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## Family Focus

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who have an easier time making and keeping friends. Naturally he will tend to compare himself to them and feel even more inadequate.

Here are some suggestions for helping your child form healthy friendships:

Start early. Parents need to be involved in the early years and actively teach their child what is appropriate behavior with others. For example, it's wonderful to involve your child in a small play group or to have another child over for a play date when he is 2 or 3, but if your child has difficulty playing well with others, this is not the time to retreat into another room for conversation with other parents and a cup of tea.

A young child needs active reinforcement for using skills such as sharing, cooperating and taking turns. He also needs quiet coaching or intervention when he is not behaving nicely with his playmates. Afterwards, tell him how proud you were that he played so well and be sure to mention specifically what he did that pleased you. Let him hear you tell others how happy you were that he shared his toys or took turns.

Evan's parents had never invited another child to their house to play or to go on an outing with them. Instead, they relied upon his school, the after-school child care program and occasional visits from relatives with children close to his age to provide socialization for Evan. Evan's parents didn't feel comfortable socializing with others; they were close to their own parents and some cousins and this formed their social world. They learned that they needed to take a much more proactive approach to help Evan form friendships. They needed to show interest in others outside of their family and to model how to make new friends.

Beginning when your child is in kindergarten, find out from his teacher who he plays with in school, and ask your child if you can invite his classmate to your house to play. You want to get his buy-in,

Seven-year-old Evan began hitting other children and his parents, too, when he entered second grade. He complained that no one liked him and that he had no friends. His demeanor changed from generally easy going to angry and unhappy.

It is never easy for parents to see their children in distress. Evan's parents reached out to his teacher and other professionals for help.

When a child feels that he has no friends, he naturally concludes that he is unlikable. Then, as in the case of Evan, he may behave in unlikable ways, further confirming his doubts about himself as others react to him with anger and dislike.

Your child's belief that he has no friends can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if he becomes self-conscious about this issue. We make friends more easily when we can be positive, or at least neutral, rather than self-critical and pessimistic. It may be even more difficult for your child if he has siblings

but of course you can structure your request in such a way to succeed in accomplishing your goal. Inviting one child at a time is best so that he can practice skills involved in play, such as negotiating, cooperating and conceding graciously. Then you can expand and see if there are other classmates you can invite over at other times, again on a one-to-one basis. Hopefully, other parents will reciprocate and your child will be able have practice playing with another child in a less structured environment than school. The objective is to help your child develop a level of social comfort at an early age.

At various ages, discuss with your child what makes a good friend, and how in order to make a good friend, he needs to show he can be a good friend. With a 3-year-old you might talk about someone who shares, takes turns and isn't mean to you and to other children. With an older child, you would look at qualities like honesty, inclusiveness, showing interest and not being mean to you or to others. For a teen or adult child, you might discuss trust, common values and interests, and not being mean.

There seems to be a common denominator here. All too often, children and adults overlook or accept mean, purposely hurtful treatment from someone whom they are trying to befriend. Even though this person may have many attractive qualities, mean-spiritedness towards others is a huge red flag. It is important for both you and your child to be selective in choosing friends.

Try to keep communication open with your child so that he can come to you for support and advice. And it goes without saying that helping him develop positive self-esteem will enable him to avoid feeling that he is socially defective in some way. He will be better able to observe situations objectively instead of being self-critical.

Be an active listener. Offer compassion and understanding. Elicit more information by asking him why he feels a certain way. Ask him questions so that he can possibly reassess a situation. For example, if he tells you that no one on his soccer team likes him, ask him, "What about Jake? I see him smiling at you and talking to you." Be surprised that he thinks no one likes him because you know that he's such a fun, interesting person. Overall, try to encourage him without telling him what to do or how to feel.

Don't discuss your child's feelings with anyone who can't be trusted not to blab to others. You don't want to take a risk that other children will find out.

When child can understand, discuss introversion and extroversion. Introverts tend to be socially more restrained and less demonstrative. They sometimes give others an impression of indifference or unfriendliness. In reality, they may not feel this way at all. In contrast, extroverts typically show enthusiasm and eagerness to communicate and get to know others. They have more social energy for exploring relationships, whereas introverts need to conserve their more limited social energy.

In the case of one sibling who seems to have more friends and an easier time making friends than another, personality style may be a large factor. Help your more introverted child learn to accept himself and know that he, too, is capable of forming good friendships. He may just need more time and effort because social ease may not come naturally.

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