

T H E

Well-Centered CHILD

September 1999

When Friendship Skills Need a Tune-Up

If only having your child learn how to make friends could be as easy as getting a tune-up for your car. It isn't of course, but when it comes to keeping things running smoothly, most early childhood teachers leave mechanics in the dust.

SPARK PLUGS

Take spark plugs, for instance. You've probably already noticed a few in your child's class. They're the kids whose interactions come with an added jolt. They enthusiastically say hello with a shove or by destroying the block tower of the very person they want to make friends with. Sadly, their attempts backfire.

Sympathetic teachers are good at showing young spark plugs some low-octane ways to greet potential friends: *Instead of throwing a crayon at him, say, "Hi, Kevin!" or Try handing him a block for his tower.* To ensure good mileage from such suggestions, teachers usually stay nearby to help kids through the process.

MERGING

Teachers can also give pretty good advice about merging into traffic. That's a friendship skill young children find extremely puzzling at first. When you join a busily playing group, is it better to watch for an opening, yield, or simply push your way in? Or maybe it's safer to hang back, and not join in at all?

Children can learn to blend into the flow of play rather than interrupt it. Teachers provide materials and support when a child is hesitant: *Here's a sand shovel and a space for you, too.* When a group seems to be closed to newcomers, they suggest make-believe roles that won't disrupt the play: *It looks like they could use someone to be the big sister. Let's find out.* And often they help children come up with the right words for entering in: *Just tell them, 'I'm here to fix your refrigerator.'* In other words, teachers are good at pointing out the "on-ramps" to play.

STEERING AND BRAKES

Of course, steering and brakes are essential, too. When kids play together they have to know when to zoom ahead with their own ideas and when to put on the brakes, slow down, and listen to someone else's thoughts. Children soon learn that being a friend can mean both leading and following.

By providing plenty of time for pretend play, teachers give children countless opportunities to learn about steering and braking, leading and following, persuading and listening. It's knowledge they'll use in friendships throughout life.

SHOCK ABSORBERS

And what about those inevitable stretches of bumpy road along the way? That's

when teachers step in to help kids realize they have shock absorbers. It's good to have someone help you figure out how to manage when your best friend is playing with another child, when someone grabs your toy, or when there isn't a place for you at the playdough table.

With a little help, kids discover they needn't be thrown by these rough spots. They begin to discover that there are other children to play with, that it's okay to stand up for themselves, and that their turn really will come if they can wait just a little bit longer.

Indeed, when kids first set out on the lifelong journey of learning to make and keep friends, early childhood teachers do much more than simply keep things running smoothly. Day after day, they're there to help children figure out how to join in, when to lead, and when to follow. They guide them in resolving conflicts and collisions. In short, teachers provide clear roadmaps that point the way to satisfying friendships.

Their work involves skill, tact, knowledge, and a willingness to wait months and months to see results. The next time you see your child's teacher, be sure to say thanks. After all, he or she provides much more than a tune-up.