The Lafayette Book Club Presents

BEST FRIENDS, WORST ENEMIES

Understanding the Social Lives of Children

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How can you make a difference in your child’s social life?

• Let them learn how to fix problems for themselves
• Listen sympathetically
• Stay confident
• Provide opportunities for children to connect with other adults or children
• Provide early attachment and love
• Don’t overreact to their situations
• Share your perspective on the situation calmly
• Realize how your past experiences with social cruelty effect how you respond to your child.

Groups vs. Individual Friendships

• Groups – social highways for childhood; some move quickly while others have to try to keep pace; no one will dare to “break” or you could get lost; some go at a typical speed allowing most children to join in safely; children feel the need to keep pace with a group which can cause them to make unsafe decisions; uniformity causes children to not be true to themselves; many children feel the need to belong to a group in order to continue moving forward and upward

• Friendships – side streets and back roads of childhood; move at their own developmental pace; can be an individual with friends from many places with different interests; nourishes the soul; having at least one friend may protect your child from many traumatic social situations. Parents need to recognize, support and celebrate their child’s friends.

Children need friendships and acceptance by a group

Attachments – Family Matters
Attachment Theory - attachment to mothers early on leads to positive peer relationships. It increases a child’s confidence, feeling of safety & security, competence, and feeling of being loved.

Attachment is...
1. Parents who are responsive to children’s needs – food, quiet time together. Do not hover – you do not need to satisfy every need and impulse. Frustration and tears are a normal part of development.
2. Communication through conversations with your child
3. Empathy
4. Observation – checking in with your child to let them know you are there when they need it
5. Your child having knowledge that you are thinking about them even when you aren’t there.
6. Sensitivity
Benefits of attachment
1. Promotes good friendships – they learn to be caring, competent, share and take turns.
2. Provides an example of what socialization is
3. Models trust and availability
4. Shows that people can be reliable and they can enjoy the company of others
5. Builds a foundation for confidence and competence
6. Allows children to move away from parents and find their own place in the world
7. Teaches them to be successful members of the community
8. Increases self-esteem
9. Self-reliant
10. Lower rates of mental illness
11. Do better in school than those who have insecure attachments
12. Helps them cope with difficult social problems (i.e. a child took their toy, someone is excluding them) because it sends the message that the whole world isn’t that bad, even though I’m having a problem
13. Learn empathy
14. They can “read” emotions

Insecure attachments
1. Make a child’s future relationships challenging
2. Children can be demanding
3. Clingy
4. Withdrawn
5. Social anxiety - Avoid interactions with peers
6. May hurt or lash out at others
7. Can be inhibited, aggressive, or unable to share and take turns
8. Bossy
9. Children may lash out first to avoid being rejected
10. May follow along with groups because they are afraid to ask

Key Points to remember:
1. Cuddle you child
2. Applaud their explorations
3. Push them gently from the nest, always leaving room to come back
4. Understand that it’s ok if they regress – it’s their way of checking back in to make sure you are there
5. Impulsive children need to be checked in with and reminded that you want them to be adventurous, but safely.
6. Teach your children about being sociable – enrolling them in classes, leaving them with caregivers, arranging play dates at other parents homes.
7. Have confidence in your child’s social ability. Even when things don’t seem to be going well, give them a chance to work it out.
8. Try not to let your past experience(s) jade you in how you respond or help your child through difficult times. What you needed when you were young may not be what they need now.
Children and Friendships

Friendship Toolbox
1. Proximity
2. Familiarity
3. Ability to coordinate play
4. Ability to sustain play
5. Ability to resolve conflict

Ages 7-12
- Children review the rules of gender
- They try out their social power
- Groups set the standard for kids – what is “cool”
- Friendships provide a mutual respect and affirmation

Have you ever had a time in your life where you have changed who you are in the face of a group, and when you returned home you did the complete opposite? Pg. 51 The friendship story – Have you ever felt that your “clothes” aren’t up to par with that of the society you live in?

Adolescent Conversations
- Need for Privacy
- Learning to confide in their friends
- Personal disclosure is the building blocks to a trusting friendship
- They share confidential information with the people who they feel understand them i.e. thoughts about themselves, fears, disgust with adults, secrets about their family life
- Looking for empathy from a friend
- All about IDENTITY – “Who am I?” “Who are you?” “What does being your friend say about me?”
- Driven by a need for intimacy, in order to show devotion to their friends

Typically children over the age of 10 begin to share deeper thoughts and feelings with their peers. Has this begun to happen in your home? How have you dealt with it? If not, how will you deal with it when the time comes?

*Jack’s Story – p55-58 – the story of a boy Jack who, in order to maintain his popular status, is no longer friends with Hal. Jack realizes that Hal is probably the best friend he will ever have and hopes one day to be able to gain his friendship back.

Quality vs. Quantity
- The average childhood friendship lasts less than a year – p. 62
- It’s not the quantity of friends your child has, but the quality
Adolescents Definition of Quality – “an open ear to listen to me, don’t judge me, different perspective on me, gives me no slack, gives me the power to talk about anything, something to smile at, give me hope, strength, courage, trust, self-confidence.”
• “BEST” – doesn’t have to be the only person with the qualities your child enjoys. They are close, trusting, intimate, and sustained friendships.

“Is my child happy?” or “Is my child lonely?”

Same-Sex Friendships:
• define us
• We see ourselves through them and become ourselves
• Shape your self-worth and sense of self
• Allows us the strength to overcome previous bad experiences and support us through the bad ones that are yet to come
• Validate your interests, hopes, and fears
• Provide affection
• Provide opportunities for self-disclosure
• Teach sensitivity
• Templates for later romantic and parental relationships
• Reciprocity
• Commitment
• Teaches children how to resolve conflicts
• Loyalty – offers a chance to be vulnerable and provides support without the fear of rejection.
• Confidence to try new things, even when your friend is not there with you

Think back to a past relationship/friendship you have had.
1. What role did that friend play in your life then?
2. How has that friendship affected you today?
3. Is that person still a part of your life?

Laws of Groups
Law 1: “Be Like Your Peers” – the desire to belong
Law 2: “You Must Belong to a Group” – who’s in, we all hunger for identity and closeness
Law 3: “Be In or Be Out” – inclusion and exclusion
Law 4: “Find a Place in the Social Hierarchy” – all children inevitably fight for a position in a group.
Law 5: “You Must Play a Role”

Group Power
• Groups may cause children to change who they are, say and do things you wouldn’t expect.
• The desire to belong is so powerful, that children will go to the group even if they know it is morally wrong.
• “Us” and “them” mentality – children vs. adults
• If you don’t join in with the group, you could end up excluded, temporarily or forever. The risk is too big to take so children go with the “group”
• Groups can cause children to lose part of their sense of individual responsibility and empathy. At times this could cause the group lose direction and ultimately make bad decisions. (diffusion of responsibility)
• Groups tend to engage in riskier behavior than if children were alone. (risky shift)
• Many children will suspend their better judgment to go along with the ideas, values and ethics of the group. (groupthink)
• Breaking group rules is the quickest way to be out of the group. Therefore, children are forced to comply with the rules established by the leader.

Painful Group Practices
1. Teasing and Name-Calling (pg. 106)
   - Shows strength and that a child has power over another child even if the intent isn’t to fight
   - Helps a child maintain a level of status within a group
   - Young children use name calling as a way to protect and defend themselves. They view it as a way to resolve a conflict.
   - MEDIA – children learn the way to be funny is by insulting someone – i.e. American Idol. On sitcoms the insults are followed by audiences laughing which reinforces to children that verbal attacks are funny, well received, and a great way to show you are dominant and “cool”

   “If everyone (adults and children included) knows it hurts someone to be teased, then why don’t they realize that it is wrong and stop doing it?” – pg 108

   - Teasing happens to reinforce the rules of the group – it can be toward those in the group to prove worthiness or toward those out of the group to make sure they remain on the outside. If you tell on someone who is teasing in your group, you will be immediately shunned, and possibly targeted.
   - Some children are resilient and don’t care what others say. That’s because they have self-confidence, other friends who make them feel accepted, or they just accept it for what it is and move on.

   Often children don’t want their parents to intervene thinking that it could make the situation worse. How can you help them?
2. **Exclusion, Rejection and Scapegoating (110)**
   - Scapegoating – when a child is the victim of everyone’s rejection or exclusion.
   - Rejection involves the whole group ostracizing one child.
   - **5 basic types of children**
     - **Popular** – high levels of sociability and cognitive ability, less aggressive.
     - **Accepted** – many positive attributes, sociable, and high levels of cognitive ability
     - **Rejected** – socially they are at a high risk. Some children can be aggressive in which case children will continually reject them for their disruptive behaviors. Some of these children are bullies and therefore are aggressive to maintain status or defend themselves.
     - **Neglected** – neither liked nor disliked. Not disrupted or distressed in the classroom. Hard to notice who they are. They lack some social skills and tend to withdraw and isolate themselves rather than assert themselves into a group. Although not in a group, they usually have one friend.
     - **Controversial** – some children are liked and some are disliked. They can be the class clown or the queen bee. These children are the BULLIES and are usually rebellious. These children don’t always know they are controversial and can be taught how their behaviors impact other children causing them to be liked or disliked.
     - **Ambiguous** – they have many characteristics of all the other types of children.
   - Rejected children are at risk for a higher rate for adult mental illness i.e. depression.
   - Children may retaliate – using aggressive means such as Columbine.
   - Interventions for rejected children should include private therapy and school involvement.
   - Successful school programs target bystanders, because in a group all children lose a sense of who is responsible and therefore no one does anything to stop the scapegoating.

3. **Bullying**
   - Not all bullies are the same children each time. It can be different children within a group depending on the social situation.
   - Children who are bystanders are glad that someone else is the target and they are not.
   - Rejected children who bully feel that the victim “deserves it”
   - Most bullies are larger in size than their victims, think quick verbally, and have a higher level of aggression.
   - They lack guilt and remorse for hurting someone else’s feelings.
   - Children bullied will show many signs of anxiety.
   - “Their motivation, whether conscious or unconscious, it to prove to themselves that they are not at the bottom” p. 126
   - Some children bully to try to gain status or popularity and also not to lose it.
   - Some bullies have are skilled empathetically and therefore use that to their advantage as to what can really hurt someone.
   - **MYTH** – children who bully have a low self-esteem
4. **Hazing**
- All children yearn to be accepted into a group, learn their secrets, and gain privileges.
- Some children like to create competitions to show their power and control “can you run as fast as me?”
- Hazing involves intentional humiliation on the individual as they strive to prove they are worthy of becoming a member of a group.
- Children don’t complain, quit or report hazing because that would make the group think you aren’t loyal or committed.
- Kids who have been through it once support and defend it because if they have done it, so can the next group. They want to keep the tradition going.

**Managing Conflict**
- Children go from friendship, to competition, wanting to hurt someone’s feelings, back to friendship and humor (all within a day or couple of hours).
- Every child wants 3 things in life: **connection, recognition, and power**.
  - Connection – we all have a need to feel connected to another person. It is the basis of friendship.
  - Recognition – all children want to compete and feel successful. We want others to value us.
  - Power – usually experienced by gender (boys through physical dominance, girls through words). This can occur at home or in from of their peers.
- Children need to learn to manage their own needs while also trying to establish and maintain friendships, self-regulation and self-control
- Trios – one person eventually wants full status as a friend, or two friends could align which hurts the third.
- When there is a conflict between two girls they usually tell the third instead of talking to each other.

**Cliques**
- Begin as clubs and become gangs of children who hang out together
- They can make you sacrifice a friendship to join
- They are the result of a person’s need for inclusion and group cohesion
- No adult can affirm a child more than their peers
- Parents feel peer pressure, children fear loneliness
- Kids will even join deviant cliques, just to be a part of a group
- The trauma that a child can experience from being excluded from a clique can have lasting emotional effects. No one is equipped to handle this kind of rejection and defend themselves again extreme hate.
- Not all cliques are bad
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER ROLES: Girls vs. Boys</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spend more time on intimacy and relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relational aggression - with body language, harsh words, and silent treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valued for appearance and sociability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminine – socially powerful and popular</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preschool/Elementary school – spend more time socializing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Status depends on physical attractiveness, talents, and ability to establish and manage relationships</td>
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<td>Popularity – girls try to avoid being called snobs so they fake niceness, focus on socializing, and increasing their status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teasing – aimed at gender stereotypes – fat, ugly, slut, bitchy, gossiping/rumors. Adults respond by ignoring or gossiping to other mom’s about another girls behavior</td>
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<td>Conflicts tend to last longer and therefore are reported more frequently</td>
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Extracurricular activities are critical for all children. It helps them find a place to belong, decreases stereotypes, and lessens the intense feelings of social exclusion.

Popularity and social standing can also affect adult relationships. As children’s friendships are strained or built, parents friendships are likely to change.

What leadership qualities do your child posses?

What can parents do?

1. **Don’t worry so much**
   Get another person’s perspective on your child, don’t micromanage, help them resolve conflicts instead of worrying that they have them, and don’t set unrealistic expectations. It’s ok to worry if they don’t enjoy spending time with friends, it’s ok to worry if they are always isolated, but if they are happy, play with children and are enjoying the one or many friends they have, don’t worry so much.

2. **Recognize the difference between friendship and popularity**
   Friendship provides affection, intimacy, reliable alliance, instrumental aid, nurturance, companionship, and enhancement of self-worth.

3. **Support your child’s friendships**
   You may need to model for them how to begin to make friends.

4. **Welcome your children’s friends into your home**
   It allows your child to feel safe, their friends to feel welcome, and provides them with positive role models. Communicate with their friends when they come over, but don’t overdo it or hover.

5. **Be a good friendship model and teacher**

6. **Provide a wide range of friendship and group opportunities**
   Socialize across generations and races.
7. Make friends with the parents of your child’s friends (and enemies)
8. Empathize with your child’s social pain, but keep it in perspective
   It’s natural to feel their pain and hurt, but don’t continually “interview them for pain”. That is, don’t always ask them if someone was mean or did they sit alone or with friends. When parents tend to overreact, talking only about the difficult painful aspects of their day, sometimes children will continue to distort the truth only to gain your attention, empathy and support. The truth is, not long after they have told you, they have forgotten and reconciled their differences and are back playing with the child again. Usually, you are left still feeling terrible for them.
9. Know where your child stands in a group
   If you suspect they are at risk, talk to your teacher, administrator, school counselor, and/or outside professionals. Model for your child how to socialize appropriately, don’t take part in their gossip and social cruelty. Parents tend to gossip either about children in the school, or about their parents. Either way, your children see this and it reinforces that what they are doing is socially acceptable.
10. Take the long view

What Can Schools Do?
   1. Include everyone
   2. Be proactive
      a. Friendship Groups
      b. Student Behavior Committee
      c. Class discussions with School Counselor
   3. Instill ethical standards
   4. Encourage good citizenship
   5. Take a systems approach
   6. Harness power of teachers

Don’t overreact or under react and certainly, “Don’t leap into the pool and start drowning yourself.” pg. 264