

# CONTENTS



<b>Preface</b>	.....	<b>v</b>
<b>Part A</b>	<b>The Adult's Role in Developing Children's Social Competence</b> .....	<b>1</b>
	Introduction.....	2
	Assisting Children to Form Positive Social Relationships .....	4
<b>Part B</b>	<b>Program for Teaching Social Relationship Skills</b> .....	<b>17</b>
	Rationale for Using a Teaching Program .....	18
	Teaching Methods .....	18
	<i>Theme 1 Friends</i> .....	23
	<i>Theme 2 Concentrating, Observing and Listening</i> .....	29
	<i>Theme 3 Feelings</i> .....	35
	<i>Theme 4 Valuing Yourself – Being Confident</i> .....	45
	<i>Theme 5 Joining Groups</i> .....	53
	<i>Theme 6 Caring for Others</i> .....	59
	<i>Theme 7 Sharing and Taking Turns</i> .....	65
	<i>Theme 8 Cooperating – Working Together</i> .....	71
	<i>Theme 9 Problem-solving and Resolving Conflict</i> .....	77
	<i>Theme 10 Peacemaking – Coping with Problem Behaviours</i> .....	85
<b>Appendices</b>		
	Appendix 1 Hughes' Social Competence Checklist.....	91
	Appendix 2 Books Suitable for Use with Young Children .....	95
	Appendix 3 Planning a Social Competence Theme .....	103
	Appendix 4 Work Sheets .....	107
<b>References</b>	.....	<b>126</b>

## Introduction

In preschools and in early-years classrooms around the nation, many teachers are struggling to deal with young children's behaviour. This could be for two main reasons: first, less time is spent on socialisation than twenty to thirty years ago and second, more children are faced with a variety of family problems. There seem to be more and more children with difficult behaviours. When children display difficult behaviour, it is often because they have a problem at home or sometimes at school. This problem may arise from abuse in the home, a new sibling, a family death, parent unemployment, feelings of insecurity, change such as moving house, problems in the parents' relationship, divorce or many other reasons.

In the past, very few children were difficult to manage in the early years, but now difficult behaviours seem to be more frequent in the classroom. This is not surprising, because family life today is very different from family life of the past. More families have both parents working to make ends meet and others are struggling to cope with the pace of life. Life now is generally more complex.

Many parents spend less time in socialising their children; that is, preparing them to becoming valuable and contributing members of society. In cities and urban areas many families have lost the family and neighbourhood emotional and social supports that they had in previous times and so are often more stressed. Single parents have fewer supports and often struggle with parenting.

Working parents sometimes find it hard to spend quality time with their children, often due to increased stress at work and having more tasks to fit into a short time in the home. Many women who work still have the same household tasks to do after they come home from work, and many fathers work longer hours or spend less time in the home. For families with one parent working there is often too little money to buy what everyone else has. This causes anxiety. For those with no work, poverty can produce a feeling of hopelessness which often leads to social problems such as crime, delinquency, substance abuse, stress, lack of power and so on. Other factors such as family breakdown, putting children into day care for long hours or moving to a place where there are better work opportunities complicate parenting. This can be unsettling or cause guilt about time not spent with children.

Children in the past spent a lot of time playing with siblings and neighbours. This also helped them to become socialised and to learn social competence. Today, however, children spend less time socially interacting in play. Sometimes this is due to a lack of safety in the neighbourhood or not knowing neighbours. As families get smaller, children have fewer siblings and fewer social experiences. Also, children spend more time in solitary experiences such as watching television and videos, playing computer games or playing handheld games. This means they are not socially interacting and learning how to develop relationships.

Being able to form satisfying relationships is an essential life skill. It enables people to feel a sense of belonging in any group, and is closely linked to confidence, self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. It is a skill that must be learned. If parents are not assisting children to develop social skills, teachers may have to take this on as yet another task in the classroom.

Having the ability to initiate and maintain satisfying relationships with others, especially peers, is known as **social competence**. Signs that children are socially competent are peer acceptance (the ability to successfully function within a peer group), and friendship (the ability to form close relationships). Children who are not socially accepted may be at risk of problems such as depression, suicide, delinquency, truancy, broken marriages and so on in later life.

Social competence is also related to higher levels of school performance. Ladd (1990) investigated the effect of being liked and having friends when beginning school, and



whether or not this affected later school adjustment. Children with a larger number of classroom friends appeared to have more favourable perceptions of school, and this was associated with higher school performance. These children were more likely to attend school daily and enjoy learning as they felt confident in a classroom. Children who were rejected by their peers had less favourable perceptions of school, leading to lower levels of school performance. Children with poor social relationship skills are often the ones who do not want to go to school and do not enjoy learning. They are not comfortable in a classroom or school because they are often anxious, lack confidence in learning and are afraid of failure. They often drop out of

school. Achievement at school is closely tied to motivation for learning and I suspect that a lack of social competence is closely linked to poor motivation for learning.

Children who are popular or liked have a very different social environment compared to children who are rejected or disliked. Popular children are invited to play more often and receive more positive responses from people around them. This enables them to have more frequent social interactions and so have an opportunity to build on their existing social skills. Thus, they are more likely to achieve social competence.

Children who are rejected or disliked often have school adjustment problems and these children feel anxious or uncomfortable at school. When their minds are focused on their feelings, they find it difficult to concentrate and think. Therefore, they are more likely to do poorly in their school work. Children who are aggressive (those who hit, punch, pinch, swear at or tease others) are often rejected by their peers. They use these tactics to control various situations or people because they do not always have appropriate strategies for interacting. It is likely that they have developed these strategies through experiences with their family or neighbours. If these aggressive tactics are successful in controlling others, they are likely to use them over and over and could become school bullies. Non-aggressive children are often very afraid of aggressive children and avoid them or give in to their demands so as to avoid further confrontation.

To have friends and be liked should become the prime goal and focus of the social competence program. Remember, people who can form relationships in the early years can make friends and effectively form relationships throughout life. Social competence is an important life skill and is largely learned in the first six years of life, so the preschool years and the first years of school are the time to work on social competence. Teachers need to begin by introducing the theme. This could be done during discussion time using a picture board, a story, puppets or a role-play.

### ***Introducing the Theme***

Show the picture board to the children. Use a puppet to ask children questions to find out what they think about friends and friendships. The questions will enable you to find out what children already know and which children have a poor knowledge and need help.



The questions should be open ended and not have 'correct' answers. Remember, you want to find out their opinions. Use phrases like: *What do you think?* For example, ask the children what they think is happening in a picture similar to the one above.

*Do you think they are with friends?*

*Do you have friends?*

*What activities do you do with your friends?*







*Do you think it is nice to have friends? Why?*

*How do friends make you feel?*

Ask about and discuss the feelings children have when they do not have friends, such as loneliness, sadness, disappointment and so on. Mention that it is nicer to have friends and be happy than have no friends and be sad.

Develop the idea that it is important that all children have friends. For example, it is fun to have friends to play with, to share experiences with, to help you when you need help, to sympathise with you when you are sad, talk with you about fun things that you have done, go to parties with and so on. You should suggest that at preschool or school children should try to be friends with everyone.

Discuss how you could make preschool into a place where everyone feels that they have a friend and establish some rules made up by children under the guidance of the teacher. The rules could be written up on a chart with a picture to help recognise each rule:

-  Offer to play with someone who has no-one to play with.
-  Invite others to play fun games.
-  Ask if you can help if someone is upset. (If they don't want help don't worry; just feel good because you asked. Respect others' feelings and opinions.)
-  Take turns with equipment.
-  Tell someone that you like them if you do.
-  Tell someone that they are fun to play with when you are enjoying yourself.

Stress the positives as friendly incidents occur. In negative situations reinforce what the rule is. For example, if children say they do not like X mention that you only want to hear about the people they *do* like.

You could then mention that for the next few days everyone will be making friends with everyone in the classroom and outside. Ask the children to say something positive to someone when they see them being a good friend: *You are a nice friend*. Ask them to comment on acts that are unfriendly and say: *Be a good friend!*

### **Using Real-life Situations in the Classroom**

Comment on friendly situations that occur inside or outside the classroom, for example, *X is being a lovely friend to Z by helping him put back the scissors and glue when he didn't even use them*. Use encouragement to reward positive behaviour, such as writing a comment about the achievement (which states what was done well and even why) in an 'I did well' book or chart. You should model positive behaviour and use positive language statements.

### **Using Stories**

Tell or read stories about friends to individual children, small groups or large groups. Choose your stories carefully. Always read theme books yourself before you read them to the children. It is a good idea to jot down questions or points for discussion as you read.

#### **Books About Friends**

**Read *Lizzie's Invitation*. Discuss issues after the story is read, such as how Holly feels when she thinks Kate has not invited her to her party (sad and sick), how she feels when she makes a friend and shares similar feelings (happy and had fun). Emphasise that she tells Amanda that she had a good time.**

**Read *Bimble and Friends in the Dark* by John Francis. Discuss as you read how it is fun to do some things with friends that you might not enjoy doing by yourself. What do you think makes people scared of the dark? Why do you think Bimble and his friends were not afraid of the dark?**