

Eyes on

# Peer relations

Supporting children  
to develop friendships

PRACTITIONERS



CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

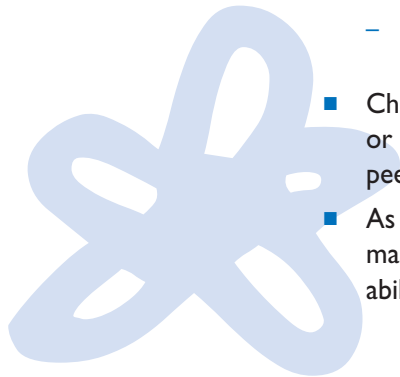
Early Childhood Development



**“Already at the young age of 3-4 years, some children may have problems in their relationship with other children.”**

## What do we know?

- In the first years of life, young children learn a lot from relationships with other children of the same age (i.e. their peers). They gain:
  - communication skills (saying what they want and feel, asking questions, inviting other children to play)
  - skills that help regulate emotions (recognizing their own emotions and those of others, controlling emotional outbursts, dealing with frustrations)
  - skills that support conflict resolution (controlling aggressive impulses, suggesting alternative solutions, compromising)
  - cooperation skills (taking turns, imitating, reacting positively to others, adapting to the other’s point of view)
- Learning how to make and keep friends is one of the main developmental tasks of pre-school period. It helps prevent children from having psychological and school problems later in life.
- Already at the young age of 3-4 years, some children may have problems in their relationships with other children.
- Between 5-10% of children experience persistent problems, such as social exclusion and rejection, or physical or verbal harassment from their peers.
- Peer relationship difficulties in the early years of life are a powerful predictor of future emotional and behavioural problems, such as:
  - *emotional problems*: characterized by feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression
  - *behavioral problems*: expressed as aggression, hyperactivity or oppositional behaviour
- Children with disabilities such as mental retardation, behaviour problems, autism or motor and language delays often have fewer opportunities to interact with their peers and are often less accepted by them.
- As a result of their limited opportunities to spend time with competent peers, many children with disabilities have gaps in important social skills, such as the ability to develop and maintain friendship relations.



### Paying attention to...

... what influences peer acceptance. Peer acceptance is strongly influenced by the relationships children have with their family (parents and siblings), by the parents' relationship with each other, and by the children's own behaviour.

... the importance of preventing peer relation problems. Children who experience problems in their peer relationships are more likely to show aggressive, hyperactive or oppositional behaviour, or to be socially withdrawn.

... which intervention programs work best. The most successful intervention programs take place in a natural setting, such as child care centres, and involve both teachers and parents.

... the importance of training. Teachers and other service providers who implement social skills programs need to be appropriately trained to ensure that children learn all the social skills necessary to establish and maintain positive relationships with their peers.

### What can be done?

- Help parents to use conflict situations between brothers and sisters as an opportunity to teach important social skills such as peaceful conflict resolution.

- Avoid putting children with aggressive traits together in the same group.
- Implement social skills training in the pre-school years.

- Initiate intervention programs that support the development of social behaviour skills:

*Two types of intervention programs have been shown to be effective:*

- **Universal programs** – aimed at promoting social skills in all the children of a group.
  - **Targeted programs** – specifically geared toward children who have problems in their social relationships. These programs attempt to improve the children's social behaviour skills and their peer relationships.
- Involve families, teachers and peers in intervention programs.

- Become informed about the training methods used in the following promising programs:

*Universal pre-school programs:*

- **I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)**
- **Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)**

*Targeted programs for pre-school children with aggressive behaviour problems:*

- **Incredible Years Dinosaur Social Skills**
- **Problem Solving Curriculum**

*Targeted program for pre-school children who are socially isolated and who come from low-income families:*

- **The Play Buddy**



# Information

The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development identifies and summarizes the best scientific work on the social and emotional development of young children. It disseminates this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of child peer relations, consult our experts' articles in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at [www.child-encyclopedia.com](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com).

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