

Chapter Ten: Social Connections to Inner Capacity

We humans, along with other members of the animal kingdom, are social beings. On a daily basis, we interact with family, friends, teachers, classmates, co-workers, grocery clerks, bank tellers, passersby, and domesticated animals. We are driven to relate to others. This requirement for love and attention is as basic as our need for food, water, and shelter. Babies die if denied loving touch.

The richer and more diverse our social connections the greater our longevity, and the better our physical and psychological health. Conversely, social isolation has been linked to a variety of physical and psychological illnesses, including cancer, heart disease, schizophrenia, and depression.

Dean Ornish, M.D., has done a lot of research into the many factors that influence coronary heart disease. Among his many observations, he found that social health had a greater impact on the development of and recovery from coronary artery disease than did factors such as cholesterol levels, genetics, or smoking. In his book, Dr. Ornish has the following to say about the importance of social connections: *I am not aware of any other factor in medicine – not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not stress, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery – that has a greater impact on our quality of life, incidence of illness, and premature death from all causes. ... Love and intimacy are at the root of what makes us sick and what makes us well, what causes sadness and what brings happiness, what makes us suffer and what leads to healing.*

In 1996, ABC television did an extensive national survey to determine the most important factors contributing to happiness. Intimate relationships led the list by a wide margin. The other top six factors were control over one's life, challenging and fulfilling work, optimism, faith in God, and a sense of purpose.

Since the focus of this book is about stress, you might like to know that reaching out to others counteracts stress. A 2000 study from the University of California, Los Angeles found that men and women react differently to stress.¹ In addition to the oft-cited flood of adrenaline and cortisol, women also release a brain hormone called

oxytocin. Other triggers for this hormone include touch, warm temperatures, and, in women and their babies, the act of breast-feeding. It's thought to increase bonding. Animal studies show it lowers blood pressure, heart rate, cortisol levels, and anxiety. Women who breast-feed their babies report lower levels of stress and more positive mood than women who bottle-feed.² The UCLA researchers speculate that oxytocin buffers the fight-or-flight drive and causes women to seek out friends during stressful times. You can reverse the sequence: intimacy raises oxytocin, which buffers stress. Bottom line: encouraging our children to be sociable helps keep them healthy.

One of our biggest roles as parents is to teach our children to get along well with others. We want them to be socially balanced: neither lonely and reclusive hermits nor superficial party animals. We want each child to learn to depend on others without becoming a burden to them. We want her to help others and rely on her own resources without becoming a martyr or a burdening to herself.

To enjoy success as a social being, a child must acquire several skills. Some of these skills are the intra-personal skills mentioned in the last chapter. For instance, he will need to become aware of his own thoughts and feelings in situations and learn to master baser instincts (and keep some of his feelings to himself). From this point, he'll need to learn to "read" other peoples' words, emotional messages, and behaviors. He will use his own experiences to imagine how another person might feel in any given situation (empathy). He must come to care about other people's feelings (compassion) and to understand that reciprocity is a key ingredient to friendship. He'll need to learn to forgive and forget wrongs, and to muster the courage to love again after someone has hurt him.

Mastering these skills takes time. (And some adults still haven't mastered them all.) Some people are quicker studies than others. Psychologist Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, would say such people have a high EQ. Some kids are more social by temperament. But no infant cares about other people's feelings. Empathy and compassion take years and years to acquire.

How does your child begin to master all these tasks of sociability? Mostly from you and starting from infancy. When she babbled while you changed her diaper, you smiled and spoke back to her. In that way, she began to understand that

communication is a two-way event, that it involves talking and listening, that people (you, at least) pay attention to the sounds she made. When she pointed at a dog and grunted, you said, “Dog. That’s a dog,” thereby improving her communication skills. You taught her not to speak with her mouth full (mostly because no one could understand her and you didn’t want her to choke). When another child came to play, you taught her to offer her guest a cookie and, hard as it might be, to share her toys. When she pushed down that child, you insisted she apologize and helped her put an adhesive bandage on the resultant scrape. You talked about how she might feel in the same situation and how she might want to be treated. And you usually managed to understand how she felt and accept those feelings as legitimate, even when you didn’t like the way she expressed them. She watched the way you spoke to people on the telephone and greeted them when they came to visit. She saw that you were always glad to make room at the dinner table for a guest. Wherever she went with you, she noticed how you treated relatives, friends, acquaintances, perfect strangers, and animals.

Another way you can help your child is to ask her how she thinks other people (in books, on TV, in real life) feel in certain situations. Whenever your child expresses insights or exhibits behaviors that reflect social awareness, your job is to acknowledge and support his skill (“I think you’re right about what’s going on with Nancy.” “I think that you really made Robin feel better about her dog’s death by bringing her a rose.”)

Social styles

A lot of how a child responds socially has to do with temperament. The rest is learned behavior. Basic temperament is something you can modify but not change completely. For instance, if your son is by nature quiet, observant, and a good listener, you’re not going to mold him into a guy who dances on tabletops. And why would you want to? The skills he already possesses are priceless. But you can coax him out of his room (where he may spend hours happily reading or cataloging his rock collection) to go out into the world. And, at least when he’s young, you can help him connect with friends.

On the other hand, if your daughter is a leap-before-she-looks extrovert, you can

rejoice in the fact that she likes people. You may also need to help her control her boisterous nature - especially in libraries, auditoriums, and at school. You can stop her short of giving away everything she owns to friends. You can help her learn to be a little more wary before she completely gives of herself emotionally. You can adjust your expectations of her behavior. For instance, she may not be the child to take to the symphony at age four.

The trick is to understand your child, to honor his bedrock nature, and help him learn to balance solitude and sociability, to be able to remain an individual and to cooperate in a group.

Capacity for Sharing

In order to make friends, a child has to learn to share. He needs to share material goods, his parents (with his siblings), his time, and his thoughts and feelings. He needs to include others in his activities.

Let's first talk about being generous with thoughts and feelings. This ability mirrors the emotional skills of vulnerability and honesty. Fortunately, kids are naturally open to the point of being transparent. In order to maintain this skill, they have to trust people.

Ideally, your child learned long ago that he could trust you. When he told you his thoughts and feelings, you didn't laugh at him (unless you understood he was trying to be funny) or say you didn't believe him or thought his expressions wrong. Because you valued his mental and emotional openness, he developed enough confidence to let other people know who he was, what he believed, and how he felt about things. That ability to share information about oneself is the first step in forming a social connection with someone else. The next step is for the other person to reciprocate.

Your child also learns how to share appropriate information with others by watching how you operated in the world. She observes that, while you're friendly and polite to the grocery checker, you don't tell him your life's story. She notices that, when you interact with your friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, you temper your openness. You clearly trust your closest friends and your family with your true feelings, although you don't burden them with every little complaint. With others, you hold back

some of yourself.

Another way a child refines this skill is by the feedback he gets from other people. Sometimes they encourage him to be more open. Sometimes he gives away his innermost thoughts and feelings to untrustworthy peers, only later to be unkindly teased by them. Others may let him know that his candor makes them uncomfortable. Gradually, he learns the art of emotional sharing.

Learning to Listen

I don't know how it was in your house, but in mine, once my two kids started talking the difficulty lay, not in encouraging them to open up and tell us whatever was on their minds, but in teaching them to take turns in a group and to *listen*. Our prime arena for working on this task was at the dinner table. We tried to make sure that everyone had a chance to tell about their day, and that, while that person did the telling, the others listened thoughtfully and made *relevant* comments. Sometimes, especially when the kids had gotten into a dispute about something, we actually used a talking stick. Only the person who held the talking stick (a one point is was a quasi Native American decorated stick, at others it was a chopstick or a spoon or a pencil) could speak. And while she spoke, the others had to bite their tongues and listen – until the stick passed into their eager hands.

Listening is an art that many adults haven't mastered. They hear what the other person is saying, but most of their brain power is devoted to thinking about what they want to say next. Hearing is not the same as careful listening. We hear the birds sing, the train whistle blow, the waves crash against the shore, the music playing, the talking heads on the news. Most of the time, it's mere background noise to our own monologues and stream of consciousness.

How do you get your child to listen? You have to make sure you listen to him. In that way, you show that you think your child worthy of the attention. You also demonstrate that, no matter a person's size or age or status, he deserves a listening ear. If your child is clamoring for your attention and you are that moment busy, you might turn to him and say, "I know you have something to tell me. Right now isn't a good time for me to listen. Let me finish _____ (fill in task), then I can give you my

complete attention.” Of course, you have to live up to that promise. Even little kids can learn to wait, but their can’t wait very long.

When your child is talking to you, you can be an active listener. You can utter words that show your interest – “Wow.” “Really?” “No kidding.” “Go on. Tell me more.” You can ask for clarification, “I’m not sure I understand about ____.” And you can reveal your understanding of what he said. “So what you’re saying is....” These kind of statements come in particularly handy when your child is upset. They’re harder to utter when your child is upset with you. Nevertheless, being the grownup in the situation, you can probably muster the wherewithal to validate his feelings. (“I can tell that you’re angry with me about...”)

Let’s say your child comes home from a soccer game and complains that you weren’t there. Rather than replying with, “I was having a root canal, you selfish child,” you might say, “It sounds like you wish I could come to all your soccer games.” Rephrasing also goes a long way when you’re mediating a dispute between two kids. We’ll get to that in a minute.

The Fine Art of Communicating

Put together a willingness to share thoughts and feelings and an ability to listen to the other person and what do you get? A conversation. I’ve met very small kids who were amazingly adept at conversation. Then there are the kids who either won’t say anything or talk nonstop.

Most of us parents hope our children strike a balance between being overly reticent to speak and tedious chatterboxes. We want them to effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings, a skill that goes a step beyond mere sharing. We hope that our children can make themselves understood.

Your child will learn a lot from the way you speak. Do you come to the point quickly? Can you articulate clearly what you want to say? If someone misses your point, do you politely say something like, “I think I wasn’t clear. Let me try again to explain.” (Such a statement is better than “You weren’t listening to me, you boorish pig.”)

They also learn from listening to effective speakers and reading. As much as

we've bashed television, I think there's something to be said for watching old movies, particularly films starring Katherine Hepburn, Carey Grant, Jimmy Stewart, or Barbara Stanwick. "The Philadelphia Story" is a classic for snappy dialogue.

Shakespeare in any form teaches kids worlds about brilliant word play. Don't assume your child is too young. Little kids enjoy the rhythm and rhyme of good verse, even when they don't quite understand the meaning. I know a woman who teaches third and fourth grade who has her students read and perform an abridged Shakespeare play each year. The kids have a ball with the language.

Listen to worthy radio shows, those few that remain. National Public Radio comes to mind, though the news is too dry for small children. Garrison Keillor never ceases to amaze my family with his wit on his weekly show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

Most of all, read with your child. Start young. Keep it up. Make a ritual of reading. Nighttime is many people's favorite. But don't refrain from urges to read at other times of the day. Good fiction offers a plethora of benefits, including the opportunity to work out strong emotions through fantasy, lessons on how to live well in the world, and how to plunder that treasure of words for the child's own use.

And remember, if you want to communicate with your child, you have to be available. You need to happen to be around when he feels like telling you something, when he needs a listening ear and a sounding board. He needs to feel that his opinions are valued.

Cooperating and Negotiating

It would be nice if a child could say his piece, then the other child would say hers, and they could continue happily ever after. But that's not life. One person says what he wants, and the other says, "That doesn't work for me. I'm not going to give you that." Or if that other person is a child, she says, "Forget it, poop face." That means kids have to adjust to the fact that things are not always going to go their way, that the world does not revolve around them. It's hard news, but all kids have to hear it. After all, kids are, by nature, egocentric. Some of us adults still are. To get along in this world, kids need to give and take. They need to learn when to give way and when to hang tough. They

need to learn to meet other people half way. They need to acquire negotiating savvy.

Preschool is often the first testing ground for cooperation and negotiation. At the table, there's one palette of paint and four kids who want to use it. The kids have to figure out that they have to put the paint in the middle of the table. They work out issues like how to keep the different colors from mixing. They figure out how to share a popular color. If things go really well, they may even admire each other's art.

Sometimes the kids can't work it out themselves. Vanessa screams that it's her turn for the blue paint, that Jacob's hogging it. Jacob throws his paintbrush at her. Blue paint spatters Vanessa's clothes and face. She cries. One of her friends punches Jacob. Jacob cries too. Clearly, it's time for adult intervention. A wise adult will first restore order, then teach the kids ways to cooperate (by asking them for their ideas).

Forgiveness and Acceptance

Last chapter, we talked about the importance of self-acceptance in emotional health. Forgiveness and acceptance of others is the analogous skill necessary to social success. Kids also need other people to forgive and accept them. This reciprocal connection is essential to intimacy. Acceptance makes other people feel secure and appreciated. Most people love dogs because most dogs are (in the absence of abusive treatment) unconditionally loving and accepting. Kids start out life this way – not as dogs, but as loving and accepting beings. Infants love the people who care for them regardless of wrinkles, halitosis, or bad hair. And they want that love returned. And we adults are delighted to give and receive that fine emotion.

Unfortunately, many of us carry psychological wounds from childhood due to our perception that our parent's didn't quite approve of us. Our parents usually didn't intend to hurt us. They may have thought that by criticizing us they were making us better, tougher people. The father who insisted his son play football then reacted with disappointment when the son never "lettered" made that boy feel unworthy.

Parents (the present generation included) no matter how well-meaning, generally have expectations of their kids. Some of these wishes are reasonable. For instance, we ought to expect our children to be respectful and well-mannered. But we may also have expectations that don't fit who our child really is or are beyond her abilities. Let's

say you had always hoped that your daughter would be a ballet dancer. Maybe you were a ballerina or dreamed of being one. As fate would have it, your daughter is not graceful. Tall and big-boned, she has a strong preference for lacrosse. Better that you accept, support, and celebrate who she really is.

Your acceptance and love will allow your child to flourish. In fact, these two things form the foundation of your child's inner capacity. Her resultant healthy self-esteem, happiness, and acceptance of herself and others will attract people to her. A father and son team, Thomas Malone, M.D., and Patrick Malone, M.D., who are well-known psychiatrists and the authors of *The Art of Intimacy* (1987), describe acceptance in these words:

Acceptance of the other underlies all intimate experience. No personal openness is possible without acceptance. Becoming conscious of your own judgmentalism is a crucial, internal prerequisite to intimacy. You can become aware of your righteousness. When you learn to recognize it, to feel it, you become more capable of acceptance. Acceptance allows intimacy. (p. 267)

This quote suggests that being judgmental is bad. In reality, we can't avoid drawing conclusions about people. If someone speaks with a drawl, we surmise they grew up in the South. We notice a person's skin and hair color, body size and shape, command of the language, smile, visible scars, demeanor, and clothes. It can't be helped. But we can refrain from stereotyping and making unkind statements about people. "Rich people are snobby. Poor people are lazy. Blondes are dumb. Asians are hard workers. Muslims are fanatics prone to terrorism." If we say things like that, we teach our children intolerance. We never get to the bigger lesson of trying to understand people, not to mention the reward of finding that understanding often yields acceptance and friendship.

How then do you teach your child to refrain from harshly and unfairly judging others? You walk the talk. You avoid undue criticism of other people, including your child. You do not compare your child to other people, particularly when you are saying that the other child is somehow better. You allow other people to be themselves. You abandon any personal agendas for them. You don't tell them what to think or feel ("Don't you think such and such? I feel that thus and so, don't you? You don't really

think/feel that, do you?") You acknowledge other people in ways nonverbal (smiles, handshakes, nods) and verbal. Kids love to be noticed. Statements that show you see and appreciate the other person go something like, "I notice you took extra time cleaning your room." "I see you got dressed up today. You look great." "That conditioning class is making you look pretty buff." "I heard you practicing your Spanish vocabulary with your sister. You've really learned a lot this year." These type of statements help kids appreciate the connection between their actions and results.

How do you teach your child to transcend his anger and pain to forgive others their flaws, trespasses, and transgressions? You model forgiveness when you accept the apologies of friends and family members. You don't bear grudges. You give people the benefit of the doubt. Of course, that doesn't mean that you don't hold your child accountable for his actions. If he throws a rock through your bedroom window, you forgive him and help him figure out how to avoid a repeat performance and how help fix the window.

You also help your child forgive people who have wronged him. Children often say and do unkind things to one another. Your child needs to learn to apologize for his own wrongs and to accept other kids' efforts to make amends. So, if your son's good buddy calls him a name and doesn't invite him to a group sleepover, your son will probably be hurt. You respond by comforting him. You refrain from planting vengeful ideas in his head (e.g., "Well, I guess Ted won't be coming to your birthday part, will he?") If Ted calls in a couple of days and wants your son to come over to play and your son wants to go, why not let him go? Without adult interference, kids usually get over slights easily. Let's say Ted repeatedly hurts your sons feelings. Maybe then you might try to steer him toward more faithful friends.

Whenever you catch your child accepting and forgiving others, praise her. Be specific. "I notice your friends seem to feel comfortable around you." "I'm noticed that you invited Lindsey over, even though the other kids say she's a snob. She probably appreciated being given a fair shake." Let's say she made a decorative plate at school. You placed it too near the stove and part of it browned. You confess your error. Your child hugs you and says, "That's okay, Mommy." You think to yourself what an amazing child you have and say, "Thank you for forgiving me. I really liked that plate. Would you

like to decorate another one?” And remember, forgiveness is a skill that can take years and sometimes whole lifetimes to ripen.

Social Awareness and Sensitivity

Openness, acceptance, and forgiveness are the basic (though by no means easy) skills that allow kids to graduate to social awareness. Basically, they must notice other people. Next, they must heighten their sensitivity toward others, to develop social antennae. Socially sensitive people can read language, body language, tone of voice, and other behaviors and formulate a fairly accurate idea of another person’s emotions. Their awareness trips off an understanding of the person’s emotional needs, whether those needs are articulated or not. That understanding inspires an effective response. Socially sensitive folk are, in a word, *empathetic*.

Along with acceptance and forgiveness, empathy is critical (arguably the most critical trait) to establishing intimacy. Empathetic kids quickly and easily make friends. Parents who have a keen social awareness can effectively build close relationships with their children. They understand their kids. They speak to their children in the way they would like to be spoken, avoiding insults, orders, and nagging.

Autism and childhood schizophrenia are the two most devastating psychiatric illnesses that can befall a child. A core feature of both illnesses is a loss of an understanding of others, a numbing of social sensitivity. Sometimes the decline of both social reciprocity and the desire for social connection is sudden and dramatic. Sadly but not unexpectedly, kids so afflicted don’t attract friends.

For most other kids, empathy comes naturally. But a number of studies show that this skill can be developed and enhanced. Something as simple as owning a pet can build empathy in children (and, provided you hold your child accountable for his promises to take care of this animal, responsibility.)

You can help your child make empathetic headway, without a companion animal. When you say, “You look sad to me. I wonder what’s going on?” or, “I wonder if you slammed the door because your upset your friends didn’t invite to go to that movie with them,” you both boost his self-awareness and demonstrate your own interpersonal awareness and empathetic prowess. When your child is very young and you’re looking

at a picture book, you might say. “That boy looks sad. Why do you think he’s so sad?” When she’s a bit older, you might ask, “What do you think the girl in that picture is feeling?” As you read, you can talk about how certain plot twists must have made the characters feel. When you watch movies, you can do the same. You also tell her how you’re feeling.

And, when she encounters children and adults in real life, you can remind her how she felt in that situation. “Remember when your hamster died? How did you feel?” “Sad,” he might say. “That’s right,” you say. “I think Jennifer is feeling pretty sad now too. Maybe a hug from you would make her feel better. What do you think?”

Reciprocity

Children need to learn that friendship is a two-way street. In order to have a successful relationship, your child must give of herself emotionally and the other person must respond in kind with openness, acceptance, forgiveness, trust, and empathy. To quote the Malones again, “Reciprocity characterizes all intimacy.” (Malone & Malone, 1987, p. 270).

This process begins early in life, with parents. For instance, you responded to your child’s emotions. When he cried, you came to him and offered comfort. When he laughed, you laughed with him. He learned that his efforts at being sociable inspired warmth on your part and the part of others. He smiled at his aunt, and she smiled back. He said hi to shoppers from the safety of the shopping cart. If they returned the greeting, you could see how pleased he was. One day, you picked him up and he patted your shoulder. “Daddy looks tired. Want to take a nap?” Oh my word, there he was not yet two years old and noticing how you felt and trying to help you feel better. You told him you appreciated the suggestion and why didn’t the two of you lie down for a minute. After the nap, he patted your cheek and said, “I love you, daddy.” And you melted.

Later, when he began to interact with other children, you encouraged him to respond to other children’s attempts at friendship. If a child made a friendly overture, you asked your son whether he would like to invite that child to play. If another family had your child to dinner or to spend the night, then you took that event as your cue to

have that child to your house next time. This sort of give and kind does not require a slavish tallying of kindnesses and hospitality. It simply implies a general mutuality.

In addition to responding positively to acts of friendship, your child will soon (and sometimes painfully) learn to give up when another child does not reciprocate. He will also need to learn that the credo of “an eye for an eye” is not an acceptable form of social reciprocity. If someone hits your child or teases him, he will eventually be able to make a more noble and sophisticated response. He will learn to walk away or otherwise ignore such people, seek adult help if necessary, or stick up for himself in a way that allows him to rise above his primal instincts for bloody revenge.

Generosity and Support

When it comes to the social skills, these two sit at the apex. They help us deepen our relationships and cement bonds. Generosity grows out of sharing and openness. Support is the natural extension of acceptance and forgiveness.

Generosity comes in many forms. We give of ourselves by way of our time, our effort, our emotional openness, our love, and also our material goods. We sense that, because we have all we need, we can afford to give to others. Small children are spontaneously generous. You’ll know what I’m talking about if you’ve ever greeted an infant and had her smile and hold out her toy (or whatever her small hands clutch) to you. Both the smile and the toy are generous gifts. Of course, she may want the toy returned shortly. But the smile is given freely, with out an expectation of recompense. Such acts are the harbingers of altruism.

Some of the hallmarks of generosity progress steadily and gradually. Infants and toddlers play mostly alone or along side another child. With practice and maturity, they gradually engage in cooperative play. As they gain experience interacting with other kids, they become able to share materials and ideas and to deal with disputes. They find a middle ground between not sharing anything and giving away all their worldly goods. They learn all of this from parents, teachers, other caregivers, their peers, and hard-earned experience. They also learn, mostly from you, about the gift of time. They learn that undivided attention is the best way to make another person feel worthwhile.

Here’s how you give your child your time and teach her how to pass along this

type of generosity. When she wants to hug you or tell you something, you take time to receive these precious offerings. You leave work early to catch athletic games, artistic performances, and meetings at school. You help out in their classrooms. You transport her to lessons and practices and friends' houses. You read to her and take her to witness beautiful things. It sounds like a mammoth investment in time, and it is, though the job is lightened by reciprocal affection and the knowledge that your generous sacrifice is the best way to show your own love.

A common characteristic of severely disturbed children is their insatiable need for adult attention. Often, they simply haven't received enough attention from caregivers. If this fundamental need is not eventually fulfilled, kids will become more aggressive at snagging our regard via negative behavior. They will stamp, scream, hit other kids, steal things, do drugs – whatever it takes.

If you want to avoid such unseemly displays, you'll want to reward your child's acceptable requests for attention. In this way, you hone her ability to use amiable behavior to attract attention from other people, a skill shown by studies to be a significant predictor of long-term resilience. Start when she's small. Ideally, you'll ignore or discipline bad behavior and reinforce good behavior by telling her how much you enjoy being with her. And be with her, lots. This kind of generosity fills a metaphorical well that your child can later draw upon to slake the thirst of others.

Now for social support. In order to support someone, a child must understand and accept this person's weaknesses, flaws, and idiosyncracies, and also be able to extend a helping hand when that person is down. Think how you behave toward someone you care about. You probably offer rides to the airport and the auto mechanic. You show up at her speeches, equestrian events, music recitals, bat mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, and other events. If she expresses sadness, you phone the next day to see how she's doing. When she confesses to anxiety about her new job, you remind her that she's smart and capable. If she's terrified of the breast biopsy she's about to have, you go with her and hold her hand. And because she's your friend, she does the same sort of things for you. You mutually support one another.

You also support your child in these ways. He may not be able to reciprocate the

way your good buddy does, but you don't expect him to. You support him, not because you want something back, but because you love him. If he's crazy about baseball, you play catch with him. If he struggles with reading, you set aside time to read with him each day and perhaps hire a tutor. If he has trouble making friends, you go the extra distance to provide opportunities for him to connect with people. Basically, you promote his personal development. You do so with subtlety and wisdom. You do not run around saying, "Look at all I do for you..." Generally, your child is not acutely aware of your support. Years later, he'll look back and realize what a phenomenal parent you are.

While he's a child, he will unconsciously integrate the things you do to support him and others into his personal repertoire. And you will reinforce his good deeds with words of acknowledgment and praise. "Great game, Johnny. I like how you encouraged your pitcher. He was starting to look pretty discouraged. I think what you said to him helped him pluck up his courage."

In my experience, adults and kids who are able to give of themselves generously and support their friends are the happiest, most balanced, and healthiest people. Even if they are dealing with tremendous physical hardship or emotional trauma, their social skills give them wings to rise above their problems. The children I've met who are socially adept seem resist stress and bounce back from adversity to a greater degree than their less socially evolved peers. They are positive in outlook and tend to be successful in every since of the word.

Socially competent children also promote ecological balance. Their own personal ecosystem stays balanced. The respect, kindness, and compassion they exhibit toward humans and other animals make the world a better place.

Helping Your Child Make Friends

So much for the lofty philosophizing about social skills. When it comes down to it, we parents are more Morticia Addams than Mary Poppins, more Roseanne than June Cleaver, more Fred Flintstone than Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. We are flying by the seat of our pants (without an operating manual). We are trying to make a living, keep the house clean enough that the EPA doesn't declare it a Super Fund Site, keep the older child from trying to fly to Neverland from the second story window, keep the baby

from swallowing safety pins. Friends would be nice. They might distract the firstborn child from the Peter Pan fantasy. Furthermore, kids need to learn how to entertain guests and how to behave as visitors in other people's homes.

"Happy is the house that shelters a friend." --Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*" *First Series* [1841], "Self-Reliance," 36.

Here are some ideas for helping kids make friends. If your child is gregarious, you might not need this kind of advice. If he's more reclusive, read on.

1. If your child is having trouble finding friends at school, helping him connect with people outside of school will boost his self-confidence. Consider your own extended family. Family members may be more accepting. And, if your child has known them since infancy, affection comes naturally. The bonds between cousins can be particularly strong. You can also help your child find success in extracurricular activities. Point #2 tells you how to get started

2. Capitalize on your child's interests. For almost any passion, hobby, or pastime, you can find an organization devoted to it. Ideally, you want to find a club or activity that contains real live kids (as opposed to chat room correspondents). If you child likes the outdoors, you can find groups that help build trails, environmental groups, and hiking clubs. If he's musical, you can find group lessons, especially for younger children. Older kids who already know an instrument can find youth orchestral and jazz and rock groups to join. Arts, theater, dance, martial arts, and athletic classes are usually group in nature. Aspiring writers can work on school newspapers, yearbooks, and other publications. Some schools have book clubs. Kids can join scouts and volunteer to work in hospitals. If you're at a loss, ask a teacher, look in the yellow pages, do an Internet search, or call your local recreation or community center. If you find nothing, consider starting a group yourself.

3. Network with other parents. Talk to parents wherever you meet them – including any of the activities mentioned above. Volunteering at your child's school is an excellent way to get to know your child's peers and their parents. If you discover a child who strikes you as compatible with your child, figure out a way to get him or her together with your child outside of school. With older children, it probably won't work to invite child over on your own. You may need to be more subtle. Invite the child's family

over for a barbeque. Or offer to carpool with that family to an activity both kids are doing. Be creative.

4. Invite your own friends over. Be the kind of person who can always come up with one more serving (or call out for more pizza) of dinner. Be generous with your time and affection. Likely your child will follow suit.

5. Welcome your children's friends into your home. Nobody really cares whether your house is clean. (And if somebody does, she's not ideal friend material anyway.) Smile and tell your child's buddies how glad you are to see them. Put out food. Put out emotional fires. But otherwise try to stay out of kids' way. Ideally, you want your home to be a gathering place (with you around, of course) when your kids hit adolescence. That's one way to know where they are, who their friends are, and what they're all up to.

6. Otherwise support your child's friendships by saying positive things. "I enjoy hearing you and Joanie laughing together." "Jason is so polite. I like that he clears his place at the table." Unless you're embarrassing the kids, take pictures and mail them. Help your child help her friend. If your child says her friend had to have "ear tubes" put in, offer to help her bake bread or put fresh flowers in a vase and take them to her house. Take your child to watch her friend's equestrian events or dance performances or poetry readings.

7. If your child complains that she's not popular, point out the difference between friendship and popularity. While it's nice to have a lot of people seem to like you, it's often much better to have a couple deep friendships based on mutual respect and trust. Friends are the people who come to your house with food and flowers when you're sick or in mourning. Friends are the people who stick around even when a broken leg takes you off the football team or chemotherapy makes your hair fall out. Friends are the people who come up to you if they think you look unwell and ask what's wrong. All the other things – being elected Prom Queen, getting asked out by a lot of boys, being invited to every birthday party -- are just marshmallow fluff

8. Be prepared for those times when your child comes home sad because her "best friend" has "dumped" her. If you have a daughter under the age of 11, get ready for this situation. When she says she has no friends and no one likes her, don't argue.

Sympathize with her pain (but try not to feel it yourself). “That sounds awful,” you might say. When she gives you the gory details of who said what to whom, refrain from calling those horrible, mean children names. Refrain from calling up that child or her parents and cursing the whole family and their ancestors, living and dead. Such action will only make things worse for your child, give you a shrewish reputation, and demonstrate less than exemplary behavior to your child (and you definitely won’t serve as a model for forgiveness). When she’s finished talking, tell her you like her a lot. Surely someone does. Then you get clever. “What about so-and-so? Yesterday I saw you two playing together on the monkey bars. It looked like you were having fun together? Want to invite her over to make pizza?” In this way, you are showing her that, instead of focusing on the person who mistreated her, she can put her energy into building other friendships.

9. Try not to worry too much. Kids generally get over social setbacks quickly. Besides, you’ve already done your best to give your child social skills and support his friendships.

Dancing to One’s Own Drummer: How to Help Your Child Resist Unhealthy Peer Pressure

Social survival depends upon being one of the pack. And, when you think about it, you’ve been teaching him conformity to social and cultural norms since day one. You taught him to use the toilet and wash his hands afterward. You taught that, here in America, we use knives, forks, spoons, and napkins. You taught him to say please and thank you and to shake hands with grownups. You taught him to hold the door open for his elders and let them enter first. You taught him the polite way to answer the phone and greet visitors. You taught him to return phone calls. You taught him to share food and toys and to take turns.

There’s no way for kids to avoid peer pressure.

Once he enters school, he slips into the social jungle. Each year, the acceptance of peers matters more and more. As a child moves into adolescence, friends provide the strength that helps him begin to separate from her parents. But peers also act as a source of conformity, both good and bad. Good peer pressure would come when

classmates ask a child to stop disrupting class or to stop smoking. A child who has “good” friends will model their desirable behaviors – study habits, way of dress, politeness.

But peers can also pressure a child to do things she doesn’t really want to do or, at least, knows she shouldn’t do. Your child will have to figure out what social mores to adopt and which to reject. He will need to learn to fit in without losing his identity. He will have to learn how to speak his mind when his thinking runs counter to that of the group. He will need to learn that anyone who says he is a loser if he doesn’t smoke cigarettes, do drugs, drink alcohol, have sex, inflict physical or psychological harm on someone outside the clique, vandalize someone’s property, or other commit other misdemeanors...is not worthy of his friendship.

What can you do to help him cope with peer pressure? For one, you can instill in him the resilience factors we’ve been discussing, as they will build a health self-image, enhance communication skills, and help him cope with social stress.

* Help your child know herself. She’ll have to do the bulk of this work herself, a process that requires plenty of “down time” for quiet reflection. But you can help a lot by asking what she thinks and listening when she tells you them. Help her understand how she feels by noticing her behavior. (“I notice you’ve been chewing your fingernails. I wonder if you’re worried about something.”) Refrain from trying to control your child too much by always telling her what to do, think, and feel. One of the dangers of such an overbearing child-rearing style is that your child will just move from letting you control her to letting the peer group pull her strings. If you keep asking your child what she thinks and feels, and what she plans to do, then she’ll begin asking herself, “What do I really think? What are my true feelings? What are my options? Which would work out best?” A child functioning at this level of maturity will “self-regulate.” If she’s a teenager, she’ll ask someone else to drive if she’s too sleepy and study the night before a test (instead of partying). She’ll also recognize the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of her stomach when the peer group is pressuring her to do something that feels wrong to her.

* Help your child have the confidence to speak his mind. Confidence takes time. You promote this process every time you make your child feel worthy and appreciated.

With regards to peer pressure, you want to make sure that you value your child's opinions, even when you don't agree with them. When you have family discussions, make sure that each person gets a chance to speak his mind, without fear of put-down. In this way, you teach your child that he doesn't need to go along with the group, that it's okay to maintain an eccentric point of view, that it's only fair to consider other viewpoints, that discussions are not a contest in which one person (the adult or the clique leader) wins. Gradually, he'll develop the confidence to speak his mind (even when his opinions run counter to that of the peer group) and the courage to act wisely.

* Be prepared for the things peer pressure will drive your child to say. "But everyone else's parents buy them this (expensive item)." "But everyone else is going to the concert/going to this party/staying out till midnight. Why can't I?" You may decide that whatever your child wants doesn't work for you because you can't afford it or it's inconvenient or you feel your child's health or safety is at risk. Safety is the most valid of all motivating factors. Explain your reason for saying no. Your child will counter, "But that's so unfair. Everyone else..." And you can coolly respond, "I can see how you might feel I'm being unfair. I can tell that my decision upsets up." Then your child counters, "You just don't trust me!" You then say, "Trust has nothing to do with my decision. It's your safety I'm concerned about."

* Talk to your child about things peers her age are doing that you don't want her to do. Tell her why. When you talk about cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs, talk about the specific risks of these things. For one, all these things are illegal activities for minors and with legal implications such as drivers' license loss, fines, arrest, incarceration, and a criminal record. All of these things also carry health risks (cancer, chronic lung disease, more respiratory infections, and diminished lung function in the case of cigarettes; damage to the brain and other organs, psychological problems, and, overdose, death in the case of alcohol and drug abuse). Tell her that addiction occurs much more swiftly the younger the user. Tell her that girls who get high are at risk for rape (which carries psychological and physical dangers). Tell her that hanging out with other kids who smoke, drink, or do drugs makes it really hard to say "no."

* While you want to be clear about your expectations, you also want to give your child a way out of dangerous situations. Tell him that if he's ever at a party and doesn't

like what's going on, he can call you and you will come get him – no questions asked. If he makes the mistake of drinking or taking drugs, tell him to call you (or a taxi) and ask to be picked up. If your daughter or son is ready for intimate sexual relationships (and will do so without your blessing), teach him or her about safe sex practices and provide contraception.

* Your child will make mistakes. Remind yourself that you did too. You can empathize with his confusion and regrets, without condoning unacceptable acts. Remember that, if you react too harshly to the first mistakes, your child will definitely keep subsequent errors in judgement to himself. Help your child see the situation as a learning experience (without rubbing his nose in it). Instead ask him neutral questions: What were hoping would happen? Which part went right? What went wrong? What would you do differently next time? After you and your child discuss what happened and explore future strategies, you will still need to hold your child accountable if he violated established limitations. He will then learn to live with (and learn from) the consequences of his actions. He will learn that he earns the privileges of independence by behaving responsibly.

Sidebar: Dealing with Bullies

Bullying is aggressive behavior that intends harm to another. The bully, who has either physical and/or psychological power over the victim, tends to repeat these attacks. Attacks can be physical (hitting, kicking, pushing, choking), verbal (taunting, cruel teasing, threatening, slandering, spreading rumors), or more subtly psychological (social isolation or exclusion, manipulating peers against the victim, making unkind gestures). Sadly, girls tend to be the masterminds behind twisted psychological wounding. Kids are bullied by include schoolmates siblings, parents, coaches, teachers, and other people who ought to know better.

Unfortunately bullying has become a cruel and unnecessary ritual in many US schools. U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher says that an estimated 1.6 million American kids in grades 6-10 are bullied at least weekly.

Kids who are bullied often feel anxious, insecure, socially inadequate, and unhappy. They may avoid going to school (and other social situations), sometimes

feigning physical illness as a means to stay home. Grades may decline. If bullying is recurrent, the victim may develop low self-esteem and depression. Eventually, he may act out violently as a means of revenge.

Bullies also suffer. They are more likely to get involved in vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, and drug abuse. Their antisocial behavior often persists into adulthood. (Ctr. For the Study & Prevention of Violence).

If your child is being bullied, you must tread a difficult line between helping and over-protecting him. Over-protection only increases a child's risk of being bullied. Your first step is to find out who the bully is. If he or she is your spouse or partner, confront him or her and, if necessary, seek counseling. If he or she is a coach, teacher, or other authority figure, start with a polite discussion. If he or she is a fellow student, talk to a teacher or administrator at the school. Your child may beg you not to take action for fear of being labeled a tattletale by peers or of reprisal by the bully and his henchmen. Assure your child that tattling is not the same as telling and getting help. The teacher or administrator should honor your request for anonymity on your child's behalf. The school should also back your concerns with a commitment to halt bullying. Many U.S. schools are adopting programs based on prevention, prohibition, and prompt intervention. Students are encouraged to report weapons and to stand up as a group against bullying.

How to bully-proof your child

Kids who tend to be victims are physically weak (especially true for boys), sensitive, unassertive, cautious, and insecure. Much of your work as a parent involves shoring up weaknesses and praising strengths.

- Encourage your child to talk about problems, including bullying. Make clear that telling does not equal tattling.
- Encourage your child to get help at school. Help her recognize when she can resolve issues on her own and when she needs to seek adult assistance. Assure her that information helps teachers and other school staff prevent further bullying and can help reform bullies by giving them positive leadership outlets.

- Let your child know that you sympathize with his problem, but that you're confident that, with a little help, he will soon be able to handle the problem.
- Point out his strengths and help him find ways to use them to his advantage. This tact will build his confidence.
- Help your child brainstorm solutions to the particular problem. Often a good strategy is to walk away from bullies (and if the bully won't let the child walk away, adult help really must be solicited). Bullies want a reaction -- tears, a fight, something. Sometimes not reacting is the best solution. Sometimes humor helps. Sometimes it's best to be assertive (but not aggressive). This means that the child tells her tormentor to back off, go away, get lost. Of course, you don't want to encourage your child to mouth off to a bully if the bully is likely to react violently.
- Consider enrolling your child in a self-defense class -- with her permission, of course. The idea is not to teach your child to behave aggressively, but to gain in physical strength, mental discipline, and confidence. She will also learn how to release a bully's grasp or strike back if necessary, just enough action to be able to leave the scene. A good instructor will make it clear that martial arts are not to be used to hurt people or to show off on the playground.
- Help your child fit in socially. Bullies are cowards who pick on loners. The more allies your child has, the happier and the better buffered from bullies he will be.
- Take seriously the adage, safety in numbers. If your child is young, small, and otherwise vulnerable, encourage him to stay within sight of school staff during recess and lunch. Encourage him to walk with a buddy to classes, to the bathroom, or to and from school or the bus stop Find a trustworthy adult to escort your young children to and from school.

If your child is the bully:

- * let him know that such behavior is not acceptable.
- * Do not use bullying techniques (name-calling, threats, intimidation, physical violence) to make your point. You want to be a positive role model.
- * Talk to teachers, administrators, and other significant adults about their view of the problem and their ideas on solutions.

- * Set limits and stick to them.
- * Establish (nonviolent and logical) consequences for infractions.
- * Teach tolerance. Let your child it's not okay to be single people out for being different – black, white, timid, loud-mouthed, red-headed, bald, small, big, sick, healthy, vegetarian, or carnivorous.

Resource

[Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence](#), 303-492-1032, University of Colorado, Institute of Behavioral Science, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Campus Box 439, Boulder, CO 80309).

Sidebar: Striking a Social Balance

As a person grows from a self-absorbed child to a self-aware and socially responsible young adult, she must learn to balance several issues. Parents play a big role in helping strike that balance.

Along the way, each child will encounter a gap between adult expectations and her developmental limitations. In particular, a child who is large for her age may find adults expecting her to behave as though she much older; a child who is small for her age may find that people “baby” her. Parents are usually the people most able to perceive this gap and soften any social tension.

If you have very young children, you may have noticed that some of their elders (grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles) seem to have forgotten normal little-kid behavior. They may have misplaced memories of their own children’s occasional temper tantrums, fits of inexplicable crying, unfathomable fears, and boundless energy. They may expect tiny children to attend a formal dinner or board an airplane and remain quietly in their seats for two hours. We parents who are in the thick of that developmental stage know better. Our primary obligation is not to relatives, visitors, fellow diners, grocery store clerks, etc., but to our children. We are their champions, their guardians, their advocates. That doesn’t mean we allow them to be rude. It means we understand their fundamental temperaments and immediate needs and try help

avoid situations where the expectations are too high. They are children, after all, not performing seals.

* Along that same vein, each child will have to navigate the fine line between what society demands of children and where her sense of individual freedom wants to take her. Society wants to mold and restrain kids into civilized beings. Kids want to be Pippy Longstocking and Peter Pan (no doubt accounting for the enduring popularity of those classic tales).

For instance, many elementary schools have embarked on a mission to teach kindergartners to read. Five-year-old children are meant to spend most of the day running and playing and engaging in active creative pursuits like spattering paint and sticking their little fingers into great mounds of cool clay. They are not designed to sit at a desk and try to master reading. Some five-year-olds are ready to learn to read. Many aren't. We adults must band together to protect our children from unreasonable societal demands.

Granted, we're also obligated to help our children learn basic manners so that they grow to be self-confident, successful adults. We need to teach them to say please and thank you, use utensils when they eat, clear their plates, help with chores, hold doors for elders, etc. We need to teach them it's rude to interrupt, talk during a movie or other theatrical performance, and chat loudly on a cell phone in public places. All of these skills hone a child's awareness of himself and others and sense of social responsibility. And they will win him friends.

* Another trend, much discussed in the early chapters of this book, is for our society to rush children toward adulthood. It's as though someone were whispering in their ears, "Grow up, grow up, grow up." Mentally and emotionally, children aren't ready to engage the world as little teenagers, and teenagers aren't ready to act like adults. Parents' task is to balance opposing tendencies to treat their children like helpless infants and to push them hastily toward maturity. We may tend to hold our children back in some areas and thrust them ahead in others. If you are a single working parent, you may find yourself relying upon your firstborn child to look after younger siblings and to get dinner going until you arrive home and take up the domestic yoke. If you have decided to stay home with your children, you may unwittingly do for them things that

they could and should do for themselves, such as selecting their own wardrobes. Watch yourself. And watch your child for hints about what he's ready and not ready to do. With either extreme, you notice some symptoms of stress.

* You need to work with your child's basic temperament. If he is more out-going, you may need to nudge your little extrovert toward quietude. That is, you can hold sacred time each week to sit and read or listen to music or take a walk or do nothing – alone. A child who is already more attuned to his inner life may need encouragement to invite friends over or to participate in discussions at the dinner table and in the classroom. However, keep in mind that you can't change basic temperament. If you try to force your shy child to make eye contact, say hello, shake hands, etc., you will only succeed in making him anxious, resentful, and balky. Accepting your child's temperament is essential to his resilience. Failing to do so sets your child up for low-self-esteem and poor problem-solving skills.

* Each child must also balance her sense of self-worth with her sense of community. She must be true to herself and also behave responsibly toward others. Without becoming a narcissist or a martyr, she must take care of herself and show compassion toward others. She will have to compete with her fellow humans, but learn to be satisfied with her own capabilities (rather than always comparing herself with others and pitting herself against them) and to refrain from taking unfair advantage of others. The name of the game should always be to do one's best to master new skills, not to win. Parents should hold out their goal for their child and also teach her that learning and behaving fairly is what matters.

* Each child will also need to learn the balance between social relationships and solitude. Friends and family are critical to health and happiness. But so is solitary contemplation. The next chapter will talk about the need for time for reflection in order to grow spiritually.

Recommended reading:

Best Friends, Worst Enemies: The Social Life of Children by Michael Thompson, Ph.D. (Xx Publisher, date. yy)

Peer Pressure. Leslie S. Kaplan. NY: The Rosen Publishing Group, 1999.

Written for a teen audience.

Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World. H Stephen Glenn, Ph.D. & Jane Nelsen, Ed.D. Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2000.

Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle by Charlene C. Giannetti, Margaret Sagarese. NY: Broadway Books, 2001.

Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence by Rosalind Wiseman. Crown, 2002.

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