

Helping Your Child with Social Problems¹

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A Parent's Dilemma

The school-age years are a period of tremendous social and emotional growth for your child. Your child experiences a lot of new social situations as she enters school, joins out-of-school activities, and meets a wider circle of people. In her expanded world, she must develop strategies for dealing with occasional social difficulties, even rejection by friends. A fight with a best friend can seem like the end of the world. When your child comes to you with social problems, you can face a real dilemma. You do not want to see your child in pain, but can you solve the problem? Should you even try?



Much as parents may want to, they cannot solve their child's social problems for her. They probably do not understand the ins and outs of the child's social world enough to even suggest a good solution. But even if they could solve their child's problem, they should not try to. To develop a healthy sense of herself as a capable person, a child needs to learn how to solve problems on her own. For example, her parents cannot make friends for her, so she needs to develop the social skills for dealing with peers.

However, parents can play a crucial role in providing their child with emotional support and teaching her how to solve problems.

Providing Support and Guiding Problem-Solving

As your child grows, your role as a parent changes. Your challenge as a parent is to understand and fulfill your role at each stage of your child's development. When your child was younger, he needed you to be mainly his caregiver and protector. Now in his school-age years, he needs you to be mostly his encourager. As your child encounters a wider range of experiences and people, he needs a parent who is interested and involved during good and bad times. Being interested and involved does not mean doing everything for your child, trying to make his life perfectly happy and smooth. It means giving him emotional support and teaching him how to solve problems on his own.

When your child comes to you with a social problem, you can help him using the process below. By using this process, you give your child support and encouragement and also show him a way to solve problems.

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Guidelines

Listen to your child. Listen to your child in a kind caring way. Reflect what you hear. For example, say, “It sounds like you’re hurt because Jamie played with Justin and not you.” Reflecting what you hear acknowledges your child’s feelings and helps him identify them. It also encourages him to talk further. Invite your child to correct or expand on what you said you heard.

As you listen to your child, avoid giving advice, criticizing, or belittling. Even resist the urge to talk about similar experiences of your own. Talking about your own experience could seem to your child like not listening to what he is saying about his experience.

Sometimes all a child wants is for his parent to listen with understanding. When your child comes to you, make sure that he does not just want to vent. Sometimes all a child needs is someone to really listen to him. Make sure your child actually wants help before going on to explore a possible solution to the problem.



Help your child identify the problem. Your child may be able to say exactly what the problem is at the beginning of the conversation or she may have to talk awhile to get to it. For example, she may, at first, talk angrily about how stuck-up her friend has become. Eventually, she may express hurt and sadness about losing her friend to a new circle. Listen for a while to make sure you have gotten to the root of the problem. Restate what you hear, asking your child if you correctly understand what the problem is. For example, say, “I’m hearing that you got mad about what happened today. I’m also hearing that you have been hurt for a while now. Is that the problem? Is it that you seem to have lost your friend?” This will give both of you a clear starting point for the next step.

Help your child brainstorm solutions. Avoid telling your child what to do. Instead, ask him, “What could you do in this situation?” If he says, “I don’t know,” invite him again to brainstorm with

you, to think up any possible solutions, even if they seem crazy or he does not like them. At this point—if your child is having trouble getting started—you can make a few suggestions. Write down all suggestions without evaluating them.

Help your child choose a solution. After your child has suggested several solutions, go over the consequences of each one. Ask your child, “What might happen if you did that? Would that solve your problem for you?” After considering each option, ask your child, “What sounds like the best solution to you?” If your child chooses a safe solution, even if it is not the one you would choose, let him use it.

Additional Guidelines

As you support and guide your child through social ups and downs, keep the following guidelines in mind.

Keep things in perspective. The situation your child comes to you with might seem like the end of the world to your child. In your understanding for your child, with memories of your own experiences, it might even seem like the end of the world to you. Recognize, though, that just as you survived ups and downs, your child will, too. In fact, he will benefit from learning to deal with such situations. By all means, ask your child about his day and help him when he comes to you with problems, but avoid getting overly involved in the ins and outs of his social life.

Teach your child how to handle different social situations. You began this process when your child was a toddler. For example, you began to teach your toddler how to share and how to say please and thank you. Your child continues to need your coaching as she grows older and encounters more social situations. As your child works with you to solve a problem, remember where she is in her emotional and social development. Even if she is able to come up with a good solution to her problem, she may not have the skills to implement it. You may want to talk to her about how she is going to put her solution into action or practice what she is going to say or do.

Provide opportunities for your child to work out problems with friends. Most of the time, helping your child think through what he wants to do about a problem is the best help you can give him. Sometimes, though, your child may need a little extra assistance. For example, if you know your child wants to resolve an argument with his best friend, you can arrange for the boys to get together in a low-stress environment, such as a park. You can provide the opportunity for your child to work out a problem with his friend without getting too involved or trying to solve the problem for him.

Conclusion

Every child faces social problems at some time. While painful when they occur, these problems are a normal part of growing up. With your support and guidance, your child can learn to handle them. However, if your child seems to have a recurring or serious problem, such as not having any friends—or being bullied by another child—you may want to talk to your child's teacher, a school counselor, or a family counselor for additional help.



When your child comes to you upset over a problem with a friend, it is natural to want to fix the situation for your child. But even if you could fix the situation, that is not what your child needs. Your child needs your love and encouragement and also your guidance in figuring out how he wants to solve the problem. With your support, your child will learn important skills and develop confidence in his own abilities.

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