Guiding your child to social success

As a parent, there always seems to be too many things to worry about; are your kids eating enough? Exercising? Getting good grades? And most importantly, are they happy?

More and more parents are also concerned about their children's social-emotional well-being. Ease your anxiety and help ensure your children's social success with the tried and true strategies that follow.

Support Relationships

One of the best ways for children to successfully adjust is through friendships. Studies show that solid friendships reduce behaviour problems and increase grades by improving kids' attitudes towards school. Through interactions with friends, children learn important social skills such as co-operation, effective communication, emotional control, empathy and conflict resolution. Ensuring your children not only have friends, but that their friendships are healthy and mutually beneficial can play a role in their social success later in life. Support strong friendships and:

Encourage kids to bring friends home. Knowing that you support their friendships and are interested in their peer group inspires kids to make friends and helps them feel confident and comfortable bringing buddies back to the house. It's also a great chance for you to get to know who your children are hanging out with and to see how they interact with friends. Is it a healthy relationship? Are they being taken advantage of? Are the kids having a positive influence on each other? These are all things you need to know to get an accurate picture of your children's social development.

Get to know friends' parents. Being a role model is a great way to demonstrate positive interactions. Seeing friendships blossom between you and the parents of your children's friend shows support and helps strengthen bonds with their own friends. It also shows your kids how to act appropriately—e.g. introducing themselves to other children, dealing with disagreements, etc.—helping to build confidence and reinforce positive interactions.

Discuss friendships together. Encourage kids to tell you about their friends and any interesting or funny stories they may have and share some of your own. Open and honest discussion not only connects you with your kids, but also helps children learn friends are something that should be valued and respected.

Teach Good Social Skills

Children look up to their parents. You are their very first teachers, so be conscious of how you handle social situations. The more you guide and model positive social interactions, the quicker your children will learn what is acceptable and what's not. Follow the tips and your child may emerge as a social butterfly before you know it.

Talk about positive social interactions and inclusion. Kids usually learn through rules and repetition. Go over the rules of social interaction on a daily basis and get your children to join in to see if they can remember them. Good rules to start with include, "be gentle," "share," and "use nice words" as they frame positive behaviours. Of course rules can and should be added and modified as the children get older to fit new dynamics, issues and behaviours.

Aside from memorizing rules, encourage kids to come up with their own and talk about examples of times they remembered and followed rules well. Pairing the rule with a real-world example helps ingrain the rule until following it eventually becomes second nature.

Discuss conflict resolution strategies. No matter how many rules they've memorized, kids, like adults, are going to have arguments, but it's how they deal with them that's most important. Children are always watching, so use the opportunity to show them how to resolve arguments effectively. When you are dealing with aggravating situations, be sure to model good conflict resolution behaviour by speaking in a firm tone, without yelling and expressing points constructively.

Talk about the emotions you are feeling and why you're feeling them. When children can match facial expressions with an emotion, it helps them learn empathy. It also helps kids better understand these feelings when they arise within conflicts, equipping them with the necessary tools (verbal expression, empathy and anger management) to resolve the situation without a major "blow out."

Practice! It's great to talk about social skills but kids will learn more by putting these skills into action. Take children to the park or get them involved in after-school activities. These settings encourage social skill practice—from introductions, to talking in turn, to sharing, to conflict resolution. Watch kids from afar to see how they're doing and speak with them later about anything you think they need to work on. Frame feedback positively or you may discourage kids from socializing or make them feel self-conscious when they do.

If little ones are having trouble "fitting in" at school, outside interests with a new group of like-minded children can also help your children develop new, more positive relationships with peers that share similar interests, and can be a huge confidence booster.

Use books to reinforce what you discuss. Having books around that reinforce all of these lessons make great bedtime stories and the repetition will help keep all of the information fresh in kids' minds.

Promote Self-Esteem

When children are younger, their self-esteem is based on how they think their parents and other important adults view them. If they feel loved, safe, comfortable and accepted by these adults, high self-esteem usually follows.

As they get older though, friends' opinions will likely carry more weight - though a strong family base is still very important. Help your child feel accepted and happy at every age and stage and:

Keep the lines of communication open. Encourage children to talk to you when problems arise with their peers. This is where knowing your kids' friends comes in handy. Don't be surprised if tweens or teens become increasingly tight-lipped about friends as they get older. Ask *specific questions* about their friends or different aspects of their day. Instead of, "How was your day?" try, "How did your soccer game go after school?" or, "How are you getting along with Alex these days?" Their response will tell you a great deal about how they are getting on with friends.

Encourage interests. Children who are involved in activities unique to them in the family dynamic have a greater sense of self-worth. Encourage kids to get involved in activities they love to do and talk about them on the drive to school or over dinner. Being able to teach an adult about something gives children a great sense of pride and accomplishment. It also connects them with other children who have the same interests and diversifies their social circle.

Show respect. If you don't respect your children, they won't respect themselves or others, beginning a negative vicious cycle that can affect kids throughout their lives. Demonstrate respect by listening attentively when your kids are speaking, dealing with conflict in a constructive manner and actively showing your kids that you take what they have to say seriously and value their opinions.

Reach out. What happens if no matter how hard you try, your child still seems unhappy and has trouble fitting in? Don't panic, and instead seek out extra help from teachers, guidance counsellors, or other professionals.

Every child is different and needs to be treated as a unique individual. While you may have had a lot of friends as a child, your kids may naturally prefer to have one or two close friends instead. Recognize and accept your children's differences and remember that it's not the quantity of friends but the *quality* of friendships that's important. By providing a safe, comfortable environment for friendships to blossom, watching their interactions carefully and staying connected through conversation, you'll help your children develop healthy relationships at home, school and beyond.