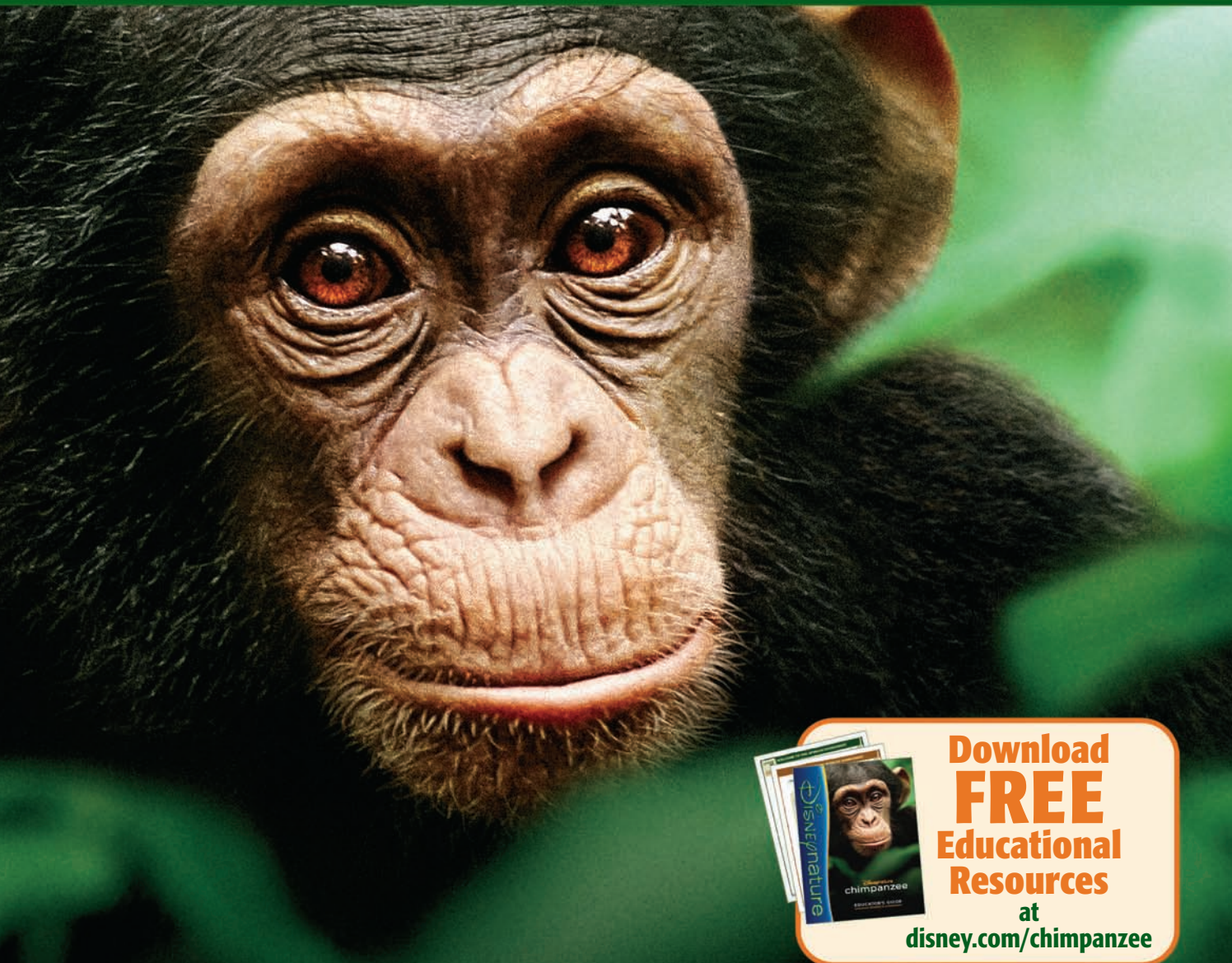



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WHEN

Friendship Hurts



Helping your students to navigate their social world can build learning success. *By Michelle Anthony, Ph.D.*

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It's the end of January, and kindergartners Emma and Rebecca, who were "bestest friends" before Christmas, aren't getting along today. Emma reports, "Rebecca is so mean. She's not my friend anymore!" When her teacher asks her what is going on, she explains, "I went up to Rebecca at recess and asked to play. She threw her hands in the air and yelled, 'Go somewhere else! I am playing with Lily and we don't want to play with you.'" As her teacher, what would you do? Should you comfort? Should you intervene? Should you punish?

Despite the expansion of bully-proofing programs in recent years, many teachers feel they lack the training necessary to manage the complexities of friendship at work in the classroom and on the playground. After all, we're not counselors. We're not psychologists. And yet, it's an inevitable part of our job. As teachers, we want our students to be friends and to be kind to each

Why Are Social Skills So Important?

According to Gary Ladd, professor of educational psychology at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and his Pathways Project colleagues, students with poor social skills are more likely to experience an array of social problems throughout their lives.

- ▶ Have difficulties in relationships with parents, teachers, and peers.
- ▶ Evoke negative responses, leading to high levels of peer rejection, which is linked to depression, failing grades, and violence.
- ▶ Show signs of depression, aggression, and anxiety.
- ▶ Demonstrate poor academic performance.
- ▶ Have a higher incidence of involvement in the criminal justice system as adults.

FRIENDSHIP

other. And—let’s be honest—we don’t want to waste hours of valuable teaching time every week on crises like, for example, who won’t let whom use the blue marker at Table 2.

The reality is, all children have moments in which they are unkind. As counterintuitive as it might seem, children’s “meanness” actually serves an important and useful function in the development of their social skills, compassion, and empathy. Children learn over time to channel their feelings of competitiveness, jealousy, and aggression more constructively. Asserting your own identity within the structure of a community in a healthy way takes time, patience, and mistakes along the way. Put simply, empathy takes practice.

As a teacher, understanding why mean behavior happens in your classroom can help you do a better job of preventing it. Instead of simply punishing students, recognize and welcome what your students are attempting to do as they learn friendship skills, and then guide them to express their desires more appropriately.

Winners and Losers

Learning how to make, and be, a friend is one of the major developmental tasks of the elementary years. It is akin to learning to read—a fundamental

skill on which later skills depend.

During this time, children actively seek ways to assert their own identities and to gain importance in the eyes of others. They try to find the means to be powerful. Unfortunately, because of their developmental level, young kids often don’t know how to make themselves more powerful without it being at the expense of another.

For young children, friendship can be a zero-sum game. Somebody always has to lose. You can see them looking to identify advantages—who runs faster, who has the good scissors, who has more frosting on her cupcake. For teachers and parents, this behavior is at best tiresome. For 4- to 8-year-olds, this is the work of finding one’s place in the world.

Collateral Damage

Not surprisingly, along the way, cupcakes get snatched and peers get elbowed out. Such actions, which stem from the desire to fit in and to find power, are referred to by researchers as *accidental meanness*. As children try to assert their place, they can inadvertently cross the line into the realm of aggressiveness and meanness. While it’s not a pleasant process, it’s important that it happens. Over time, children begin to understand that what they say and do affects others. Take

For young children, friendship can be a zero-sum game. Somebody always has to lose.



the earlier example: Rebecca orders Emma away from her play. Five-year-old Rebecca could have been thinking something like, “We’re in the middle of an important part of our pretend play and if another friend joins in now, it will ruin our story.” That thought is translated as “Go away!”

Around third grade (earlier for some), a notable shift occurs. Children are better able to understand multiple points of view, think through their actions, and predict logical outcomes

to events. A fourth-grade Rebecca would likely understand that screaming “Go away!” is not an effective way to keep a friend. If a fourth grader makes that kind of choice, it is most likely intentional.

Relational Aggression

In later elementary, meanness between children represents a different dynamic. Children are learning how to find and assert power within meaningful relationships. You will see children set

4 SOCIAL SKILLS BUILDERS

These strategies can help all of your students become more aware of the impact they have on others.

1. Friendship Reading

Books such as *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola, *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, and *Big Al* by Andrew Clements are a great way to spark a conversation about bullying and social issues from a safe distance. Students may be more comfortable

talking about fictional characters. Get the conversation started with open-ended questions such as “What do you think Sarah was feeling when she had to exclude one friend to be able to play with another?”

2. The Kindness Jar

Set up two large jars labeled *Kind* and *Unkind*. Each time students witness a kind or unkind act, they can place a marble in the appropriate jar. At the end of the week, graph the number of marbles in the jars and discuss the results. Using this activity for a few weeks can help children become more aware of their own and others’ actions and increase their sense of accountability.

3. Filling a Bucket

Drawing on Carol McCloud’s book *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?* develop a common language in your classroom or school. The premise is simple: We all carry around an invisible bucket that can be filled by kind words or actions, or “dipped” by unkind words or actions. Add in the notion that students can put a “lid” on their bucket to give them more control over how others affect them. Share a time that you have been a “bucket dipper,” emphasizing that being human means that we make mistakes. Rather than focusing on the mistake, point out that it’s the next choice that matters most: to make amends.

4. Readers Theater

Readers Theater can give students a chance to “try on” the emotions of others. Use texts like *The Hallo-weiner* by Dav Pilkey. (You can find scripts at scholastic.com and pbskids.org/zoom/activities/playhouse.) Assign roles randomly by handing out slips of paper with the characters’ names. Encourage kids to imagine what their character is feeling, and to convey it vocally and through facial expressions. After a couple of read-throughs, collect the slips of paper and hand them out again, giving students a chance to experience a new point of view.

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up situations where the objective is to embarrass or hurt another student. However, even then, the root motive is almost always functional rather than merely malicious.

The Challenge for Girls

Meanness in friendship, or relational aggression, can be a particular problem for girls. Researcher Lyn Mikel Brown, coauthor of *Meeting at the Crossroads*, argues that the “tyranny of nice and kind—the demand that girls act perfectly nice and accommodating [can] wreak havoc with their relationships.” That is, it pushes girls to find indirect ways (gossip, exclusion) to experience power.

Beginning in early elementary school, friendship can become a kind of currency between girls, argues Lawrence

Cohen, a researcher and coauthor of *Mom, They're Teasing Me*. “The words ‘I’ll be your best friend’ also mean ‘I have power over you, because I could take my friendship away.’”

This is clearly a difficult dynamic to break. The place to start is to provide as many opportunities as possible for girls to assert themselves in a healthy way—as learners, athletes,

writers, and artists. Girls who feel confident within themselves are less likely to perpetrate or be damaged by relational aggression.

Finding Your Role

As you deepen your understanding of the developmental aspects at play in children’s aggression, you may find that you listen with a more empathetic ear. Meanness and aggressive behavior may not be desirable traits for children to exhibit, but they are developmentally appropriate for elementary students and accepting that fact can help you to change your role in the dynamic.

As a busy teacher, it is easy to fall into the trap of playing traffic court judge for the social collisions in your classroom. One child shares her side of the story, the other rebuts, and you hand down a quick verdict of “Play nice!” or “Time out!” But as long as you continue to mediate and resolve, you prevent students from practicing those crucial skills themselves. Instead, think of yourself as an interested observer of and guide for your students as they do the work of learning how to be a friend.

Active Listening

Actively listening to your students—understanding their feelings and their goals at a particular moment and reflect-

ing them back—will help you to guide them to make better friendship decisions. Instead of stepping in (e.g., ordering Rebecca to let Emma play), remain fully attentive to the child, without imparting your own feelings, values, or judgments. Your focus should be on reflecting back the heart of the child’s thoughts or feelings in order to encourage her to further clarify her own thinking. Doing so also helps you to focus on understanding the child, instead of trying to fix, explain, or intercede.

Here’s how it works: When a child comes to you with a hurt or a complaint, listen closely to him and restate a condensed version of what you hear. This “check in” helps you to make sure you’ve correctly understood the child’s basic message. Active listening goes like this: “It sounds like you were worried your play would be interrupted.” Or, “Today, Rebecca only wanted to play with Lily. You are feeling sad and wonder whether Rebecca is still your friend. Have I understood you correctly?”

Guiding the Conversation

Active listening not only connects you with your students but also teaches them to reflect on their own words and feelings. As you restate things, you can help them to identify the real issues at hand and to bring them down to a more manageable size.

From there, you can help your students to see alternative perspectives, asking, for example, “How do think Emma felt when you said to go away?” or “How do you think you would feel if you were in Emma’s place?” Trying on another’s feelings can be startling for young children who are still learning empathy and self-control.

At the same time, you can gently push them to own their own choices. Instead of offering a solution, you might want to ask, “What do you think your next step should be?” or “If it were you with hurt feelings, what would you want the other person to say?”

This is not to say that your student will immediately see the situation from another viewpoint, that she will quickly identify what the true issues are (as opposed to the superficial ones she is currently in such a panic over), or that she will feel your brainstormed suggestions are doable. But the mere act of seeing that there are numerous possible solutions to a seemingly impossible problem is empowering. By responding with empathy but also with the message “This too shall pass,” we give children the opportunity to find their inner resilience and move forward in their own way.

Over time, you’ll find that these techniques will help to increase the level of trust between you and your students. When they know that you are there for them in this complex endeavor of learning how to be a good friend—and that their confused efforts will be seen as positive attempts—the road to friendship may end up being a little less rocky. □

Michelle Anthony, Ph.D., is the coauthor with Dr. Reyna Lindert of *Little Girls Can Be Mean* (2010).