

Dear Gingerbread Parents: This is a very common issue, and has been one as long as I've been a teacher (a long time!). The message I want you to get MOST OF ALL is that we can work these issues, but it requires that we take the time to help children work through this with the other children involved. These skills are important life skills, and we don't want to miss this window of opportunity! Love, Teacher Skye

YOU'RE NOT MY FRIEND

"Dummy!" "You can't come to my birthday party." "Loser!" "You can't play with us." "You can only play with us if you have a purple shirt." "No girls (boys) allowed." "Nobody would play with me." "I don't have any friends."

Comments like these, either overheard or reported by your child, can be real heartbreakers for parents. We wonder why this starts so young, or why it has to be this way at all. We recall every slight or fight we had when we were in school. I am aware that everyone would really like to shield our children from every mean or bad thing. Not only is it impossible to shield our children from this kind of thing, but if we WERE able to do it we would be doing our child a big disservice. Sometimes it's really difficult to realize our children are the perpetrators. There are several realizations that are important to wrestle with when helping your child grow strong in this area. First of all, its important to understand that to eliminate this kind of thing is to handicap our child for later on. Second, understand that we will deal with these things through the lens of your own experiences when you were a child. Third, acknowledge that the social theme is complex and often difficult to sort out.

BE A STUDENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Its very helpful to know the stages of social development. When I've taught Toddlers, often parents are very concerned because their child seems selfish and won't share. Please be aware that the only way a toddler shares is to be given too much to hold and when they drop something make a big deal of it and say "Nice sharing!" I like the Gesell books Your Three Year Old, Your Four Year Old, Your Five Year Old, or Your Six Year Old for insights into general tendencies of these ages and stages.

HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

Children are entitled to their emotions about an event in their lives. Don't assume that you know what they feel, either. I remember when my youngest son, Tucker, came into the house and announced "The kids on the bus say I'm a nerd." Now, in my mind I'm ready to go beat up what ever little snot nose called my son a name. However, I hadn't gone through two other children for nothing, so I said "How did that make you feel?" "Fine, 'cause its true . . . I AM a nerd," he stated with pride. (Fast forward to 2006: When Tucker first met Terry when we were dating, Terry walked out the door and Tucker turned to me and said "Nerds rule!" And they do!)

You are also entitled to your emotions about situations with your child. What often happens when we hear that our child has had their feelings hurt by another child is to bring out the Mama- or Papa-Bear. While completely understandable, this adrenaline rush of protectiveness is often not helpful--it causes us to do and say all kinds of things that don't help your child get a handle on socialization.

WHAT THEY SAY MAY NOT BE WHAT THEY MEAN

Realize, too, that often a child will learn to say "You're not my friend" when what he really means is "I'm mad" or "I'm lonely" or "I'm sad." When you hear a child say "Nobody would play with me" you can respond by saying "How did that make you feel" or perhaps you can hazard a guess: "You sound discouraged." They will correct you if they don't feel that there is a fit.

WHO OWNS THE PROBLEM?

Secondly, understand who it is that's going to need to solve this problem. Its most often the child himself, with help from caring adults. Try to give your child the IMPRESSION that they have the power, while getting help behind the scenes. Show concern for what they are going through without giving them all sorts of solutions they should use. Allow the child to dictate a note about the situation they're reporting. Call the child's teacher, asking for input (this is gathering data) to get the teacher's take on what's going on. Let the child's teacher know what's being said after school and see what her observations have been.

YOU SORT OF OWN THE PROBLEM BECAUSE IT IS YOUR CHILD AFTER ALL!

Third, don't underestimate your ability to help your child negotiate their situation. Calling up the other child's parent and solving it adult to adult should be one of your last strategies. Remember that you are your child's sanctuary and refuge from the harsh world. It is your job to provide the comfort (snuggling, stories, unconditional love) that will recharge his batteries and allow him to go out and try again. Helping our children learn to comfort themselves (reading, exercising, napping, playing) and find comfort in others (hugs, talking) is extremely important. When they become teens we want them to have a smorgasbord of options for finding comfort that do not involve self medication (drugs, eating, drinking, etc.)

IS IT BULLYING?

Parents are understandably concerned that their child may be the victim of a bully. One way that can prove helpful in determining whether or not this is the case is to ask their child if they'd like to invite the "offending" child over for a play date. If they say "Yes" it most likely is not a bully situation. Most of the time when a child has a play date the parents find out that the child is really not as bad as they may be picturing. During this play date it is recommended that you be an observer of most interactions--jot anything down you would like to discuss with your child. Try not to intervene unless a "house rule" is being broken ("In our house the couch is for sitting.") but discuss the interpersonal later ("I noticed that _____ wanted two turns and you let her--that was being a nice hostess, but you can also say 'You can have another turn after me' and a friend should accept this.")

LEARN TO BUY TIME

Gathering data about an incident, while time consuming, can be very effective in dealing with friendship issues. At Gingerbread we have an "Agenda" where we write out what problems the children have and problem solve solutions, with a teacher as mediator. I've recommended to many of you to carry around a small notebook or a 3 x 5 card to make a note of anything you would like to work on with your child. It can be a powerful tool for throwing them off balance (always a good ideal).

WHO HAS THE POWER?

Children often come to us on either end of the spectrum when it comes to assumptions of power, which is what most of the name calling is about. On one end of the spectrum are those children who think all power resides outside of themselves. Other children can tell them what to do and they don't hesitate to comply, even if its not something they want to do. If they have trouble with another child they always go to an adult to solve it or to tattle.

On the other end of the spectrum are those children who think all power resides with them. They will hit or grab, and they never tattle if someone does something to them (and you'd love for them to tattle). They seem to have the idea that its all up to them to make their lives work out.

I HAVE NO POWER

For the children who don't know their power, the best response to a complaint is "What did you do?" with an interested expression on your face. This question is not about "What did you do to deserve it?" but rather, "What happened next?" Most often these children will answer "Nothing" or "I came and told you." This is the opportunity to teach boundary setting techniques. These include "holding up your fence," telling the child "hands to your own body," teaching them to say "keep that in your brain," discussing things they can decide to do. In some homes and classrooms a chart of choices may be used to help the children decide what they are going to do, not what they are going to make someone else do.

I HAVE ALL THE POWER

For the children who take all the power, its important that they understand that "if you break it, you fix it." This is the concept of atonement and requires quite a bit of teaching on the part of the adults around them. For this child its important to have them ask the child who was hurt "What can I do to make you feel better?" They are in fact responsible for fixing the broken relationship to the best of their ability. The child who was hurt is then given the opportunity to say "I want you to fix my block building" or "I want you to get me an icy sponge" or "Say sorry." For hurtful words, "taming the tongue" is an age old problem. When hurtful words are said, the only thing we can do is write a note of apology, give a verbal apology and try to show with our actions that we don't feel that way any more.

CONSEQUENCES, NOT REVENGE

Its extremely important not to give the child the idea that the other one "asked for it." We want them to learn that they can get anything they want any way that does not cause problems for someone else. Its very effective here to understand that there are a variety of things that can be done to get what you want that do not include taking matters into your own hands. We want to expand this child's abilities to include negotiation, going for help, using a timer, etc.

THEN WHY DID YOU ASK ME?

It really helps if we think about social situations and how we can decode them for our children. Have you noticed that our children don't really want our advice? Some better ways to give them ideas to try include the question "Would you like to know what some other children have done?"

WHEN DO I DEAL WITH THIS? TIMING IS EVERYTHING!

Talk about a situation separate from when you first hear it, but within the day. When you greet them from school and hear something like "I don't have a friend" a great response would be "If that were true for me I

think I would need a big hug and a story time as soon as I got home." Later ask if they want to talk about it. If yes, just listen. Avoid giving advice (I know this is hard). Listen some more. A powerful thing to learn to say is "Hmmm" with an attentive look on your face. Then ask "Would you like some help with this?" If yes, ask if they'd like to know what some other kids have done. If they're interested (they usually are) start with the one you'd least like them to choose. "Some kids hit. Some kids cry. Some kids walk away. Some kids play with the teacher. Some kids play by themselves. Some kids think about other children they like. Which one do you think you'll try?" If they say "I don't know" then say "Let me know how it turns out." Then call the teacher to let her know of the conversation so she can keep an extra eye on things and help interpret. Don't let your child know you called.

SEND A NOTE

Another effective tool is to have your child dictate a note to you regarding the situation. This is a very powerful tool for the teacher to be able to take an actual incident and have the children problem solve. It helps the other children grow their "empathy" muscle by seeing how their actions made others' feel. Its so much more effective to have an actual incident to build a class meeting around than to just decide the curriculum states that in November we talk about put downs (or whatever).

CAN I PLAY?

In a neutral setting (school, the library, church), children should NOT be taught to ask "Can I play?" Rarely is the answer "Yes" but its not the personal statement many people think. The "No" answer can mean "I don't want anything to change about the play right now." It can mean "Oh, you're giving me all the power over the play house? Okay, I'll say NO and see if you go away (crying), proving to myself that I have total control." Instead, teach the child to assign himself a role while watching the play for a moment or two, then just jump in with the announcement of his place. If the child says "You can't play with us" spontaneously, she can say "There's no captain of the playhouse."

I NEED SOME SPACE

Its important to give children permission to not play with others if this is what they feel like. At Gingerbread the way we say this is "He's wanting a break right now. If you'll give it to him I'll bet he'll want to play again soon." We do not allow this to be "Exclusive Play", however. Exclusive play is where the child says "I want my space from YOU. Come on, lets play, Emily."

We tell the children that what they're talking about is a "play date" and that's where they call someone up and play with just them at their house.

BIRTHDAY TALK

Discussions about parties (or play dates) are fun but only if the discussion is in the broadest terms (what I'd like, where I'd like to have it, etc.). Other birthday talk is not allowed because people feel left out. Does that mean you have to invite everyone? No, but to discuss it in front of the uninvited is not kind. Birthday talk can also be a means of manipulation to get another child to do what they want "I'll invite you to my birthday party if you" I usually just say "Emily, do you want to do _____? No? I wouldn't, then." Again, nip the birthday talk in the bud by telling the child to keep it in their brain or talk about it at home.

TEACH, TEACH, TEACH

Use books to teach separate from the incident. In other words, comfort, problem solve, soothe, and help your child, then, at a later time when all is calm, read books that include some aspect of social behavior and discuss it. This can really be helpful to both your child and to you! Some great titles include Ira Sleeps Over, Move Over Twerp, George and Martha, Patrick and Ted, Bargain for Francis, A Friend is Someone Who Likes You, Fire Cat and Noisy Nora.

CAN I PULL YOUR STRINGS?

Some of these comments are manipulative in nature. "I'll be your best friend" "I'll invite you to my birthday party" are both ways of trying to get someone to do what you want. The way to help your child is to do everything you can to build their self concept so that they are resilient. Resiliency is the ability to take the knocks that the world dishes out and still know that you are a worthy person.

YOU'RE THE BOSS OF ME?

When a child gets in trouble by doing something because another child "told me to do it" its important not to let them off the hook and blame the other child. You want them to learn to stand on their own feet and be their own person (take responsibility), so I like to answer this excuse with "Wow! So ____ is in charge of (that other child) AND you, too" with a startled facial expression. This brings the absurdity of what's just happened to the light. Be sure the consequence for the behavior still stands. "Wow, so Janie told you to cut your hair and she's the boss of you? Okay, well, I thought you were big enough to use scissors on paper but I guess not. We'll put them up until you show me that you can remember the cutting rules." Then make sure they have to use THEIR energy to convince you. You don't even have to do anything except say "I'm not convinced yet. I'm not sure what I'll need to see to be convinced but I know playing the blame game is not it." They should have hope that they will get to try this again soon . . . for little kids a day or two or even a few minutes can be enough time-use your judgement.

SHARING

Children can be confused about sharing. We do want our children to grow up to be generous, but that doesn't mean that they have to share something they are engrossed in. This is very difficult and should not be expected. We teach the children to say "When you're through with that can I have a turn?" and then we stay close by to pass it on when the child lays it down, commenting "Thanks for sharing the _____." If the other child complains that they are taking too long you can say something along the lines of "They ARE taking a long turn. When you get it would you like a long turn? I thought so." Sometimes an item is very popular but scarce, usually when we first get it. This is a time to ask the children what they can think of so that everyone gets a turn. If they can't think of anything you can say "Some kids use a timer, some kids take five spins (or whatever number seems appropriate or reasonable), etc." If they have a suggestion and everyone is keen to try it say "We'll try it today and see how it works." Then, the next day, follow up. If it worked, great. If not, tweak it, abandon it, ask for other suggestions and try again.

SAYING SORRY

Please do not require children to say "sorry" to a child they have wronged. This can become rote and a "get out of jail free" card that is meaningless to the child who has been harmed. We prefer to use atonement, or "cleaning up your mess." The child who did the deed (knocked something down, hit someone, etc.) is asked to say "What do you need to feel better?" If the child won't, the teacher can say it for him or her, then turn to the child who needs to fix it to ask him to comply with the other child's request. After awhile they will

begin to do this themselves and this usually conveys a real desire to help the other child. If the wronged child says "I want him to say sorry," of course that's what is needed. Often they will want the other child to fix something (for example, if they knock a block building over that they didn't build, they will need to build it back. If they say they don't know how, ask the other child to show him what to do and where to put each block.) We use the philosophy "If you break it, you fix it."

MOST COMPLICATED

The social/emotional development of your child is a complex process. We want our children to be successful with sorting all this out because as we know, so much of our happiness as adults has to do with how well we do relationships. Beware of what works quickly--raising children is never efficient. To be effective we must spend some time helping them sort this all out. It's a fun journey if you allow it to be (and don't just spend all your time wishing it would go away!). I hope that you continue to use our *Gingerbread* staff as a resource in your child's social development.