



Socialization: It's more than just having friends

by Judy Arnall

When families homeschool, parents are often asked the question, "What about socialization?" Many people are fine with the academic achievement of homeschooling but worry that children who do not go to school to interact with the same aged peers daily, lack necessary social skills to grow into a well-rounded citizen.

Children are socialized by four agents in society - parents, school, communities and media, however, most people think that school is the only one. Yet, when pressed, most people admit that a playground of 200 children and one teacher or supervisor is not the ideal arrangement to teach children the proper way to get along with other humans. Recess, bus time, and lunch time is when children are free to socialize in school, and anyone who has ever been a bus monitor, or lunchroom lady will know, that the socialization consists mostly of teasing, bragging, one-up-man ship and bullying. Not much conversation, listening, and caring comments goes on with a room of school-aged children and little to no adults.

When people ask, "What about socialization?" what they don't mean is, "How will my child learn how to be a decent, compassionate, communicative adult with healthy relationships?" What they mean is "How will my child find friends?"

This is a valid concern. First, friends do not always come from school. Children thrown together because of age do not necessarily get along with each other due to different temperaments, cultures, and gender role expectations. Friends are everywhere in a child's life, not just at school. Clubs, sports teams, church, interest-based classes and neighborhoods are a great way to meet a variety of multi-aged friends.

Second, children are more in need of adults than peers. The smaller the child-to-adult ratio, the better. Children learn proper behavior toward each other by the presence of aware adults, who teach positive social skills. Adults are nurturing, not peers.

Third, there is a myth, not supported by research, that children exposed to negative socialization like bullies, sarcastic comments, teasing, etc., learns how to handle it better later in life. Research proves the opposite; that a child who has had minimal bullying and teasing, tends to have better long term self-esteem and self-confidence in adulthood. Early exposure to nasty socialization leaves lifelong scars. The best way to avoid this is to have a lot of adults around to monitor negative socialization and gently correct it, as well as model assertiveness skills, confrontation skills, kindness, manners, and conflict resolution skills to children.

Bullying is also minimal in the presence of adults. Since homeschooling provides quite a high adult-child ratio in many social gatherings, this may be one of the best reasons to consider this education alternative.

Whether a child is home educated or in a physical or online school, here is a checklist for all children, on determining if their social skills are up to par. In fact, many adults could use a brush-up on these basics too.

Social Skills Checklist

A person with good social skills...

- greets people with a "Hello," and a handshake. Asks how people are and listens to the response.
- can start a conversation by noticing a detail.
- maintains eye contact.
- smiles and nods while listening.
- respects other people's personal space. In North America, it's a peripheral of about 18 inches around a person.

- ask questions, listens and responds after listening.
- gives opinions that are generally positive and upbeat. Doesn't criticize excessively and never criticizes other people.
- doesn't talk about other people negatively. Discusses ideas, opinions and own anecdotes rather than other people.
- talks for 15 seconds and then listens while the other person takes a turn to talk for about 15 seconds.
- doesn't talk too much about themselves. Doesn't share too little about themselves so the other person in the conversation has nothing to ask them about. Visibly shows an interest in the other person.
- is not distracted from a conversation by cellphone, or electronic devices or other people walking by.
- doesn't interrupt conversations. Can wait and determine the proper moment to interject into the conversation with own insights.
- can interpret visual and auditory clues to people's moods, such as expressions, voice tone, and gestures. If exceptionally skilled, can articulate the other's people's feelings with empathy to encourage the other person to share.
- gives encouragement and empathy when others talk about their woes.
- can exit a conversation by saying "Thank-you, it was nice to speak with you," and "Goodbye."
- uses "Please, May I, and Thank-you as well as "I'm very sorry."
- asks permission to use other's belongings. Articulates when not sure about a situation to seek other people's guidance.
- knows what constitutes private behaviour and public behaviour such as swearing, picking noses, and letting out gas.
- knows when it is appropriate to not speak.
- politely and respectfully uses I-statements beginning with "I think.., I feel..., I would like..., I am disappointed...," to assert ones' needs.
- initiates and co-operates with problem-solving for win-win solutions when there is a difference of opinion or plans.
- knows their own limitations and is comfortable saying "No, thank-you," to requests.
- shares, take turns, and offers help to people in need.
- knows the different levels of conversation and which is appropriate for different audiences and situations. For example, level one is

making small talk for strangers, level two is sharing facts with acquaintances, level three is sharing beliefs and opinions with friends and lastly, level four, is sharing feelings with family and intimate friends.

- is not feeling lonely in solitude. Knows when they want to be alone and when they want to be with other people.
- queues in public line-ups and does not let joining friends into their space in line.
- can find common ground for conversation with people of different ages, cultures, religions, uniforms, genders and social status (bosses, police etc).

It's important to remember that most of these skills are learned in the school-aged, teen and emerging adult years. It takes a lot of practice but will come with time. Children don't need a whole plethora of friends to learn socialization. All a child needs for healthy development is at least one good friend, one attachment adult and a lot of supportive people in their lives.

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