

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT
STRATEGIES
HELPING THE
ISOLATED CHILD**

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HELPING THE ISOLATED CHILD

- There are few things more painful to children than to have no friends. Just about all children need to feel a connection with their peers. For those on the social fringe, school brings frequent reminders of their unwanted status — being chosen last for a team, having trouble finding a partner for an activity, having few classmates to invite to their birthday party, not having anyone to play with during recess.
- Beyond its effect on a child's self-esteem, isolation from peers can have a marked impact on his school adjustment. He may have difficulty focusing on schoolwork as his attention drifts to social concerns. Having limited relationships with peers also denies him a valuable learning experience. It is through these interactions that he learns the skills of developing and maintaining friendships. It is not surprising then that children who are isolated from their peers tend to have social problems later on.

HELPING THE ISOLATED CHILD

- Children can be friendless for very different reasons. A child may lack an understanding of basic social skills so that he may not know what to say or do around his classmates. Rather than run the risk of trying to connect with a classmate and failing, he may withdraw from his peers and choose to spend time alone. Staying to himself is often the less painful option.
- Some children are isolated from classmates for a much different reason: their behaviors may turn other students off. They may cut in line, talk too much, interrupt conversations, make fun of others, and butt in during games. Not surprisingly, these students have trouble making and keeping friends.

HELPING THE ISOLATED CHILD

Friendship skills come more easily to some children than others. But fortunately they are skills that can be, and should be, taught. If you have a student who is socially immature, you may need to coach him in social skills. In addition, you may need to put on your social director's hat and try to orchestrate successful peer interactions. Through these activities, the student may gain valuable social skills and his classmates may come to see him in a more appealing light.

HELPING THE ISOLATED CHILD

What You Can Do

- I. Have a class meeting about friendship issues. Put two headings on the board, “What Friends Do” and “What Friends Don’t Do.” Ask your students to give examples for each list, prompting them when necessary to make sure certain characteristics are included. Use their contributions as the basis for a discussion about what makes a good friend. Help them understand how children may feel when they are left out of activities. Underlying your comments should be the message that you expect them to show concern for their classmates. You might even establish a rule in your classroom that students are responsible for making sure no classmate plays or eats alone unless he wants to.

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What You Can Do

2. Try to figure out why the child is isolated. Find time to observe him in different settings such as lunch or recess. Or get a report from staff in those settings. Also talk with last year's teacher as well as his parents. You might even talk discretely with an observant and trustworthy student. This information may help you determine if the student's social difficulties are related to shyness, bossiness, aggressive behavior, appearance or hygiene issues.

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What You Can Do

3. Raise the student's social intelligence. When peer conflicts occur, help him take a close-up look at what happened and how he can improve. After dealing with the immediate incident, take the student aside and help him understand what happened by asking some questions: Why do you think the student reacted to you that way? How do you think he felt? What could you have said or done differently? In this way, you can help the student become more observant of his own behavior, more aware of alternative ways of acting, and less impulsive in responding.

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What You Can Do

4. Coach the student in social skills. Talk with him privately and give specific guidance about social situations he is likely to encounter. With young children, you may need to start with very basic skills such as making eye contact, joining in activities, or asking others to play. Suggest some “door openers” (for example, “Would you like to play a game with me?” or “Do you want to be my partner?”). If he is comfortable, role-play with him some common social situations (for example, asking if he can join in a soccer game during recess). Also give him ideas for things to talk about with classmates during recess or after school. And, of course, make sure to lavish praise on him (privately if you think he will be embarrassed by public recognition) when you see him demonstrating good social skills.

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What You Can Do

5. Arrange social interactions with classmates. This may call for you to put on your social director's hat and orchestrate the child's involvement with his peers. Find activities where he can interact with other students successfully and is with peers who are likely to be accepting. For example, you might ask a couple of kind and mature students to ask him to play during recess or join them at their lunch table. Or you might split the class into four or five groups for an academic activity, perhaps having them meet outside of school to complete the project. This may help to foster relationships with classmates. If you have students pair up in class, assign him to a student who is likely to relate well with him.

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What You Can Do

6. Organize a group of classmates to reach out to the student. Carefully select a group of four or five students and meet with them privately to ask them to make a special effort to involve the student in their activities. Talk with the group about what kinds of activities they could do with him, eliciting their ideas and giving some of your own based on your knowledge of the student. As one example, you might ask each student to phone him once a week. Encourage them to invite him to an after-school activity or to walk to school with them. The more you can build a peer support system for the student, the more he will feel a sense of belonging to the class. Ask them to respond positively and naturally when the student speaks with them.

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What You Can Do

7. Help the child befriend another student. You might play the role of matchmaker by identifying a classmate with similar interests and an accepting manner who might become a friend to the isolated student. Look for opportunities to pair them up by placing them in the same group for an academic or social activity or assigning them to be partners during a field trip or classroom activity.

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What You Can Do

8. Encourage the parents to foster peer relationships. The parents play an important role here so encourage them to help their child develop friendships by arranging social contacts with classmates. You may want to suggest to them particular children he might call. Give them ideas for how to structure the visit to enhance its success, including inviting only one child at a time and providing an appealing activity for the first visit. Also suggest to them that they involve their child in community activities that he has an interest in and where he is likely to do well.

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What You Can Do

9. Start a lunch club. If you have students who are isolated from other children and playing or eating by themselves, consider grouping these students together during lunch and recess. Tell them the only requirement for being a member of this club is that they be kind to each other. You might have them choose an organizing activity for the group (for example, playing board games or doing art projects). You may find that friendships begin to develop and that lunch, previously a dreaded part of the day, is now a time they look forward to.

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What You Can Do

10. Help the student feel important through his classroom contributions. A student who has few friends is likely experiencing a lack of self-esteem. Try to enhance his sense of self-worth by assigning him classroom jobs or finding ways he can help others. Tell him that you are giving him this responsibility because you are confident he can do it well. You might, for example, have him be a classroom messenger, hand out papers, or tutor a student in a lower grade.

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What You Can Do

11. Help classmates recognize the child's strengths and talents. Talk with the student or his parents to find out his interests and talents. Find a way to bring these to the attention of the class in a natural way. If he is a good math student, ask him to show the class how to do a challenging math problem. If he is a rock collector, have him bring in his collection and talk about it. This may allow other students to see him in a new light.

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What You Can Do

12. Intervene immediately if the student is being ridiculed. Take the offending students aside and help them understand how hurtful ridicule and rejection can be. Adopt a serious, stern tone in telling them that this behavior is unacceptable in your class and that you will monitor closely to make sure it has stopped. If it has not, contact their parents or take disciplinary action. At the same time, consider teaching the victim of the teasing steps he can take and things he can say if he is ridiculed.

- Adapted from:

Shore, K. (2020, September 17). *Helping the Isolated Child*. Ken Shore.

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