

Let's Play: Teaching Social Skills

by Linda M. LeBlanc

Alex is watching three other boys engage in a “super-hero” play act. The boys are playing Star Wars, protecting their fort from the Evil Warriors. For the past couple of days, Alex has walked near the same small group of boys and watched intently as the boys play out their drama. He moves close but says nothing.

In another corner of the room, Emily and Jessica are playing house. Emily plays the mother and wants Jessica to assume the role of baby. Their play is interrupted by Jessica’s refusal to be the baby. While Emily insists, Jessica refuses and soon, the play disintegrates.

Steven, a new boy in the classroom, had been introduced to the class earlier in the morning. Now he is wandering from center to center, looking on as others become involved in their “free choice” of activity. The teacher is busy working with a small group in the science center, and Steven is on his own.

In this classroom, as in most, many opportunities are provided for peer interaction. But Alex, Jessica, and Steven need more than the opportunity to interact. They need help in developing and practicing certain social skills. What could Alex say that would help him join the ongoing play act? How could Jessica effectively resolve the conflict? What is an effective way for Steven to initiate conversation with these new peers? Teachers can use their understanding of social skills related to peer acceptance and their knowledge of instructional strategies to enhance children’s social development.

The purpose of this article is to (1) discuss the importance of peer relationships to a child’s development; (2) present the skills which research suggests

are related to peer acceptance; and (3) describe how specific social skills can be taught. Strategies for classroom use that will be provided include instruction in the context of play, group discussions, and manipulating the physical environment.

Peer Relationships

Children learn role relationships, communication skills, and how to negotiate and resolve conflicts through peer relationships (Piaget, 1932). Furthermore, it is believed that peer relationships function as “sources of modeling, feedback, information, challenge, and support” in a child’s overall development (Oden, 1982, p. 95). Whether or not children learn to develop positive peer relationships can have serious consequences in relation to a child’s development. Research indicates that those children who have problems with peer relationships when they are young are apt to have emotional and behavioral disturbances later

in life (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973).

The preschool classroom provides opportunities for children to interact positively with peers and thus develop positive peer relationships. Some ways that young children interact with their peers can lead to acceptance; other ways of interacting can result in rejection. Some children seem to be naturally socially skilled in their interactive style, and thus are more likely to be accepted by their peers. On the other hand, children can be found in most classrooms who seem to be disliked or ignored by their peers. These children may be interacting in ways which contribute to their rejection. They need to develop and then practice certain social skills. The early childhood teacher plays a significant role in creating a classroom that supports the development of social skills by identifying children who are experiencing problems with peer relationships, and instructing those children in the skills related to peer acceptance.

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Skills for Peer Acceptance

Researchers have defined three types of skills which are related to peer acceptance: initiation skills, maintenance skills, and conflict resolution skills (Asher, Renshaw, & Hymel, 1984). Each of these will be discussed here.

Initiation Skills

Children need skills to initiate activities with unfamiliar peers. In the examples presented earlier, Steven was in a setting with children he did not know. He needed to initiate a conversation or an activity with them. Gottman (1983) found that one successful initiation strategy used by unacquainted children was to establish a common-ground ac-

tivity. Steven might have said to another child, "Let's play with the blocks" or "I'm going to color, too." Children who are able to find something to do with others are more likely to establish contact with peers and to successfully maintain that contact.

Another successful initiation strategy is to explore similarities. Steven might have said to another child,

"We're both coloring" or "I have a shirt like that, too. My dad got it at Disney World." The similarities might have been related to common activities or common physical attributes. When initiating contact, it is useful to look for similarities as a basis for friendship formation.

The second type of initiation skills includes those skills used to gain entry into an ongoing play act. Putallaz and Gottman (1981) found that popular children have developed successful strategies which include: observing, adopting the group's frame of reference, and contributing something relevant. Since Alex observed the superhero play act, he may have "tuned into" what was being said. He could have contributed something relevant by taking on a role or offering some other plan of action. In doing so, Alex may have easily entered into the ongoing play in a nondisruptive way.

Since most preschool play episodes last less than ten minutes and over one-half of the requests made to join are denied (Corsaro, 1981), children may attempt to gain entry into the play of others many times during one day. Another important skill needed to gain entry is the ability to ask again if denied and to adapt the request. If Alex had simply said, "Can I play too?" a likely response might have been "No." It would have then been appropriate for Alex to paint or play with the blocks for a while and then go back and ask to join again, perhaps this time suggesting who he might be (asking again and adapting the request).

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts occur with high frequency in a preschool classroom. It is important that young children learn non-aggressive ways to solve interpersonal conflicts. Gottman (1983) suggests two successful strategies for deescalating conflicts: (1) providing a reason for the disagreement, and (2) complying with a weak demand. The disagreement between Jessica and Emily may have been resolved if Jessica had communicated her reason for not wanting to be the baby. She could have said, "I don't want to be the baby sister because I ALWAYS have to be the baby. I want to be the mom sometimes, too." Under

these circumstances, Emily might have agreed to let Jessica take on a new role. By verbalizing her reason for disagreeing, Emily would be using a strategy which defuses the conflict and opens up the possibility for negotiation.

Maintenance

Once interactions have been initiated, they are best maintained through friendly and cooperative styles of interaction. Being positive, showing affection, sharing and exchanging information are social skills which contribute to the maintenance of peer interactions and the subsequent development of positive peer relationships. During play, children who communicate a sense of "we-ness" are more likely to maintain the interaction and form friendships (Gottman, 1983). Once a common activity was established, Steven needed to talk with his peers, sharing such information about himself as his name, how old he is, or where he lives. By being positive in her approach and using verbal as opposed to physical demands, Jessica might have been able to resolve the conflict and nurture her friendship with Emily.

In the dramatic play area, children communicate a sense of we-ness when they plan a play act together. Contributions in the form of role identification, sequence of activities, use of props, and the general "story" to be acted out are necessary to the development and maintenance of a play act. Thus, any suggestions of Alex and Emily would have communicated a sense of belonging to the play group.

Teaching Specific Social Skills

One of the important roles of the early childhood teacher is to teach young children the social skills needed to establish positive peer relationships. Children like Alex, Steven, and Jessica would benefit from informal instruction in initiation, maintenance, and conflict resolution skills. For young children, social skills instruction in the context of play may be the most appropriate.

Individual Instruction

Early childhood teachers can observe the play behaviors of their chil-

dren to identify those who may be experiencing problems establishing positive peer relationships. Children who don't play at all, who play alone, or who frequently stand on the fringe and watch others play, can be guided to develop social skills which may lead to positive peer interactions. By using the "teachable moment," social skills instruction can be tailored to meet the needs of the individual child.

For example, when the teacher observed Alex watching a group of boys playing "Superman," she could have talked to him about watching the play and thinking about what role he could take. Through careful questioning the teacher could help Alex adopt the group's frame of reference. The teacher might ask: "What are the boys playing?" "What would you do to the bad guys?" or "Who could you be?" The teacher could also tell Alex to share his idea(s) with the boys: "Tell the boys who you want to be (or what you would do)."

If Alex chooses to ask for permission to play with the group and it is denied, the teacher might instruct Alex to play in another area for a little while, then go back and ask the boys again. She can reassure Alex that it is important to find something else to do and that it's okay to go back to the group and ask again.

Newcomers to the preschool group may need help in establishing positive peer interactions. The new child can first be instructed to look around the room and see what there is to do. The teacher can also tell the new child to choose an activity with someone else. For example, the teacher could ask Steven, "Would you like to color with Brian?" "Why don't you play in the block area with Michael?" or "You could ask Peggy to paint with you." These suggestions guide the child to select a common activity in which peer interaction is likely to occur. Instruction can also include telling the child, "When you go somewhere and you don't know any of the other children, it's a good idea to do something *with* someone else. Look around and try to find something to do with someone else."

When conflicts arise and children have difficulty solving them, the

teacher can intervene by suggesting that the children talk to each other about the reasons for the disagreement. This helps to deescalate the conflict and keeps adult intervention to a minimum. If Emily and Jessica continued to disagree, the teacher might have said: "Jessica, why don't you want to be the baby sister?" Once learning of Jessica's reason, the teacher could encourage Jessica by saying: "You have to tell Emily why. Tell her and she might let you be the mother instead." Rather than solve the problem for the girls, the teacher encourages resolution through peer negotiation.

By working with children in the context of their play, instruction remains informal, yet relevant. The child does not need to be singled out or labeled. Instead, supportive instruction is provided when the need arises.

Group Discussion

Not all instruction needs to be individualized. Sometimes the teacher can work towards developing social skills with the whole group at the same time. The group discussion time provides an excellent opportunity for this.

At the beginning of the year, most children in the preschool setting are unfamiliar with each other. Group discussions early in the year could focus on the importance of finding something to do with others. The children could also be encouraged to look for ways in which they are alike. The teacher might do this by moving around to the different centers and talking with the children about their similarities in name, dress, or choice of activity. For example, at the art center the teacher could comment on the similar colors that are used in the paintings. Exploring and sharing similarities helps children establish positive interaction and friendships.

Group discussions can also be used to encourage the children to be positive, show affection, share, and cooperate. Discussions promote empathy as children share what makes them feel angry, sad, happy, lonely, etc. The teacher can use books written about friends to help the children understand their own ideas about what a friend is and how friends treat each other. (See bibliography of recommended books.)

Manipulating the Environment

In addition to facilitating the development of peer relationships through social skills instruction, teachers can promote positive peer interactions by making changes in the physical environment. Research suggests that the amount of group or social play that occurs in the classroom is related to the materials and activities made available during free play time (Rubin, 1977; Tschantz, 1984; Van Alstyne, 1932).

Sociodramatic play areas, blocks, and play dough with accessories are activities which tend to attract group play rather than solitary play. Peer relationships are more likely to be cultivated in an environment rich with materials requiring group efforts.

Teachers can create an atmosphere which encourages group cooperation by providing activities such as gardening and cooking. Since materials in the preschool setting do have an effect on the kind of play that occurs, early childhood teachers should assess the kinds of materials made available during free play time. Well-equipped dramatic play and block areas attract groups of children who are likely to engage in peer interactions. By selecting materials and arranging space to promote social play, early childhood teachers create opportunities for practicing and developing valuable social skills.

Conclusion

In most preschool classrooms, there are children like Alex, Steven, and Jessica — children who need to learn certain social skills. The teachers in these classrooms can play a significant role in helping these children develop and practice social skills by instructing them in initiation, maintenance, and conflict-resolution skills and by selecting materials and activities which encourage an optimum level of positive social interaction. Helping children acquire the social skills related to peer acceptance should be a primary goal of early childhood education. The long-term benefits of positive peer relationships are far too important to leave to chance.

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