

When children have friendship problems

It is inevitable that children will experience the highs and lows of friendship. Given that they are only learning how to negotiate peer relationships and manage their own and other's needs simultaneously, adults will often be on the receiving end of complaints made by children regarding being left out, someone being mean, or, should the child feel really challenged about what is happening, state that they have no friends. Parents, carers and grandparents on the receiving end of these statements often feel instantly worried that the child is unhappy or being treated unfairly. Knowing what to say and do at these times is crucial in being able to support children to develop the ability to deal with the situation. The aim of this article is therefore to explore the most effective way to support children through peer hardship and understand the reason behind said actions.

Generating concern

Children undoubtedly feel supported when adults take the time to listen to their problems and validate what is happening to them. Without such support children may feel abandoned in their time of need. Yet the debate of how much support is too much support has been creating a lot of conversation. Over the last decade there has been a predominant shift towards creating child-adult relationships where the child feels heard and has opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns. Such advocacy generates the idea that when children feel validated, they establish stronger connections with those they rely on, develop greater self-esteem, confidence and independence. This statement, however, comes with caveats.

To know how to maximise the child's experience means that adults undertaking the role of the listener must understand the difference between listening to empower and listening to disempower. The latter nulls the adult's efforts to support the child's sense of self, confidence and independence. The former develops an individual's self-worth and capacity to manage the ups and downs of life. Examples of each will now follow, starting with listening to disempower.

Listening to disempower – Example one

When someone, regardless of who or how old they are, needs to talk about a problem, listeners that disempower will ask questions, insert opinions, reassure the speaker that they are right to feel as they do, take sides, and postulate that it should be up to other people to stop or change their behaviours. While these opinions may not be inaccurate, the listener creates the conditions for sympathetic listening, a form of listening that has been proven to have ill-effects on others.

Sympathy is described as having feelings of pity or sorrow towards another person and has the tendency to create patterns of unhelpful thinking, including those that create a victim and villain mentality. Victim mentalities reduce an individual's ability to look beyond the problem and/or generate the belief that all problems can be solved. They trap individuals to believe that without another person changing their behaviour they are a slave to the circumstances they face. An example is provided below.

Adult: "What's the matter? You look sad."

Child: "Minnie was mean to me today."

Adult: "What happened?"

Child: "She wouldn't let me play."

Adult: "That's not very nice. Why wouldn't she let you play?"

Child: "She told me she didn't want to be my friend."

Adult: "Did you tell someone that she was being mean?"

Child: "I told the teacher."

Adult: "And what happened?"

Child: "Nothing. He told me to play with someone else."

Adult: "Did you?"

Child: "No, I wanted to play with Minnie."

Adult: "So what happened?"

Child: "I didn't play with anyone."

Adult: "That's not good. You shouldn't have to play by yourself."

Child: "I don't want to go to school tomorrow."

Outcome – the child has had the opportunity to tell the adult what is wrong but they are left feeling disempowered and unable to think of a way forward, other than to avoid going to school the following day.

Listening to disempower – example two

There will be many times when children approach adults with valid and worthy problems. Even in instances where children have instigated (or partially instigated) their own hardship, adults will be of little help when they deflect blame back onto the child or offer a platitude. Similar to the example above, when adults avoid diverting children towards their own ability to problem-solve, they miss golden opportunities to teach the child how to be capable and successful despite the challenges that might temporarily set them back. An example of deflecting blame and offering platitudes is added next.

Adult: "What's the matter? You look sad."

Child: "Minnie was mean to me today."

Adult: "What happened?"

Child: "She wouldn't let me play."

Adult: "That's not very nice. Did you do something to her that made her not want to play with you?"

Child: "No, she told me she didn't want to be my friend."

Adult: "Did you tell someone that she was being mean?"

Child: "I told the teacher."

Adult: "And what happened?"

Child: "Nothing. He told me to play with someone else."

Adult: "That sounds like a good idea."

Child: "But I wanted to play with Minnie."

Adult: "But that wasn't an option. You should have found someone else to play with."

Child: "But I wanted to play with Minnie."

Adult: "Sometimes our friends don't want to play with us."

Child: "I don't want to go to school tomorrow."

Adult: "I'm sure it'll be fine tomorrow."

Outcome – the child has had the opportunity to talk but not feel validated. When children do not feel listened to or heard they will continue to feel like the world is against them.

Listening to empower

Regardless of the type of listener (empowering or disempowering), both will start off using the same strategy – that being to allow the child to verbalise their problems and articulate their point of view. From here the empowering listener tends to shift course, allowing the conversation to focus on the person with the problem more than the problem itself. This type of listener will not generate the belief that one person is in the right and the other in the wrong. Ideally, they will turn the speaker's attention inwards so that they can access the inner resources they possess to solve the problem independently. When children are taught to face their problems and not give up at the first sign of defeat, they will more likely be able to negotiate an outcome (albeit with some degree of compromise) that satisfies everyone and resolves the problem. An example is provided below.

Adult: "What's the matter? You look sad."

Child: "Minnie was mean to me today."

Adult: "What happened?"

Child: "She wouldn't let me play."

Adult: "That sounds tough."

Child: "She told me she didn't want to be my friend."

Adult: "I wonder what you did when she said that."

Child: "I told the teacher."

Adult: "And how did that go?"

Child: "Nothing. He told me to play with someone else."

Adult: "Then what happened?"

Child: "I wanted to play with Minnie."

Adult: "It sounds like you chose not to find someone else to play with."

Child: "I only wanted to play with Minnie."

Adult: "Did not playing with anyone else work out well for you?"

Child: "I don't want to go to school tomorrow."

Adult: "It sounds like you don't want to go to school because you don't like playing by yourself."

Child: "Minnie's mean."

Adult: "Sometimes friends can do things we think are mean. I wonder what you are going to do tomorrow when you go to school."

Child: "I'll ask Minnie if I can play with her."

Adult: "That sounds like a plan. And if she says no, will you play by yourself again?"

Child: "I don't know. Maybe. Maybe I'll ask Georgia if she'll play with me."

Adult: "It sounds like you've got two plans to try tomorrow."

Outcome – Encouraging the child to think about their actions and how their decisions affect the way they feel helps the child see past what is (i.e., Minnie not wanting to play and choosing to sit alone). It also encourages the child to consider other ways of being. One conversation may not be enough in remedying the problem; however, it helps the child experience the steps needed to resolve problems i.e., think of an idea, choose an idea, try an idea, reflect to see if the idea worked and if not, choose another idea.

Overcoming the urge to fix

The reality of life means that no-one, children included, can be happy all of the time. No matter how hard we try there will always be adversity, friendship conflicts, or a sense of unfairness. As we age, the problems we face can increase in complexity, meaning that if we have not had sufficient opportunity to learn how to overcome adversity independently or had too many opportunities to avoid problems, we are less likely to live happy and fulfilled lives. Friendship woes in the younger years create the perfect conditions to practice how to overcome conflict and learn how to draw on one's inner resources. Creating the conditions that allow children to think about their own problems and act on their own ideas (even if they are not immediately successful) teaches children that they are capable of independently solving a range of problems now and in the future.

Summing it up

Helping children overcome friendship problems is an inevitability. Listening to them and validating their experience is essential in helping them to feel supported through tough times. The way we listen has the possibility of either empowering or disempowering children and it is the later that can create problems that dislodge children's self-belief, self-worth and self-esteem. Steering away from sympathy and creating empathetic conditions helps the listener to maintain a neutral position, one that helps children problem-solve and seek their own resolutions independently. The more practice children get to overcome problems in their younger years, including those created by peer conflict, the more capable they will be in overcoming adversity now and in the future.

M.J. Fisher

Child and Family Therapist

B. Soc. Sc.; GradDip Teaching; Dip. Care and Ed.

www.whatmjdoes.com

© What MJ Does