



Developing Social Skills

From Age Two through Kindergarten - What do we observe in the classroom?

By Georgia Bowen

Separating from Parents

When two year old children first enter the preschool, most are barely aware of their fellow classmates. You will see children going through separation from their parents and expressing heartfelt tears or anger at being left "alone". There are a few children who are so accustomed to depending on their parents that they seek out *any* parent before trusting the teachers to care for them. Once we heard a child crying in the arms of a volunteer parent saying, "I want Mommy, *any* Mommy." Most children quickly form attachments to their teachers and are on the road to waving goodbye to their parents and playing independently.

Playing On Your Own

Most two year old children in the preschool are able to choose a toy or activity and enjoy playing independently without requiring others to play with them. They continue to bounce most things off the adults around them and enjoy talking about what they have done, what they are doing and what they are about to do. They will say, "Remember when I had cherry ice cream at my birthday party?" Young children believe that adults are all-knowing and *of course* their teacher would know what happened at their birthday party.

Observing Others

Eventually children begin to notice their classmates as they play along side of them. They notice what another child is doing and through these observations they expand their own play. Sometimes children interact with others sooner than they wish, when a child comes along and grabs their toy or nudges them a little too much.

Risking Interaction

It is common for young children to worry about interacting with others in the classroom. They may have nightmares or share their worries with adults regarding an incident that may or may not have happened

with another child. They may be anticipating what might happen if they begin to interact with children they have been observing. It is quite challenging for children to figure out how to insert themselves into the play going on around them. As an adult you can relate to this if you recall what it is like to arrive at a social gathering where it appears that the other guests all know each other and are having a great time sharing common experiences.

A child may go home from school and say, "Nobody likes me, I don't have any friends." This is difficult for parents to hear but it may be the first indication that your child is progressing socially as he or she communicates a desire for friendship. The most challenging interactions are with children who are the same age and have the same interests and desires. Older children may cater to younger child's needs and even younger children don't usually have the same needs. Children who are the same age have reached about the same level of social competence with similar approaches to getting their needs met and this can lead to conflicts.

Young children act upon their environment in a physical way. They begin interacting with others in a physical way as well. You may see a child with few verbal skills go up to other children and hit or push them with a truck. You might interpret this as a form of aggression but many times it is an unsophisticated bid for interaction that says, "Hey you, here I am, let's play!" Language acquisition speeds this process along more successfully as children become able to articulate their bid for interaction in a more inviting way.

Social Experimentation

Everything is learned through experimentation. Children try one approach and then another. They find out what is successful and what is not. As children develop language they are able to share ideas, listen and respond to others and feel more confident and successful in their world. Playing with others is how children begin to form the foundation of how they will relate to people in all their future interactions.

Sphere of Influence

Between the ages of three and five we see children who suddenly realize they have influence over others. We have seen individuals who walk from one end of the school to the other just to see who follows them. They may never say a word or take part in any activity. They just look over their shoulder to see who is coming. Some children experiment with rejecting others, "You're not my friend!" and then watch to see what happens. They may say, "Oh that's okay, you can play," and then observe if the person still wants to be friends. Other

times they may continue to reject a child and find out if they can influence others into rejecting the child as well.

Social Choice Step Ladder

It is common to see hesitant children begin interacting with adults, then moving on to the quiet hesitant girls, more active girls and then the more aggressive or challenging girls. After working their way up the social stepladder of girls, the hesitant child begins playing with the quiet hesitant boys, more active boys and finally the more aggressive or challenging boys.

Choosing Activities

Safe Havens

Children usually choose familiar activities where they feel safe or confident in their abilities. If they love the doll house or train set, they may spend much of their time there. Some children need assistance in moving around the room. Arts and crafts, puzzles and books are safe havens for many children. Children sincerely love art, puzzles and books and do challenge themselves to expand their interests and abilities in these areas, but initially they may go there because they can sit safely on their own, doing their own thing without interference.

Challenging Areas

Dramatic play, blocks, cars and trucks, table top, floor activities and outdoor play provide more social challenges for children. These areas require close supervision and adults who can bridge between children and assist them in joining the play and articulating their ideas.

Kindergarten

In kindergarten, children become capable of expressing themselves in more sophisticated terms. They rarely communicate in physical ways as they have found the power and influence of words. They can express their ideas, their likes and dislikes and rather than hit or grab from a person they learn that they can wound or reward others with words such as "You can't come to my birthday party!" or "He's my best friend!" In kindergarten, children begin to make their own social choices which may be different from the preschool years where playmates were found according to parental friendships.

A positive or negative self concept and reputation can be created by whether people play with you, sit next to you, talk to you, invite you for a play date or even know your name!

Kindergarten children continue to learn from experimentation. They try out different approaches with people and find out what happens. They

experiment with how much control they have over others and their own lives.

As discussed earlier, some children suddenly realize their sphere of influence and begin experimenting with how much power they have or don't have among their classmates. Sometimes this is done through being the class clown, directing others, being rude and some compete with the teacher for everyone's attention.

This behaviour may come from feeling that if they are entertaining enough they will be noticed and people will like them. It can also come from being very popular and having many friends place demands on them at the same time. This can become a burden which is difficult to deal with for a young child who hardly understands what is happening.

Kindergarten age children aren't always exhibiting these extreme behaviours. They are also very imaginative, constructive, able to express their ideas and plans to others and able to accept others into their activities. They take initiative in making choices, figure out how to do something and can explain step by step what they are doing.

Some children peacefully go through their days and are able to get along with most children without putting themselves in a challenging social situation. Some rush in with a forceful personality and definite ideas of what they want without considering anyone else.

In the classroom, we try to help children communicate successfully. We encourage them to listen, take turns, be more aware of others and understand the impact they have on another person. Sometimes children are so intensely focused on these social issues that it is a challenge to assist them in becoming constructive in other things. Many of these issues, as we know, continue through life. We are always amazed how early they all begin.