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## Preschool Peer Relationships Tips to Facilitate Socialization and Play

by Amy Freedman, MA, CCC-SLP

Interaction and play with peers are essential for social and emotional development in the preschool years. Social skill acquisition goes hand in hand with communication and play development. Some children effortlessly acquire the ability to play with others and socialize with peers. For others this is a laborious process that requires adult facilitation and support.

Many children attend nursery school or a day care program by age 3. Three-year-olds tend to be adult-oriented and start to take conversational turns with a parent or teacher. However, from age 3 1/2, most children are more interested in playing and interacting with peers. They begin to be able to have short conversations and communicate with adults and classmates. Most start to develop more cooperative play with other preschoolers. By age 5, children are using language to create elaborate play scenarios and interact with peers for extended play times.

Young children want to be able to socialize and play with friends. However, for some this is a daunting task. Social success is more difficult for those who have limited communication abilities, less advanced motor skills, developmental delays, difficulty organizing and sequencing play or sensory integration challenges.

### Prerequisites for Socialization and Play

The following skills support a youngster's ability to socialize and play with peers:

- Get a peer's attention
- Communicate with friends
- Follow a request
- Negotiate a conflict
- Take turns
- Pay attention to the play scenario
- Be a leader in play
- Follow another's lead
- Organize and sequence the play
- Be flexible about developing a play scenario

Certainly, young children are still developing these skills, and older

youngsters have more of these pieces in place. When a child is experiencing difficulty it is essential to take a minute to carefully watch the interaction. Observe how the preschooler enters play and how the child interacts with peers. What are her strengths, and what do adults need to do to support play? The adults in a child's life can provide important encouragement and be instrumental in helping a young child learn how to socialize with peers. Following are some of my "top tips."

### **Teach Requesting**

Snack and play times often provide opportunities to help a young preschooler learn how to request what she wants and needs. For example, by putting a little juice in a cup and waiting, a parent or teacher gives a child more opportunities to request what she wants and practice using her vocabulary words. Similarly, by blowing a bubble or two and waiting, the adult provides more speech and language opportunities. This is particularly important for the child who is just beginning to communicate.

Older preschoolers can work on requesting when adults pair them to make a snack for a friend. They can, with adult facilitation, ice and decorate a cupcake, make a fruit salad or a sandwich for another youngster. This involves communicating with peers to make wants and needs known. The partner also learns to respond to a friend's request. Some children need to do this in a structured context before they can generalize this skill to unstructured play.

### **Scripting: An Important Tool**

Scripts are words and phrases that a young preschooler may be taught to help communicate. Many of these phrases can be particularly helpful with young children who are beginning to use their words to make requests, as well as negotiate with peers and adults in their environment. These may include phrases such as "help me," "my turn," "your turn next," "please wait" and "I'm done." Incorporating phrases such as these into a child's repertoire is particularly valuable for a young child or the youngster who has communication difficulties.

Scripts for young children are generally short phrases that are easy to use. Parents and teachers can model using these scripts in a variety of circumstances, such as negotiating with peers, commenting and requesting help. Adults who are engaged in play with children can easily model these communicative scripts for those who are having trouble interacting with peers. For example, if two youngsters are squabbling about using a particular toy, an adult can prompt one preschooler to say, "I'm next," instead of grabbing the desired item from a peer.

### **Be a Player**

Both parents and teachers of young children can support social interaction by taking part in the preschooler's play. Get on the child's eye level and be a participant. Some young children may need to experience success playing with an adult partner before they are able to generalize these skills to playing with peers. Play with an adult helps to develop social and communication skills, and youngsters are often able to sustain the play for longer periods of time. With adult support, a child may be able to come up with novel ideas or learn to organize and sequence play.

### **Teach Turn Taking**

Have your child pick a play activity. Afterwards, choose another game or activity and encourage your youngster to follow your lead. At first this may be difficult for the young preschooler who finds turn taking to be a challenge. Initially, the adult may pick another favorite activity of the child and have a shorter turn. You may want to use a timer to support the child's "switching gears" and facilitate turn taking. Eventually, this can also be generalized to play with other family members and finally with friends. Turn taking skills are essential for socializing with peers.

### **Play Follow the Leader**

Encourage motor play with your preschooler. Join your child in her play on the playground. Take turns being both the leader and the follower in the play as you go up ladders and down the slide. Playing "follow the leader" is a valuable strategy to help young children learn to take turns, develop new motor skills and learn to organize and sequence play.

### **Facilitate and Structure Play**

Structured play can provide a framework to support socialization. Teach your youngster how to play early card and board games. Teach "Lotto" and memory games, as well as preschool games such as "Don't Break the Ice" and "Arthur Goes to the Library." Once your child learns how to play these with an adult, encourage her to play them with a peer or a sibling. Buy one of your child's favorite games and donate it to her classroom so that she can generalize these game-playing skills to school.

Support a child's participation in dramatic play by reading books and then acting them out. Read books about familiar events such as going to a restaurant or

going to the doctor. Pull out several props, and you've set the stage for socialization and play. For example, pull out a suitcase and pretend to go on a trip. Bring out a pizza box or a tea set and you have provided an interesting play scenario. Let your child pick a theme and follow her lead.

Some youngsters may need your help to organize and sequence the play. If your child is a whirlwind of energy whose idea of dramatic play is to empty everything out of the play kitchen, pull out a basket and a blanket and ask which foods you could use to go on a picnic. Or ask your preschooler if there are any fruits in the kitchen that the two of you could use to pretend to make lemonade.

### **Teach Early Childhood Games**

Early games often provide great opportunities for youngsters to interact socially. Introduce games such as: "Duck, Duck, Goose," "Red Light/Green Light," "Musical Chairs" and "Doggy Doggy Where's Your Bone?" As these games become some of your child's favorites, share them with her teacher, in a playgroup or on a playdate.

### **Help Your Child Get to Know Preschool Classmates**

Some children need specific help to learn the names of their teachers as well as classmates. Talk to the teachers about taking individual pictures of classmates and teachers so that you can put them in a photo album. Look at the pictures at home with your child, and name the others for your youngster. This skill can be used to teach "calling a friend's name" to get a classmate's attention at preschool. Practice both at home and at school.

### **Have Playdates With Nursery School Classmates**

Entering a large social group such as a classroom can be daunting. Some children find their first classroom experiences intimidating and stressful. Parents can help support a child's first school experience by inviting a classmate over for a playdate. It is so much easier for children to get to know each other in a one-to-one setting rather than a larger group. These playdates provide your youngster with early social skills, which she can then generalize into her preschool classroom.

Invite one child over at a time. Ask her teacher for suggestions. Keep initial playdates short, as it is so much better to end on a good note. If your child gets tired after a morning at school, schedule playdates for after a nap or on a weekend.

Plan activities that the children can do together. Add a novel twist when the

children need a change of activity. For example, if you are playing outside, have bubbles and interesting wands available when the children need to switch activities. Encourage the children to draw with sidewalk chalk, and then produce a squirt bottle so they can squirt water on the pictures and change the colors.

Encourage collaborative projects as much as possible. For instance, the children can make instant pudding together and take turns shaking it. They can create a big mural on a large piece of brown mailing paper, and that can be used as your tablecloth.

Stay close by to support the play as needed. As the children interact more, the adult facilitates the play less.

### **A Final Word...**

Encouraging social and play skills is like giving your child a winning lottery ticket. And, as the Maryland lottery slogan says, "You've gotta play to win!"

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