



Social & Emotional Development / Getting Along with Others

Social Development



Dear Debi,

My 4-year-old won't play in groups, won't participate in "circle time" and won't play with the other kids at his pre-school. He even hides behind me when I drop him off. How can I help him?

– Sara, Pasadena, CA

Debi's Tips



Debi Gutierrez

Host

- Give kids opportunities for play
- Model appropriate behavior
- Encourage language development
- Let kids work out their problems

Expert Advice



Sabra Smith, Ed. D

Child care provider for 5 years

If you care for a child who's reluctant to interact with other kids, give the child plenty of opportunities to play with others. Children need social interaction in order to acquire socially acceptable behaviors and to learn how to deal with their feelings in a constructive and appropriate manner. Children learn and practice social skills while they're playing together.

Children learn appropriate social behavior based on their own individual experiences. They're more likely to treat others with respect if their parents or child care providers do and if they themselves are treated with respect. Adults should model the behavior they want kids to learn. If a parent comes in and says, "Here's the paper you asked for..." then the other adult says, "Thank you." It's kind of an informal role-play and kids pick up on this behavior. With kids at that age, their brains aren't memory based. So make sure to say to a kid, "Can you pass the potatoes please? Thank you."

Adults should encourage language development so that children can identify feelings and express them verbally (as opposed to physically) and communicate their ideas to others. This is one of the most important things in addition to modeling. The lack of words encourages inappropriate behavior. You always want to re-direct kids to use their words. It's a form of conflict resolution. But not only in a conflicting situation. If a kid says, "Give me the potatoes," you should ask the child, "What words should you use?" Stop them and give them the words if they don't know them already. And you should remember to acknowledge them when they do the right thing.

When kids are having problems amongst themselves, intervene when absolutely necessary, but try to let the kids work out their problems for themselves as much as possible, especially older preschoolers.

Infants are doing observation because they don't have the language skills. They're observing and they're hearing. They're brains are processing. You want them to see things that are enriching. So allow them to observe and hear an environment good for social development. That's where modeling comes in.

With toddlers, the provider needs to provide most of the words. Kids may say "stop," but you have to re-direct them. With a toddler, since they're developing language skills, you have to accompany them to talk with someone else.

Pre-K kids are more independent, because they're looking for attention from the teacher. With each stage, you're trying to foster independence, so when they're not with you, they'll know the correct behavior and how to utilize it in a different environment. Because these are the most impressionable years, these are the techniques they carry on to adulthood.

You should always make kids with disabilities feel comfortable. They know something is different, but you want all the kids to know, it's OK and we're all different. You should provide that safety zone initially. Kids with a disability can model the same language behavior. In fact, they make use of their words more effectively because of their disability. But you always want to mainstream them and have the other kids welcome diversity. Let the kids know, we all say it the same way. Whether it's a handicap or not, we can all use our words.

Child Care provider Comments



Dorothy

Child care provider for 3 years

If the child is withdrawn I talk to them and encourage them to communicate with me. My little boy who is 2, didn't want to talk or play with anyone. But I noticed that he likes colors that are bright, and he seemed to like the color yellow. So I would look in the toy box and point out the things that are yellow and soon he was asking for them. When I gave him that special attention he started to come out of it and talk and play with us. I think I won his confidence.



Karolina Ramirez

Child care provider for 6 years

With a child who can't get other kids to play with him, I'll observe that the child either doesn't want to join the group or the group doesn't want to play with the child. If it's the child who doesn't want to play with others, I'll spend time with the child and find an activity that will make the other kids want to come over and play with him. That way the child won't feel like they have to play with him and the child feels the kids weren't forced to play with him.

Parent Comments

My five-year-old, Darla, does very well. When she came on the show, she did well with the other kids. We thought she was going to be nervous, but she was fine. I encourage



Whitney

Mother of three children

Darla to play with children her age and older so she can learn the right communication skills and how to share and how to respect others' property while playing. Darla played for a YMCA junior basketball team and she was the only girl. But we used the sports and the fact that she was the only girl to help build her confidence.

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