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Dear Parents of Young Children – A Young Child Looks At Other Children
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Dear Parents of young children

A Young Child Looks At Other Children

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"NO, YOU CAN'T have it"
 "You can't play with us"
 "I am not a baby"
 "We dumped all your blocks out"
 "I'm going home, I won't ever come back again."

Does this sound familiar? When you hear it going on in your home day after day you wonder if your child will ever become a friendly, sociable being.

It is hard to realize that these seemingly unfriendly words represent the child's first clumsy attempts to be friendly. Children are not born with social knowhow. They learn on their own level by using whatever skills they possess.

Recently I looked at a study entitled, "The Social Approaches of Little Children." The author attempted to classify the different approaches used by children in a group which she observed. She referred to them as:

Affectionate

Patting, holding hands

Friendly

Smiling, helping, offering something

Neutral

Looking at or watching

Unfriendly

Teasing, snatching, interfering with play

Hostile

Hitting, biting, kicking

The children in this study used friendly approaches almost half of the time. Next in order they used unfriendly approaches and neutral approaches some of the time. On the other hand, they used affectionate approaches and hostile approaches only a small per cent of the time.

This study suggests that little children use a variety of approaches with other children in the process of learning. As parents we tend to notice their unfriendly ones more than the friendly ones.

Children need some opportunity to be with other children in order to practice and to improve their social skills. This, of course, is one of the values of brothers and sisters growing up together in a family. The home furnishes a natural practice ground, if not at times an arena.

Brothers and Sisters

"Why do children in the same family do so much quarreling? Why can't they love each other?" you may ask. They usually do—you soon find out if another child picks on either one, or if one or the other is punished.

Brothers and sisters quarrel oftentimes because of the natural competition and rivalry that is present. They are in a very real sense competing for the time, attention and affection of their parents. Parents will save themselves endless trouble if they will give such affection freely. If a child knows that he will get his

share of affection, he will be less likely to struggle against the others and be less resentful when it is given to a brother or a sister.

Four-year-old Mary may be (unconsciously) striving for her share of affection in relation to two-year-old Tim. If Tim breaks her favorite doll, Mary may feel doubly threatened; that is, the same person who comes between her and her parents is the same person who breaks a favorite toy.

Sometimes it helps to let a child know that you know how he feels when younger sister takes his train away. If he knows that he can talk out his feelings with you without being scolded, it may help to get rid of his cross feelings at least some of the time.

It helps if each child has shelves, drawers, clothes, etc., that are his alone and that are respected by everyone in the family including mother and father. Asking permission to use others' belongings is a way of teaching respect for things.

Do you find yourself repeatedly blaming one child when something goes wrong? It goes like this, "Now I wonder what has happened, Mark has probably done it again." Remember that it takes two to make a quarrel and that even an overly aggressive child is not aggressive all the time. Studies show that children who are usually cooperative or usually aggressive may act in quite the opposite way at times.

No matter how much brothers or sisters enjoy each other they may become irritable from having been together too long. If at all possible, separate them briefly even if it means



arranging separate play activities in different rooms. Caution—Suggest this as something they will like, not as punishment.

Remember that complete agreement between brothers and sisters is no more to be desired or expected than constant quarreling. It is better to let them work out their own quarrels although there may be times when you must interfere in case one is getting hurt. Also when quarreling goes on too much of the time you may want to separate the children or suggest a substitute activity.

The Neighbor's Children

Parents are sometimes puzzled by a child who begs for the company of other children and then behaves in a silly, unsocial, or even unkind way when he gets in the group. He probably did want companionship but he is not grown up enough to know just how to use it or what to do. In this case it would be well to plan ahead with a child, suggesting what toys to play with, where they might play, what juice they might serve—in general, what to expect. At first it is better to let little children play together only for a short period of time. Also if mother keeps in sight the experience may be less frightening.

The other day I dropped into a home where three small boys were engaged in an elaborate building program with a new set of blocks on the living room floor. The oldest boy seemed to be engineering a very cooperative effort, with each child having a part in the building. This was the only play activity in sight and for the moment, at least, it was commanding their full attention.

Although it is somewhat easier for children to play out-of-doors, in either case, it is necessary for the adult to carry on quite a bit of "behind the scenes" supervision.

When a neighbor child is too bold it helps to be courteously firm and clear as to what you expect when children visit at your house. You can say, "Stevie, we like people to knock before they come in to our house," or "Over here we don't step on the new doll; we take it for a ride in the cab."

It helps also if the neighbors can occasionally get together and talk about the children's play and attempt to reach some kind of agreement as to what is expected in the neighborhood.

Children Who Seem "Different"

Sometimes children "gang up" on one child in the neighborhood. Indirect methods are better than direct interference. It might help to invite the "outcast" and one of the gang



to play at your home where you can set the stage for some friendly play.

A group of children are playing store and are heard to say, "Billy, we don't want you to play with us." An adult might say, "Billy could deliver the groceries for you on his bike!" This suggestion can easily start a whole new train of thought in which exclusion is soon forgotten.

Parents should be careful lest the personal feuds between adults in the neighborhood bear upon the play of little children. It is so easy to plant a seed of prejudice in the minds of children simply by what we do or say about the neighbors.

Group Play

Some of you would like suggestions for supervising a group of little children who might be in your charge such as an organized play group or a pre-school church group.

If you are working with several pre-school children, do not feel it necessary to involve the whole group. Let those who want to, take part. Some will be too young for any kind of group play. Just let them play

around by themselves. This does mean more adult help so that the "wanderers" can be kept from disturbing those who are in the group activity. It is well to provide one adult for every 8 or 10 children. One or two adults with many children can only "ride herd" on the group. Sometimes a young person of Junior High age can supplement the adult help. In this case it would be well to assign a specific task to the younger worker such as reading to the group. This extra hand will free the older person for overall supervision and for coping with emergencies.

While it is a richer play experience where two or more children can play together, remember it is hard for little children to take turns. To reduce snatching, it is better to have enough materials to go around or in some cases, duplicate materials. Sometimes little children bring a favorite toy from home. Again it would be better not to force a child to share; perhaps just showing the toy to the others will be as much sharing as he can manage.

Little children easily become over-stimulated when playing in a group. It would be well then to plan some activities that would be restful and less stimulating.

This letter suggests that:

If we will try to notice the number of friendly approaches which little children make, we will be less discouraged over the times when they appear clumsy or unfriendly.

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FAMILY ACTIVITIES WITH PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

- Why not a family sing at the table choosing songs that will appeal to the young? A singing game is a fine way of involving everyone.
- Parents, what are some of your skills that you can share with your children—can you draw, paint, sing, do sleight-of-hand tricks or what? In drawing or painting, do not set standards too high or encourage imitation. Rather, let your child work out his own ideas. The fun of doing it together will be sufficient.
- Some evening let both Mother and Dad read parts of the story. This will add interest and the joy of everyone taking part.
- The next day, follow up the story by using clothespins to make some of the story book people. Use scraps of yarn, cloth, or paper for the clothes and hair. Glue milk bottle caps to the feet to make the dolls stand, or mount them in modeling clay.
- On one of those evenings when you linger at the table, start the question, "Guess what happened to me today?" as a time for listening and telling.

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