

Tips for Parents: Unpopular Kids

Does your child have a problem getting along with others? If children go day after day without making friends, they may experience life-long difficulties. Contrary to what parents might think, being unpopular is not something a child grows out of.

What makes a child unpopular?

Withdrawn or disruptive behavior is often the cause of unpopularity. Children who are shy and withdrawn frequently find themselves isolated from the group, as do disruptive children who strike out physically or bully others.

Peer rejection

Rejection by peers can have harmful repercussions. Children tend to build self-esteem based on their relationships with other children. Through interaction with peers they develop their abilities to share, to handle anger, and carry on emotional relationships. Children who are unsuccessful in acquiring these social skills are susceptible to depression, low self-esteem, dropping out of school, and delinquent behavior.

Behavior that leads to being unpopular may begin as early as age one or two. A toddler, for example, who grabs toys from other children may not have a problem. But if this same kind of physical aggression is still taking place in second grade, the child is likely to be rejected by classmates.

Once children experience rejection, their behavior usually deteriorates further, making them even more unlikable and less able to succeed in the negotiating and compromising world of play.

The danger of waiting

Can children work things out on their own? Parents tend to believe that children will grow out of being unpopular. Unfortunately, research shows that this is not usually the case. By the time the problem is clearly evident, rejected children have already established negative feelings about themselves and their relationships with other children.

Bad reputation

Children, like adults, may gain a “reputation.” Unfortunately, with younger children, bad reputations seem to be “set in stone” and are not easily changed. A bad reputation can cause serious damage to a child’s self-esteem and is a real obstacle in building social relationships.

Low self-esteem

Self-esteem is a key ingredient in leading a happy and productive life. Unpopular children have low self-esteem and, therefore, have little faith in their ability to take care of themselves and meet life's challenges with confidence.

Lack of motivation

Being unpopular and having low self-esteem can lead to low motivation. When children feel like they don't "fit in," they may lose interest in school and do poorly at their studies

How can I help?

High self-esteem is good for your child's emotional and physical health. Children with high self-esteem feel good about themselves and, therefore, get along better with others. In fact, some research suggests that kids with high self-esteem spend fewer days away from school due to illness.

Unconditional love goes a long way in building a child's self-esteem. Children with high self-esteem feel happier and more accepted by others, thus it is easier for them to make friends.

As you support your children in their efforts to achieve success, make it clear that you still expect them to maintain certain standards of behavior. A firm, but fair approach to setting behavior limits and a willingness to deal with aggressive children has the most success.

For more information:

National Network for Child Care –“Children Without Friends,” four part series
http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/dc26_wo.friends1.html

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