



Prosocial Behavior and Peer Rejection: Information and Strategies for Parents and Teachers

BY KATHERINE A. GIOIA & STEVEN LANDAU, PHD, *Illinois State University*

Developing prosocial behaviors is a key ingredient in forming successful friendships and peer relations. Prosocial behaviors include those considered appropriate by peers and designed to benefit others. Prosocial behaviors vary according to age and gender, but range from sharing toys to following rules of a game to taking turns to saying nice things.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROSOCIAL SKILLS AND PEER REJECTION

Children's prosocial development requires the prerequisite skills of emotional understanding, empathy, and emotion regulation.

Importance of Prosocial Skills

Children who have emotional understanding are able to identify their own emotions and the emotions of others. Children who have developed empathy are able to take others' emotional perspectives and produce sympathetic responses. Emotion regulation is the ability to control or modify how one expresses feelings in response to particular emotionally arousing experiences.

Children who have successfully developed these prerequisite skills are more likely to be accepted by peers and have greater opportunity to develop positive peer relations. There are multiple benefits to having positive peer relations, as the development of positive friendships not only creates a context for positive social interactions but also tends to protect children who are faced with challenges at home or school.

Impact of Peer Rejection

In contrast to socially successful children, those who are rejected by their peers have difficulty developing positive peer relations and tend to be deficient in the prerequisite prosocial characteristics of empathy, emotional understanding, and emotion regulation. Rejected children tend to be emotionally intense and have difficulty regulating these emotions in order to successfully get along with others.

During the course of childhood and adolescence, most children experience some disruption in their relationships with peers. Peer rejection, on the other hand, occurs when children are actively disliked by classmates. Children who are rejected have developed negative reputations over time and may experience peer victimization (such as bullying, teasing, name-calling, social exclusion, and having rumors spread about them). Because many rejected children are excluded from social situations, they are less likely to have opportunities to observe, develop, and practice age-appropriate prosocial behaviors. Fewer opportunities lead to fewer prosocial behaviors, fewer social skills, and fewer friendships. Rejected children are also at risk for academic, emotional, and behavioral problems.

IDENTIFYING REJECTED CHILDREN

It is important for parents and teachers to identify children who are rejected in order to intervene as early as possible.

Characteristics

Not all rejected children behave the same way. Children may be aggressive, immature, inattentive, withdrawn, and/or anxious.

Aggressive children. Children who are aggressive and disruptive are more likely to be rejected by their peers. These children tend to be hostile towards other students, oppositional and confrontational towards teachers, and disruptive and impulsive in the classroom. Rejected children who are aggressive also tend to interpret ambiguous social situations from a hostile perspective, and are more easily provoked.

Immature and inattentive children. Children who are socially immature and inattentive are also likely to be rejected by peers. These children tend to have trouble paying attention to teachers, have difficulty following directions and playing fairly in games, and tend to behave immaturely in the classroom. Overall, these children have difficulty controlling their behavior both in the classroom and when engaging in social situations. Children with Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) typically fall within this category and are especially prone to experience peer rejection.

Withdrawn and anxious children. Children who are socially withdrawn and anxious may also be rejected by peers because they seem awkward in social situations. Even though these children may prefer to play with others, they can be neglected and ignored when attempting to join social activities. In addition, they may be targets of bullying because of their passive nature.

Warning Signs

Because rejected children are at risk for additional social-emotional, academic, and behavioral problems, it is important for parents and teachers to determine which children have problems with peer rejection. Parents and teachers can become actively involved in identifying children who are rejected just by watching children in social situations. The following is a list of indicators that may suggest a child is being rejected by his or her classmates:

- Frequently disrupts games and other social activities
- Gets into arguments and often fights with peers
- Is unable to cooperate and play fairly with other children
- Complains of experiencing bullying and harassment
- Has few friends but prefers to have more
- Is ignored and plays alone at recess despite attempts to play with others

There are also formal procedures to help identify students at risk for peer rejection in the classroom.

Psychologists sometimes use sociometric assessments (peer nominations and ratings) to identify how well-liked or disliked the child is by his or her classmates. This method essentially asks children questions such as “Who do you like/not like to play with?” to determine the degree to which a child is liked or disliked by his or her peers. When used by trained personnel, such assessments have been found to reliably identify popular and unpopular children, and thus help school personnel to identify those children who might benefit from intervention.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

There are several ways parents can help.

Involve Children in Prosocial Activities

Parents serve as gatekeepers of their children’s social development. You can help your child gain access to prosocial opportunities, such as extracurricular activities and teams in which children can engage in and practice their social skills. If your child is having difficulty making friends at school, you can enroll him in community sports leagues or groups or teams at school, your local community center, or a day care center. You are also encouraged to speak to your child’s teacher regarding extra opportunities at school for your child to engage in social activities.

Become Familiar With Your Child’s Peer Group

Children spend most of their waking hours at school in the presence of peers. Despite your family’s hectic daily routine, try to find time to talk to your child about her friends and classmates, such as on the way home from school or sports activities. Learn the nature of your child’s relationships. Set up play dates in which you have the opportunity to meet the parents of your child’s friends. This will help you get to know your child’s friends and their families and to observe the children playing together. Because parents cannot always observe their children in social situations, you are also encouraged to talk to your child’s teachers to find out more about her social successes and challenges.

Seek Professional Help

Some rejected children experience adjustment difficulties so severe that they require extra support. Professional help is available from the school’s support services staff, such as the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker. Typically, children who are rejected are more likely to be referred to professionals for problems such as aggression, learning difficulties, hyperactivity, or inattention, and less likely for problems such as poor social skills or negative reputations. Because social-emotional problems make it hard to succeed in school, talk to your

school psychologist if you have concerns about your child's social skills or mental health.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

There are several ways teachers can help.

Become Familiar With Students' Peer Relations

During the first few weeks of school, teachers typically determine whether their students are performing academically at a developmentally appropriate level. Teachers also should consider whether their students are performing socially at a developmentally appropriate level. Look for signs that children are being rejected by peers by focusing on children who appear to be isolated from classmates, overtly avoided, bullied, and/or teased.

Help Students Gain Access to Prosocial Opportunities

Once you identify which students may have difficulties in peer relationships, you can assist these students to become involved in prosocial activities and peer groups. By setting up group projects or peer instruction tasks, you can monitor students' social interactions within the classroom setting. Specialists such as art and physical education teachers can also help students gain access to social groups by requiring them to work in pairs or small groups. During cooperative learning activities, select a student who has demonstrated positive social skills to serve as a work partner of a rejected student.

Incorporate Social Skills Lessons in Classroom Routine

Educational standards are changing to include development of social and emotional understanding of others. There are standardized curricula to help teachers facilitate students' social development, including *Second Step, I Can Problem Solve, The Stop and Think Social Skills Program*, and *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies* (see Recommended Resources below). Consider implementing a weekly curriculum that helps children develop their social skills.

Consult Support Services Personnel

If you suspect that a student is being rejected by peers, make a referral to the school's support services staff. The school psychologist, social worker, or counselor is often the student's primary mental health advocate. Find out what types of services are available from school mental health personnel. School psychologists, social workers, or counselors may offer social skills training groups, parent training, counseling, and/or consultation, or simply facilitate referrals to community resources.

SOCIAL SKILLS INTERVENTION

Peer rejection can be the consequence of children's lack of prosocial skills or difficulties applying skills they have

learned. Different intervention strategies are needed for skill deficits versus performance deficits.

Skill Deficits

Some rejected children have difficulty acquiring social skills and do not know the rules of prosocial behaviors. Their lack of knowledge reflects a skill deficit. In this case, children should receive social skills training to help them learn the necessary, specific skills to make and keep friends. Parents and teachers are encouraged to speak to the school psychologist about the availability of social skills training and social skills groups at school or resources in the community.

Performance Deficits

Other rejected children, in contrast, understand the rules of social situations, know how to make friends, but have difficulty applying the skills they possess. Children's inability to perform the social skills reflects a performance deficit. In this case, interventions are needed to help the child delay an interpersonal response long enough to access existing skills. Interventions that address these problems provide multiple opportunities for children to become more fluent in using their social skills by engaging in gradually more independent practice. Strategies include direct instruction, modeling, guided practice, role-playing, independent practice, and generalized practice of social skills with same-age peers. Both parents and teachers can facilitate practice opportunities in social situations with adult supervision, such as the playground, physical education class, birthday parties, and other play settings. These situations also give parents and teachers opportunities to provide children with immediate feedback.

SUMMARY

Parents and teachers are encouraged to look beyond children's academic functioning in school and consider how they function in relation to their peers. It is crucial that schools recognize that children's social skills affect their academic attainment and emotional development.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

- Bierman, K. L. (2005). *Peer rejection: Developmental processes and intervention strategies*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Chen, X., French, D. C., & Schneider, B. H. (2006). *Peer relations in cultural context*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kupersmidt, J. B., & Dodge, K. A. (2004). *Children's peer relations: From development to intervention*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Ladd, G. W. (2005). *Children's peer relations and social competence: A century of progress*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rubin, K. H. (2003). *The friendship factor: Helping our children navigate their social world—and why it matters for their success and happiness*. New York: Penguin.
- Shapiro, L. E. (2004). *101 ways to teach children social skills: A ready-to-use reproducible activity book*. New York: Bureau for At-Risk Youth.
- Waas, G. A. (2006). Peer relationships. In G. Bear & K. Minke (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (pp. 325–340). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Recommended Intervention Programs

- Committee for Children (2002). *Second step manual* (2nd ed.). Seattle, WA: Committee for Children.
- Greenberg, M. T., Kusché, C., & Mihalic, S. F. (1998). *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS): Blueprints for violence prevention, book 10*. Blueprints for Violence Prevention Series (D.S. Elliott, Series

Editor). Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado.

- Knoff, H. M. (2001). *The Stop and Think social skills program*. Frederick, CO: Sopris West.
- Shure, M. B. (2001). *I Can Problem Solve: An interpersonal cognitive problem-solving program: Intermediate elementary grades*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Online

National Association of School Psychologists: <http://www.nasponline.org>

See <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/index.aspx>
Parenting.org, *Social skills 101: Learn the steps to 16 basic skills*:
<http://www.parenting.org/behavior/socialskills/>

Katherine A. Gioia is a doctoral student in the School Psychology Program at Illinois State University. Steven Landau, PhD, is a Professor of Psychology at Illinois State University.

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