

Helping Your Child Navigate Social Dilemmas

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All children will experience social difficulties from time to time. This is not only a normal, expected part of growing up, but also an important learning experience for children. As they muddle through social problems with their peers, children will learn to negotiate, compromise and become increasingly more self-aware. Finding the solutions to these social dilemmas, however, can come easily to some children and not so easily to others.

Socially “savvy” children tend to be good problem solvers; they seem to have an innate sense of what to do, when to do it, and how to apply it in social situations. These children tend to be more popular with peers as a result of this savvy as they *appear* more capable. Appearing more capable to their peers can translate to social confidence and a positive sense of self.

Children who are shy or socially anxious tend not to be great social problem-solvers. Oftentimes, shy children will try the same social solution over and over again without success and eventually give up. While shyness in and of itself is not a detriment in life, ‘not having the answer’ to social dilemmas can have negative impact over time. This could contribute to low self-esteem, social isolation and perceived (or real) senses of rejection by their peers. Improving social problem-solving skills, therefore, is critical to give shy or socially anxious children an edge in social situations.

Problem-solving strategies can be taught, and the ideas can be continually reinforced by parents, teachers and others. The following problem-solving strategies can be applied to most social situations, so it is a good framework to teach a child and remind them to use when faced with a social dilemma. It is easily remembered by the acronym **STOP**:

September 2007

S **Stop and remain calm.** Remind your child that most problems cannot be effectively solved when we are upset, crying or worked up. Anxiety “feeds” on situations that are stuck in an upset, worried place. The anxiety-ridden, upsetting situation may produce rapid breathing, rapid heartbeat, upset stomach, headache and/or muscle tension. Therefore, to stop the anxiety cycle, it is important to shift gears from that emotional reaction. This may involve taking deep breaths, counting to 10, encouraging muscle tensing and then relaxing, visualizing something calming or soothing, or removing yourself from the room or situation that was making you upset. Only when your child is calm, relaxed and able to think logically can an effective solution be found. Remind your child that most decisions made impulsively and in a rash manner are not good decisions.

T **Think about What the Problem Is.** Oftentimes, this is easier said than done, but it is important to help your child accurately and succinctly identify what their problem is. Children are very good at pointing a finger at others to describe their problem, but identification of the specific problem is a little tougher. For example, rather than identifying a problem as “He is playing with my toy,” encourage your child to identify the problem as “I want to play with that toy.”

O **Consider the Options for Solving the Problem.** Help your child brainstorm and come up with a minimum of 3 solutions to the problem at hand. This forces the child to think beyond the one (or two) solutions that may come impulsively to them. If they cannot think of solutions, encourage them to think of a silly, zany solution like “I know, you can dance around like a silly monkey!” – while this type of silly solution will likely not help them solve their social dilemma, it will lessen their defensiveness and encourage a more open, creative thought process. When their mind is more open to ideas, the likelihood of thinking of a good solution is greater.

P **Decide on a Plan.** This part of the problem-solving process involves considering the possible outcomes of the solutions your child has come up with. What may happen if your child chose one or the other? Will anyone get hurt? Will your child get in trouble for choosing one of the solutions? Will anyone feel upset or left out as a result of choosing one solution or another? Help your child consider the pros/cons of each potential solution. Then, ask your child which of the solutions they think may be best to solve the specific problem they identified in the second step.

As you talk with your child about these problem-solving steps, the following ideas may be helpful to keep in mind.

Help your Child Learn to Read Cues

Some children are good at reading social and nonverbal cues, while others can seem oblivious. Being a good judge of these kinds of cues in a social situation, however, can help or even eliminate social problems. These cues can be a signal to enter into an interaction with others, to stay away, to keep quiet or to speak up. You will be your child's best teacher if you can encourage him or her to read body language, facial expression, presence (or not) of eye contact, and verbal innuendos in a social situation. You can do this with real-life examples, such as following an interaction with a stranger in a store. You can ask your child questions such as "Do you think she seemed happy or sad?" and "What made you think that?" It is also a great exercise to look through books and magazines, pointing to faces and scenes, asking your child questions about the cues they see in the picture. You could even give your child several old magazines and ask them to cut out all the pictures of angry people, surprised faces, people who look approachable or people who do not. This is a fun and creative way to teach a keen reading of emotions and nonverbal cues. It is also important, however, to teach your child to recognize their OWN body language, facial expression, etc. Help them see how their expression, lack of eye contact, or slumped posture may be communicating "stay away" to a peer when that may not at all be what your child is hoping to communicate. Don't criticize, but instead offer ideas of how they may be able to change these nonverbal cues of their own to more approachable ones.

Be Patient and Keep an Open Mind

Parents lead busy lives, and between balancing households, jobs, and childcare responsibilities it can sometimes feel like there is no time left to think. It is important, however, to make the time to sit and talk with your child about their social problems. Try to be patient and listen, without judgment. While some problems may not seem worth getting upset about to you, keep in mind that in your child's world this is important. Listening alone can provide much-needed validation for your child, just because you are considering their thoughts important enough to give your undivided attention. Try not to rush the process, it may take some time for your child to put into words what is on his or her mind. Don't try to fill in the blanks for them or finish their sentences. Don't try to solve the problem for them. Oftentimes, parents think they are showing support and encouragement by giving their child a solution. "He's ignoring you?" "Well, go play with someone else" you may say. But by offering your child the solution, you are robbing them of the experience of arriving at the decision on their own, and they miss out on learning the PROCESS of problem-solving. Instead, try to ask open-ended questions such as "What do you think about doing this?" or "What do you think may happen if you tried that?" Your child will be more likely to follow through on their solution if they are given the chance to come up with it on their own.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Just because popular, socially "savvy" children innately know what to do in a social situation doesn't mean that these things cannot be learned. Any behavior can be learned with practice and encouragement. Socially anxious and shy children have a hard time joining in to a social situation because they can become immobilized with their fears and held back by their inhibitions. As a result, they do not have time to think once they are faced with a social situation because they are so preoccupied with their internal experience. You must encourage your shy child to practice *what to do* in social situations at HOME. This way, when they are faced with their peers, they can more readily draw from their practiced experience and do not need to think about what to do. Role play exercises are a fun and effective way to achieve this. You can pretend to be a peer at school who your child is having trouble with, allowing them to "practice" what to do and what to say in a mock situation.

Draw from Your Own Experiences

We have all experienced social dilemmas in our childhood, and likely our adulthood as well! Your child is not alone, and it is important to let him or her know this. Your child will feel validated in their experience by knowing that you went through something similar. Additionally, you have an opportunity to teach them what is right and wrong and impart your moral values by talking about yourself rather than about your child's problems. You can say, "You know when I was about your age I felt left out a lot by the other girls at school and do you know what I used to do?" This kind of learning is very powerful for a child, as they look up to their parents so tremendously.

With reinforcement of appropriate problem-solving strategies, ongoing practice of new ideas and encouragement, and keeping these tips in mind, you are well on your way to helping your child develop necessary social skills. Your child will be in a better position to navigate through social struggles and this will translate to a greater sense of social confidence and improved self-esteem.