



“Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me”: Helping Kids Learn Skills to Make Friends

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*“Nobody likes me, everybody hates me,
Guess I’ll go eat worms,
Long, thin, slimy ones; short, fat, juicy ones,
Itsy, bitsy, fuzzy wuzzy worms.”*

Many of us remember hearing this rhyme (or a regional variation of lyrics) on the playground when we were kids. While it remains a humorous little ditty, it exemplifies the sort of sad and disillusioned thinking often experienced by children who struggle with making or keeping friends.



No Shades of Gray

From the first line, we see a common, yet harmful, all-or-nothing, black-and-white view of the world. By stating, “NOBODY likes me, EVERYBODY hates me,” the child in the song doesn’t consider that peers may like some of their qualities and behaviors, but may not like everything about them. The danger of believing the first two lines of this seemingly innocuous song is that children who feel disliked often feel lonely and hurt, and behave in ways that further distance them from potential friendships. The line, “Guess I’ll go eat worms” conjures an image of an unpleasant, self-punishing activity. The song points to a cycle of feeling hated and perpetuating the isolation with social behavior that is off-putting to others.

It is heartbreaking to think of children who don’t have friends or the skills to connect with others in a meaningful way. But fortunately, the skills needed to create friendships can be learned—and that is exactly what happens in our Morrissey-Compton Social Skills Groups.

Let’s think again about the child from the song. The image of a lonely child resorting to eating disgusting worms makes me think about the skills that this child would benefit from learning.

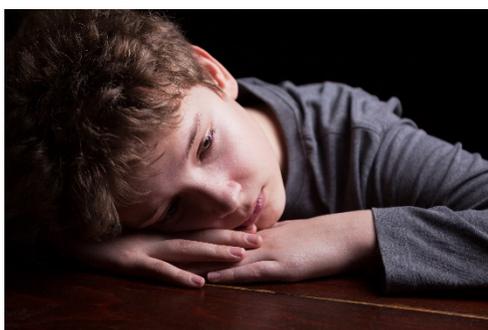
First, the child lacks awareness of “expected” and “unexpected” social behavior. There are many strategies for coping with feelings of sadness or rejection; however, eating worms is clearly an ineffective choice. In addition to not soothing the child’s feelings, eating worms is likely to cause other children to feel disgust toward the child. So the child, who already feels discouraged, has

given up trying to be accepted and has resorted to behavior that further distances him or her from other children.

Taking Cues from Others

How does a child know what the expected or appropriate behavior is in any given situation?

Expected behavior changes depending on the setting, the people present, the child's relationship to those people, and a host of other factors. Some children observe social situations and are easily able to read the nuanced behavior of others, such as whether a serious, private conversation is taking place, or if a group is open to having another person join in. Other children have a more challenging time reading these cues, and benefit from explicit instruction in what to look for when observing others in a social setting. In our groups, we use discussion, games, role-plays, and fun activities to teach children how to recognize the distinction between expected and unexpected social behavior.



Improving one's ability to "read" social cues is an ongoing process, one where practice plays a major role in acquiring new skills. We teach children how to act like detectives, observing behavior to glean information about what others may be thinking or feeling. A child will have an increased chance of being accepted by other children if he or she shows awareness of how their own behavior impacts others. Success in understanding this impact relies upon developing the skill

of observing the reactions of others to a child's own behavior, and learning how to understand situations from the perspective of another person. For example, if a child wants to play basketball and approaches a group of children engaged in a soccer game, using strategies to join the soccer game will be more effective than trying to get the other children to stop playing soccer and begin playing basketball.

When the "Obvious" is Anything But

Often, expected behavior is based on hidden rules that a child is just "supposed to know." For example, some children will tell a joke, enjoy the laughter of other kids, and then repeat the joke several times. The child may not realize that what was funny once has now become annoying. This is where developing the ability to observe non-verbal cues is helpful. A child who can observe his or her audience, notice that others look saying, asking questions, taking turns talking, and disagreeing respectfully. Children learn how to manage anger and other strong emotions through the use of calming skills and problem-solving strategies. Our groups emphasize the importance

of matching the size of one's reaction to the size of a problem. disinterested or annoyed, and can modify their own behavior based on that input is honing an important skill: the ability to observe the body language of another person and use that knowledge to maintain a comfortable social connection.

Our Approach

At Morrissey-Compton, we practice the skill of listening to peers talk about their interests, even if the topic is boring to the listener. Children learn that showing “whole body listening” will increase the likelihood that another child will reciprocate and want to listen to your stories.

Listening to each other offers an opportunity to find common interests, and thus creates the foundation for building a friendship.



In our groups, children also practice skills such as identifying feelings in themselves and others and improving conversational skills, including initiating a conversation, showing interest in what others are. The Importance of Peer Interaction

A group is an opportunity for children to interact with peers and get feedback in “real time.” When conflicts arise, group leaders help children express their feelings and guide them as they work out a solution. Children are taught how to notice positive attributes of each other and strategies to decrease feelings of annoyance with others.

The Role of the Parent

Practicing social skills outside of the group room is essential to maintaining newly acquired skills, so parents are provided with strategies for reinforcing their child’s increasing social abilities. The ultimate goal of our social skills program is for group members to successfully use their new awareness and skills with peers on the playground, at school, at home, and in public.

With so many ways to support children as they learn to develop and deepen friendships, I hope that the old song, “Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me...” is on its way to becoming obsolete.