

by Ronald A. Kotkin, PhD, and Aubrey H. Fine, EdD

Help Your Child Make Friends

Looking out the kitchen window I could see my seven-year-old son Jack watching two boys playing basketball in their driveway. He wants desperately to make friends. I envisioned him walking up to the two boys and asking if he could play next. He would joke with them and praise their good shots. When they finished their game they would ask Jack to play.

In reality it didn't go as I envisioned. I could see by the look on his face that he really wanted to join them. He slowly walked over to where the boys were playing and stood waiting for them to notice him. He didn't say anything and just stood there watching. I could see him becoming discouraged. He lowered his head and walked away. My poor boy looked dejected. I could feel his disappointment and wanted to do something to help him.

Parents are in the best position to actually help children by addressing real problems they observe on a daily basis. Jack's father envisioned how Jack could engage the boys playing basketball and join in their game. He could see what Jack needed to learn if he was going to be able to join into a future basketball game. Jack needs to learn to stand on the sideline and wait until he is acknowledged. He needs to learn to genuinely praise good shots. Jack also needs to learn to ask if he can join the game and wait for an answer. If they say, "Not now," he needs to come back later and try again.

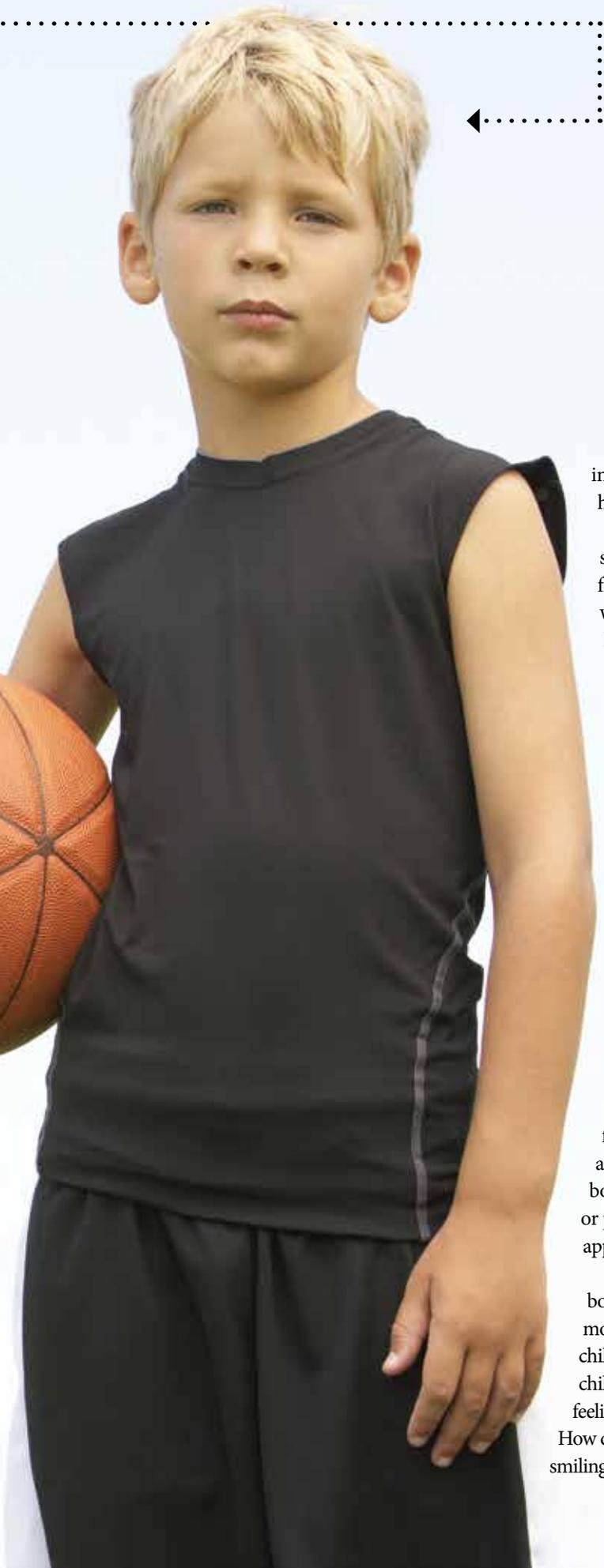
Jack's father can roleplay this scenario with Jack and prompt him to try again. He can set up a playdate with several boys to play one-on-one basketball so the boys have to take turns playing. Dad can join the game and model what they roleplayed and reinforce Jack for his efforts in taking turns, praising good shots, and patiently waiting for his turn.

Strategies to help children make friends

Some children are better at making friends than others. All children have problems making and keeping friends at some time. Parents are in an excellent position to help their children gain social competence and meet the challenges of making friends. What better place to learn to



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interact with others than in the natural setting of the home, park, or playground?

Parents can watch children playing and they can see when things don't go well. They can then structure future playdates as opportunities to teach children new ways of responding to difficult situations as well as how to make friends. The observations parents make can become the content of what they teach their children. They can then influence the behavioral choices their children make in playing with other children through modeling the skills, using role models, and reinforcing their children for trying new more effective styles of interaction.

Reading body language and facial expressions

Some children have difficulty reading body language and facial expressions. Unaware of what another child may be feeling, they charge ahead, clueless to the fact that their behavior may be inappropriate given how the other child feels. If they were able to read the other child's body language, they may have approached the situation differently. For example, a child has his arms crossed, a frown on his face. His body language says, "I'm angry. Stay away." If another child approaches him who does not read his body language, that child may be in danger of getting hit or pushed away. Children need to learn when it is best to approach another child and when it is not.

The most effective way to teach children to read the body language and emotions of other children is in the moment. Parents can take the opportunity to ask how their child thinks someone is feeling based on how the other child appears. "Look at John's face. How do you think he is feeling?" "His face looks angry." "Susan has her head down. How do you think she is feeling?" "She looks sad." "Mark is smiling. How do you think he is feeling?" "He seems happy."

Parents can influence the behavioral choices their children make in playing with other children through modeling the skills, using role models, and reinforcing their children for trying new more effective styles of interaction.

To help your child recognize how body language can tell you how a person might react, you can ask your child to tell you what might happen if he or she approaches the other child based on how the child looks. “Do you think John wants to play now?” “Would this be a good time to talk to John?” This is a first step in helping your child in understanding someone else’s perspective.

Showing interest in someone else

Parents can also teach their children how to ask other children questions in order to connect with them and understand their interests. “What games do you like to play?” “What is your favorite food?” “What are your favorite television shows?” “Do you play video games?” “What video games do you like to play?” This information can be used in planning a playdate.

You can encourage your child to try playing something that the other child said he liked. Have your child notice how the other child responds when playing a favorite game. You can then reinforce your child’s considering the other child’s preferences and playing a game the other child chose. Over time your child will learn to consider the interest of peers in a playdate.

Modeling social behavior

Parents can have a mock playdate with their child, focusing on modeling the social behaviors their child needs to learn. For example, if your child does not give eye contact and greet other children, you could model this behavior. Before starting a play session, you can have your child give you eye contact and greet you using the greeting you modeled. Modeling is an efficient way of teaching everything at once. Your child can learn the appropriate tone of voice, demeanor in greeting someone, and what to say just by watching you.

Self-as-a-model

A second strategy is through the use of video. Digital devices such as iPads, iPhones, and cameras can be used to create videos as models of appropriate social behavior. A technique called self-as-a-model can increase the effectiveness of modeling. In self-as-a model the parent videotapes the child successfully demonstrating the social behavior the parent wants the child to learn.

You can do this by modeling what you want your child to do and videotaping him or her doing it. You can then

edit the segment of the video showing your child successfully demonstrating the behavior. Once you have a sample tape, you can use the tape as a model prior to a playdate.

Self-as-a-model is effective because it eliminates the problems often associated with modeling. If your child sees someone else modeling the behavior, he can say, “Sure he can do it, but I can’t.” The child may see the model as an expert and feel incapable of doing what the expert can do. With self-as-a-model, the child can’t say that, because he or she is the model demonstrating the skill. This can be used for any social behavior you want to target. Another advantage is that children like seeing themselves on videotape.

Finding models on TV and in movies

Another strategy for teaching appropriate social behavior is through select television shows. Kids love to watch TV. Parents can sit with them and analyze the interactions of the actors in a movie or characters in a cartoon. The actors and characters demonstrate both positive and negative examples of how to handle various social situations.

You can ask your child questions about how the actor or cartoon character could have handled the same situations better. You can also focus on good models of social behaviors.

Watching TV offers an opportunity to practice reading body language by helping your child recognize the clues that tell you how someone feels. If you are able to watch superheroes that your child admires, you can use them as a prompt during a playdate. For example, you might say, “How would Spiderman handle this situation?”

Setting up playdates for success

The first step in helping your child develop skills in playing with others is observation. Setting up a playdate and observing what your child is doing that is negatively affecting relationships can help you pinpoint what your child needs to do to be more successful.

You may notice that your child lacks awareness and sensitivity of how his or her social behavior affects others. It may be that your child has not learned the skills of socially engaging peers. On the other hand, your child may have the skills but may not use them in the appropriate context.

Once you know what the problem is, you are in a position to structure a playdate to help your child learn new skills and begin to make friends. The more positive expe-



periences your child has with another child the more likely he or she will be able to foster a friendship.

Once you have identified the problem behaviors you can plan the next playdate. Remember, the goal is to have the other child want to return for another playdate. Your child needs to be sensitive to the preferences of the guest so he or she can create a fun playdate.

Parents frequently arrange playdates for their children. Sometimes the playdates do not go well. If this is the case, planning ahead can avoid unnecessary problems. Instead of ending the playdate when someone is crying, fighting, or hurt, planning can help it can end on a positive note with the guest wanting to come back.

The goal of planning a playdate is to practice preparing your child for an activity to increase the probability of success. Often parents develop a plan for an activity without making sure that their child fully understands it or

has the skills to do it. Taking the time to brief your child will increase the probability that your child will have a successful playdate. 🗨

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