

YOUNG CHILDREN AND REJECTION

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This is the most difficult issue for adults—even harder than anger or conflict.

It's so hard for adults because it brings back:

- all the feelings of our own hurts
- worries about not being liked or having friends
- memories of being bullied or teased by other children
- memories of teasing or bullying others to be in with a group of kids

We don't want our children to have to have these awful feelings.

Parents sometimes hear their child say things like:

- I only like Molly and I will never let Kristin play with us.
- No one likes me.
- They are mean and won't let me play.
- No one played with me today at school.

Teachers know these statements can have many meanings such as:

- A special friend might have played with someone else for a short time.
- A plan for playing didn't go as expected.
- Something happened between kids at the last minute after a great day of playing.

Parents or other adults often try to control situations for kids to avoid hard feelings but:

- We put social expectations on kids that we don't expect of ourselves.
- We don't always want to socialize with an annoying neighbor or relative.
- We all have different temperament styles when it comes to personal relationships.

Forcing children to play with others when they don't want to can create adults who:

- have a hard time saying no
- try to please everyone
- want everyone to like them

There are lots of reasons for teaching children skills to deal with rejection:

- Children who are repeatedly rejected in early childhood can go on to have a harder time in public school.
- They are more likely to be depressed, or to act out and eventually get in trouble.

At SYC we believe that:

- Early childhood is the perfect time to learn skills to deal with rejection.
- We want kids to be able to say no when something doesn't feel right.
- We DON'T want them to be immobilized by their feelings and unable to take any action.
- It takes lots of practice to be able to stand up for yourself and work through conflicts in a respectful way without bullying, teasing and hurting others.
- Children will let a rejected child play if an adult insists, but negative feelings go underground and can come out in other ways when adults aren't watching.
- Children learn kindness best by watching adults and peers that they care about model nurturing or inclusive behavior.

What are reasons a child might reject another child at school?

- She may be worried about getting hurt by another child.
- She is just developing her own self-concept in relation to others.
- He is trying as hard as he can to maintain a friendship.
- She is not developmentally ready to play with more than one other child.
- He is just learning to be social and may need to watch or only be near one other child to try out new skills.
- He may be protecting his space from intrusions that can stop the play.
- She is just learning about friendships and thinks she can only have one best friend.
- She may not know how to handle conflict or problem solve.
- He is just learning that his words can be powerful.

What we don't do or say at SYC:

- *It's not nice to say that to Joey.* – Before age 9, children's moral understanding doesn't go beyond just doing what adults tell them to do to please them or in fear of punishment. Simply telling children to be nice might work in the short term, but they probably won't be able to repeat this behavior for the next situation. They are just following adult rules without real understanding.
- *At this school we are all friends.* – Our rule is that no one can hurt another person physically or with words but we don't expect children to like everyone else.
- *Apologize.* – Saying "I'm sorry." when a child doesn't mean it, just gives him an easy way out of a situation that probably needs much more processing and adult help.
- *Quit acting mean.* – This is a general statement that doesn't tell a child what she needs to do. Children need the specifics of what someone else doesn't like in order to change that.

What do teachers do about rejection at SYC?

- We give kids lots of chances to explore different kinds of play with many different children.
- We encourage them to be flexible and to take risks when they seem ready to try playing with someone new.
- We notice and comment on kind behavior in our classes.
- We model acceptance and understanding ourselves.
- We look at rejection as a form of conflict and a great opportunity for new learning.
- We ask children to work through their feelings with teachers acting as coaches.
- We help them learn to compromise, learn who they are and what they like, learn to express what they think and want and what it means to be a friend.
- When a child wants a sign saying "Billy can't come in." We say "Who DO you want to come in?" and we put that on the sign. Then we say, "If Billy comes in, what will happen?" or some question to figure out what the rejection is about.
- We help a non-playing child to notice what a group of children are doing, what props they are using, etc.
- We help a rejected child find out why another child is afraid of her and what she can change that will help.
- We find and highlight the interests of a non-playing child in order to attract others who might have the same interests.
- We use careful observation and input from the child's parents and from other teachers to build the relationship with the child and come up with new possibilities.