



Succeeding in school involves more than academics; developing these life skills will help your child navigate the school halls with confidence.

Social Skills They Need

BY JUNE ALLAN CORRIGAN

WE ALL LIKE TO THINK OUR CHILDREN are intelligent when it comes to academics, and perhaps yours does show an early ability with numbers or is reading at a 2nd grade level while still in kindergarten. But is he also emotionally intelligent? Will he take it in stride when the cafeteria is out of chocolate milk, or will he stage a nuclear meltdown right there in the lunch line?

Being able to control impulses, delay gratification, and identify and manage feelings are all skills that fall under the category of “emotional intelligence.” Try sticking around for a while after drop-off one day to examine your child’s behavior on the playground. How well does she

interact with others? Is she content to wait for her turn with the ball or just as apt to elbow her way past someone else?

“Becoming proficient at academic skills is only one aspect of the school experience. Another very important area that I don’t think really gets enough attention is the acquisition of social skills,” says Lillian G. Katz, professor emerita and codirector of the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Social intelligence is all about being able to relate to others, respond to their feelings and cues, and negotiate conflict. Mastering social skills will ensure that your child has

friends to play with and a better than average chance at doing well in school. Here are four such skills you can help your child develop.

1. HOW TO BE A JOINER

Picture this: A game of dodgeball is in progress. Your child is standing on the sidelines, unsure about how she can get involved in the action. Knowing how to join an activity or a preexisting group is a skill that requires a bit of finesse. “For a child, this means being assertive enough to ask to play and being diplomatic enough to not barge in and take over the game,” says Erika Rich, a child psychologist in Los Angeles

who runs social skills groups for children.

It also includes being able to take no for an answer. “Even socially skilled children are told no when they ask to join in about 50 percent of the time,” Rich says. “Figuring out how to brush it off and find something else to do is a valuable skill.”

2. HOW TO BE A GOOD LOSER

Once your child has joined a group or game, he'll wear out his welcome fast if he doesn't know how to lose gracefully. This draws on at least one or two skills that are often stressed from a very young age: taking turns and sharing. But your child also needs to be able to communicate what he is thinking and feeling as well as listen to what others are thinking and feeling, says Judith Wagner, a professor of child development and education at Whittier College in California. He won't gain anything standing out on the playing field arguing that the ball was within bounds without listening to what others saw from a better vantage point.

If you haven't cheerfully “lost” a board game to your child on purpose, take the next opportunity to do so. It's an excellent way to model good loser behavior.

How you listen and react to your child's perceived injustices on the playground can

also influence her behavior in win-lose situations. Children often mull over, with their parents, the social problems they dealt with that day at school, Wagner says. “They quickly learn that they're likely to capture their parents' attention by recounting who hurt their feelings or made them feel left out or unappreciated,” she says. “While it's important to validate a child's feelings, it's better to promote self-reliance by asking ‘How will you handle it tomorrow if the same boys won't let you shoot hoops with them?’”

3. HOW TO BE A SAVVY NEGOTIATOR

Being able to negotiate ideas is an important skill, says Rich, and it's two-pronged. Not only does your child need to explain his ideas effectively; he also needs to truly listen to his peers' ideas before making a final decision. For example, why is his suggestion for classroom pet any more compelling than another student's? Saying “Because I think tarantulas are cool!” simply doesn't provide enough information. Meanwhile, another classmate's more detailed argument about why a chameleon is the better choice could sway the popular vote, and if your child keeps an open mind, he may even agree.

Parents can sharpen their children's

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negotiation skills through everyday play situations. Act like a kid and really care about whose turn it is or who gets to have the red or blue marker. Announce that you don't want to be “it” first during the next game of tag, and argue the point if need be. Once children practice negotiating in a safe environment with a trusted adult, Rich says, they will be able to do it more easily when the stakes are higher.

4. HOW TO STAND UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT

With the increased focus on bullying in schools, parents are eager for their children to know what to do if they see someone being bullied or experience it themselves. Younger students generally have no trouble running to a teacher when they perceive the no-teasing rule being broken. Once they reach the age of 7 or so, however, most kids are loathe to tattle.

To help them learn to handle this kind of situation themselves, Wagner recommends using third-person stories. Find sample scenarios for children to role-play in one of the many anti-bullying books on the market, such as *What To Do When Your Temper Flares: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Problems With Anger*, by Dawn Huebner. “What's key is to realize that these ‘one size fits all’ approaches are only a starting point. To be truly effective, anti-bullying lessons must be tailor-made for the situation and each child's history and personality,” Wagner says.

Talk about what sort of response feels comfortable to your child. She may fit more easily into the role of siding with the victim, showing support that way rather than by standing up to the teaser. Don't push her into being a vocal opponent of injustice when a quieter response may be truer to her nature.

Wagner recommends giving kids plenty of opportunities to play with children of varying ages in a setting that is unstructured by adults—and that does not include video games. “The most important thing is for children to have face time with other children,” she says. Nothing beats in-person interaction and play as a foundation for the development of social skills. **!**

Learning to communicate ideas effectively will sharpen your child's negotiation skills.

