

Medical Sense

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Friendships and kids, how to help children with friends

Summertime and friends. The words belong together. Unfortunately for many children, teasing or being unpopular can be a daily heart breaking experience made even more difficult during the long summer vacation. However even the 'popular' child who seems to have it all, can be struggling with burdens, such as trying to turn themselves into someone the group wants them to be. "Fortunately over the summer, there are many things parents can do to help a child improve their mood, decrease their anxiety, work on friendships and/or relieve social pressures," says Dan DeMarle Ph.D., an Education Specialist with the Rochester General Hospital Behavioral Pediatrics Program. "Parents at times need guidance, however, in learning how to help their children with these issues. The key is for parents and caregivers to teach their child the skills they need, but also to be proactive and provide opportunities for friendships and growth, and for success."

While we think about needing to teach children to read, many children also need to be taught friendships skills. We often believe that children just pick up social skills through just observing others, but in fact, just like math, friendship and social skills need to be taught. While some children need to be taught once, others need repeated instruction. While there are professionals who can help with teaching these skills, parents are in the best position to do the actual teaching. An effective strategy is to observe your child in social settings and then talk with them about what they did well but also not so well. Some children for example are "space invaders" and others are "bulldozers". Or sometimes the same child is both. A space invader stands or sit too close to others and invades their space. A bulldozer constantly is crashing into others without necessarily meaning to do so. Standing too close invariably leads to the other person feeling uncomfortable, and bulldozing into others, makes them view your child as aggressive or stumbling even though they are not. In these instances the parent over time can teach the child to pay attention to how close they are to others using the PNP rule (first state a **p**ositive, then a **n**egative, then a **p**ositive). For example, the parent may say "I like how you went up to Isaiah, but you sat too close to her on the bench, which made her feel uncomfortable. But when you saw me remind you, you did great moving back a bit like we talked about. (PNP). A similar approach can be taken for bulldozing or for the other problems children can run into.

During the summer break, parents can work on providing opportunities for children to make and learn to keep friends. Parents need to consider these points.

Opportunity – summer camps, weekend camping trips all provide opportunities to meet new people and for children to find things that they can do well in. The more children the child meets, the more likelihood there is they will find someone with some common interests.

Interests – If a child loves science, send them to a science camp. This will increase the chance for them to meet someone else who also loves science. Shared interests are often the foundation for good friendships.

Change – If a child struggles with friends at school, do not send them to camp with the same individuals who bother them at school. If this is unavoidable, let the counselors or adults know about the problem immediately so that they can be proactive in addressing the situation.

New Settings – We are more open to new experiences and people when we go to a new place. Going away on a family vacation or to a summer camp provides a higher likelihood of a child making connections with others because that other person is also more open to new people.

Get physical – Exercise not only is good for us in regards to our bodies but also for our minds and our moods. Getting outdoors over the summer will improve your and your child's moods and make them more likely to want to reach out to others in a positive way.

Lastly, turn off the TV and get out and about. There is no way your child will meet a new friend while they are in front of the TV.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT 922-4573