Beginnings

On the Rocky Road to Friendship: Emerging Peer Relationships

by Kay Albrecht

When adults think about the school age years, their first thoughts are usually about friends. Best friends, friends who left you out, friends who let you in, and friends that gave you trouble are a major part of childhood experience during the school age years. Emerging friendships and the sense of social competence that making and keeping friends gives children have enormous impact on the person one becomes. A closer look at why peer relations are so important requires that we understand the developmental needs of these important years.

Setting the Stage

Between kindergarten and junior high, school agers pass through three different stages of development. Each stage is distinct — characterized by abilities, attitudes, and priorities that are qualitatively different from the stages that have passed and those yet to come. The first stage, from about age 5 to age 7 or 8, is called the **early childhood stage**. The second stage, from about age 8 to age 10 or 11, is called the **middle childhood stage**. And the third stage, from about age 11 to age 14 or 15, is called **early adolescence**. As children and youth move through these stages, their interests, activities, and relationships with each other change.

Although all children pass through the same developmental stages, they do so at different, highly individual rates. Each child or youth has a unique pattern and timing of growth. Two children of the same age are often at different developmental levels with regard to specific skills. For example, one eight year old might be able to catch and throw a baseball well enough to play the game successfully, while another may not yet be able to coordinate eye and hand movements to catch, hit, or throw. Yet another child may be able to catch and throw reasonably well but have limited hitting skills.

Further, individual children develop unevenly, with physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth happening at different paces. For example, a child may show above average intellectual abilities for his or her age, have average physical abilities, and lag behind same age peers in social and emotional maturity.

All this means that during the school age years chronological age alone becomes a weak predictor of developmental level. Adults who work with school agers must have acute sensitivity to the broader indicators of developmental stage and to unique patterns and timing of growth in order to successfully plan and implement effective school age child care programs.

The Importance of Peer Relationships

Key developmental tasks of the school age years are to transfer some of the attachment from home and family to the larger world and to begin the search for one's place in that larger context. Most children begin this quest by affiliating with individuals and groups that help define who they are.

As school agers get older, peer relationships become increasingly important to them. They want to be with and be liked by their peers. Failure to develop a sense of social competence through positive peer relations has lifelong implications. Research suggests

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Characteristics of Peer Relations — Early Childhood Stage

Sees peers important as playmates.

Seeks to play with someone else rather than to play alone.

Moves in and out of groups based on interest in the activity and materials rather than on who is playing.

Begins to learn discrete social skills like taking turns, dividing and sharing resources, working cooperatively, preventing conflict, reading and understanding another's feelings.

Likes clear limits which are well enforced.

Desires to be with older, more competent children some of the time.

Turns frequently to adults for help in solving problems.

Wants to master the skills of favorite adults and playmates.

that early difficulties in peer relations can have serious negative consequences for adjustment later in life, increasing the risk of, for example, delinquency, dropping out of school, mental health problems, and suicide (Asher and Coil, 1990; Asher, Renshaw, and Hymel, 1982).

Difficulties in Forging Peer Relations

Difficulties in forging peer relations are a natural part of the maturation process. Most of the time these difficulties relate to where a child is developmentally — he or she has just not mastered the skills necessary to maintain effective relationships. Take this example:

Three children are successfully playing in the area designated for block building. They are building a city, arranging blocks to look like roadways and adding props like cars and trucks, shoe boxes for buildings, foil paper for lakes, and pine cones for trees. Kaleb wants to join the group. He goes over and dive bombs the center of the city, laughing as he destroys the city. The children are furious and begin to wrestle with Kaleb, screaming at him to leave them alone. Kaleb finally walks away, frustrated and angry.

Kaleb hasn't mastered a critical social skill. He has not learned effective ways to join a group which has already begun to work cooperatively toward a goal. This is a good example of a developmental difficulty — Kaleb needs help finding and practicing some acceptable ways to enter groups. Once he tries a few more unsuccessful strategies to get to play, gets some coaching from a caring and supportive adult about what else might work, and watches how friends enter groups successfully, Kaleb will likely add this social skill to his repertoire.

These types of difficulties, derived from a developmental lack of skill, present themselves most frequently. Intervention takes the form of helping the child develop a new skill or perfect emerging skills in a supportive environment. School age child care is often a supportive environment in which peer relations skills can be practiced and perfected.

Four areas of peer relations may need special attention from planners of school age child care:

• **Acquiring knowledge.** Children and youth need to understand the give and take of the relational world. Because they are learning how to establish relationships, school age children need more information about the process of how to do so. Much like children learn how to play certain board games — first learning the rules, then learning a little bit about the best strategy for playing the game, and finally learning to play the game successfully — children and youth need help gaining knowledge about how to form and maintain relationships.

Knowledge can come from a variety of sources but certainly includes getting explanations from others about what works and doesn't work in different situations, observing those who are successful to see if their approaches can be modeled or copied, and getting coaching from more socially competent children or supportive adults.

• **Developing discrete relational skills.** Because the development of peer relations is sequential, children and youth can be taught discrete skills depending on the stage in which they are operating. Children in the early childhood stage need to learn skills like taking turns, dividing and sharing resources, preventing conflict, and skills for resolving conflict such as calling for help or using verbal negotiation, reading and understanding another's feelings and cues, and anticipating the outcomes of actions.

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Children in middle childhood may need help learning skills like entering and leaving groups, exercising social planning skills like when to ask a friend to play and when to wait, anticipating how a friend might respond to an idea or suggested activity, considering the potential consequences of one's actions for self and others, evaluating potential outcomes of actions or activities, and taking on various group roles.

Early adolescents may need help learning to negotiate friendships in a group setting, understanding the appropriateness and inappropriateness of adult-like behaviors like arguing and resisting authority, experiencing and navigating the waxing and waning of friendships, practicing adult-like roles, presenting opposing views, and negotiating acceptable outcomes to problem situations.

• **Finding good role models.** As children begin to look outside of the home for guidance and support, influential adults and peers become sources of new information, new skills, new points of view, and different approaches to life's challenges and dilemmas. Because they are just beginning to learn how to find role models, children and youth may need help identifying, recruiting, and finding good peer and adult role models.

• **Getting unstuck, making progress to the next developmental stage.** A good example is conformity. School agers need to identify with individuals and groups. To do so, they often adopt the dress, speech, body language, and demeanor prescribed by the group. The group's members are expected to conform. Once included in the group, school agers try to fit in by being as like as possible to the group's expectations.

As school agers move from middle childhood toward early adolescence, they begin to question the required conformity and struggle to find their own unique place within the group. As this process occurs, many larger groups may break up even though friendships within the dissolving group may endure. A child who does not begin to make the change from absolute conformity to selective or discontinuous conformity may be stuck and need help learning how to progress to the next stage.

Another example of getting stuck can be seen in the emergence of gangs with the wrong goals. Gangs are not a new phenomena — school agers have defined themselves in groups or gangs throughout modern history. It is the goals of the group or gang that have changed. When conformity to the group includes haircuts, clothing styles, special language, etc., it is viewed as part of the child's developing identification with peers and emerging autonomy. When conformity to the group or gang includes violence, vandalism, theft, or other illegal acts, the goals of the group have changed from a developmentally typical experience to a deviant one. School agers often need help keeping the goals of their groups or gangs focused on positive experiences that facilitate continued development.

Characteristics of Peer Relations — Middle Childhood Stage

Begins to develop groups (peer, gang) relationships — looking for belongingness.

Begins to learn discrete social skills like entering and leaving groups, exercising social planning skills like when to ask a friend to play and when to wait, anticipating how a friend might respond to an idea or suggested activity, considering the potential consequences of one's actions for self and others, evaluating potential outcomes of actions or activities.

Prefers same sex, same age groups.

Interests emerge as a source of peer pairings and groupings.

Skills (usually physical or intellectual) emerge as a basis for peer participation in groups.

Affiliates with the same group most of the time; identified groups let few children in and few children out.

Conforms with identified group's norms and behaviors.

Likes to make and keep own rules of conduct within group.

Rejects opposite sex's participation in group.

Resolves some conflicts without intervention from adults.

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Characteristics of Peer Relations — Early Adolescence Stage

Begins to develop close individual relationships which can be quite enduring or quite transient.

Develops cross-sex interests.

Likes to take on real adult roles and act adult-like.

Begins to learn discrete social skills like negotiating friendships in a group setting, understanding appropriateness and inappropriateness of adult-like behaviors like arguing and resisting authority, experiencing and navigating the waxing and waning of friendships, practicing adult-like roles, presenting opposing views.

Begins to learn to take on a variety of group roles including leader, follower, planner, problem solver, problem initiator, idea generator, group disrupter.

Forms groups around activity and function rather than just belonging.

Tests institutional rules (family, school, community, society).

Moves toward multiple affiliations and group memberships.

Controls some of the behavior that provokes conflict.

Begins to see a place for him / herself in the larger context of community and society — become interested in work and career choices and in developing leisure skills.

Implications for School Age Child Care

Hire capable adults who can serve as good role models. Adults serve as important behavior models and can be effective coaches in encouraging prosocial behavior and peer relations in children and youth (Oden and Asher, 1977). Staff in school age child care must have broad repertoires of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are interesting and engaging to children. Then school agers will see them as resourceful and worth getting to know.

Train staff to understand the development of peer relations, the needs of children and youth during different stages, and their role in facilitating the development of peer relations. Training should focus on children's developmental stages and staff's role in facilitating developmental growth in all areas of development, especially in peer relations. In addition, staff need training in observation skills which lead them to know and understand each school ager's developmental individuality.

Create a climate where learning new social skills is supported and nurtured. Staff need to be available to talk about hurt feelings, coach children through what might work or what else to try, and share their own peer relations experiences to help children see that peer relationship problems have solutions.

Include children and youth in planning and implementing activities and experiences. At the core of emerging social skills is taking the responsibility for choosing one's own activities and experiences. Children benefit from planning parts of the daily schedule, allocating time to activities and projects, discovering the outcomes of plans, making modifications, and trying the implementation again.

Plan activities and experiences with peer relations in mind. A wide variety of school age child care experiences naturally lend themselves to developing and practicing relational skills. Activities that help children and youth develop social competence with peers include:

• role playing social conflicts to explore various strategies and outcomes;

• reading and discussing books about friendship;

• negotiating program rules and consequences for misbehavior with school age child care staff;

• working in groups to plan and implement plays, parent programs, and other events of interest to children;

• discussing selections of new toys and materials to be purchased for the program;

• encouraging children to divide into groups in different ways for different activities — for example

by number of siblings; type of pet owned; or favorite recording artist, sport, or pizza topping;

• conducting *fairness* discussions when children argue that someone or something wasn't *fair*.

Use mixed age (or stage) grouping to facilitate the development of peer relations and social skills. Older children benefit from opportunities to exercise leadership skills and to practice emerging skills with younger, less threatening playmates (Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman, 1990). Younger children get new ideas for the use of materials and can observe different ways to interact successfully with peers demonstrated by children who are more skillful. Some of the best lessons in peer relations are learned by observing and participating in real peer relationships in action and having supportive adults or more capable peers serve as coaches. School age child care is a mixed age (or stage) world. The opportunity to facilitate children's understanding of the give and take of the real, mixed age world of adults is built in (Bender, Schuyler-Hass Elder, and Flatter, 1984).

Peer relations form the foundation of social competence — the feeling that one can operate successfully in the social world. School agers who have opportunities to forge positive peer relations in our school age child care programs accrue life long benefits. The starting place is viewing peer relations in a developmental context that allows us to help children learn social competence just like we help them learn so many other important life skills.

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