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?”
- **Use books and television or movies.** Ask your child to think about characters’ thoughts, feelings and actions. 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.

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.

3

Talk about others’ feelings and thoughts—beginning with YOURS.

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.”

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.”
- Share your strategies for coping. “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.”

Role play with your child.

- 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.

4

See discipline as teaching. 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?"