The Invisible Child

Social issues and anxiety

By Rachel Rosenholtz, LCSW

Sara stares blankly out the wind driven rain covered window as her mother stares at her, grappling with how to help her child. Sara comes home every day complaining about not having friends, wistfully recounting how all the other girls walk together arm in arm sharing snacks and chatting away during recess.

Mrs. Levi wants to know what is being done by the school to ensure that her daughter is being included at recess. Mrs. Klein, Sara's teacher, assures her that the girls are being encouraged to include others and advises her to send Sara to school with something special that will interest her peers. Mrs. Levi follows through with this but it doesn't seem to alleviate the problem. Something seems to be holding Sara back from making and keeping friends.

At first glance

The natural reaction for parents and educators alike is to figure out how to encourage other children to be more accepting and include the child that is being left out. This leads to an effort to engage in social engineering by identifying who can be encouraged to include the friend-less child and implementing group activities to ensure the socially isolated child is being included.

The hope is that, by employing these interventions, other kids will develop relationships with this child and through this process become integrated into his peer group.

But what about if this does not work?

What if this child doesn't end up "fitting in" and the other kids decide they would rather play with "their friends"?

Will this child always be at the mercy of the kindness of his peers?

Is the socially isolated child always going to be in need of outside intervention to ensure that he or she is included?

This approach is of dubious effectiveness and generally includes several aspects of which impact negatively on all parties involved.

- The kids who are encouraged to include others often grow resentful of the disruption of their social experience and by extension, the forced "friend". Childhood years are crucial for the social development of all children and it is natural for kids to gravitate socially to specific children and develop natural friendships with them. While the goal may be to teach children how to be sensitive to the needs of others, because children are naturally focused on his or her own social development, he or she may quickly forget that another child is supposed to be included. Being forced or even encouraged to include someone socially on a constant basis is not natural. All children are working on developing their own sense of self and who a child chooses as a friend is a big part of that process. These children cannot be blamed for a lack of caring or sensitivity, and this leads to another problem:

- The children who are supposed to be helped by this are in reality hurt by having to accept artificial "friends". When he or she is intentionally left out, because the other child is frustrated about having her natural relationships interrupted, or unintentionally left out because the other child loses focus, the socially isolated child then experiences rejection. She becomes confused about relationships because other kids were friends with her one minute and the next minute were not and she loses the ability to trust. The child develops more of an insecurity and this leads to further isolation and impairment. Genuine friendships need to develop naturally and not from superficial interactions.

It is important that kids be able to navigate their own social interactions without the outside influence of adults. This of course does not pertain to children who purposefully leave others out as a form of bullying. That behavior should never be tolerated under any circumstances.

If an adult wants to help children become more sensitive to the needs of others the appropriate environment to encourage "forced" interactions is the classroom, in the form of group activities. In the classroom a teacher has more control over how children interact. The structure the classroom environment easily lends itself to children learning to interact in a meaningful way with kids with whom they would otherwise not interact.

Another well known intervention is social skills training - teaching the child how to interact with others. Social skills training is an important and powerful tool, however it too has drawbacks since the socialization is scripted and isn't coming from natural spontaneous interaction. This can be a challenge to navigate when things don't go as per the script. There is also a significant risk of failure since the root his or her social ineptness is not being directly addressed.

A second look

On the basis of this rationale, I am suggesting that kids not be forced or even strongly encouraged to include others. Adults are putting way too big of a responsibility on developing children and this is unfair to all parties involved.

Why is the child really lacking in social skills?

As a parent of a child who is struggling socially, the first question you should ask yourself is - Why doesn't my child have friends like everyone else? What is going on with *my* child that is preventing her from making friends?

The change really needs to come from within the socially isolated child and not from the outside. It involves thoroughly understanding what is holding a child back from making friends in the first place.

First step is to talk with your child about how he or she is feeling when he is in a social situation, listen to what he or she has to say.

Second step: Validate what you child is saying. Validate the feelings and reflect back. If a child says nobody likes me resist the urge to jump in and try to reassure their child that they are a great kid whom people like. Whether or not this is true (or the fact that as a parent you like your child) it is your child's reality and there is no way they will change the way they view things just because you try to convince them differently. What may really be going on is that the child does not like herself. Often a child who struggles socially is a child who is not comfortable in her own skin and is unhappy. People have a difficult time relating to someone who is unhappy and not comfortable with them self. Before other children can start liking your child your child has to start liking herself.

Self-like is key to all social relationships. Specifically self-like as opposed to self-love. Most people love themselves to some degree, just they don't actually like themselves. Think about a person you don't like who happens to grate on your nerves for one reason or another. Even if it is a loved one. Now imagine having to constantly be with that person. You will quickly feel very uncomfortable.

That's how this child feels when he is with himself.

Before a child or even an adult can meaningfully interact with others, he has to first be able to interact with herself. Often the socially isolated child does not believe in himself. He believes that he is incapable of making friends, but he wants to have friends. At the encouragement of an adult, he makes an attempt at socializing but is doubtful. Self doubt leads to anxiety. A person finds he is confronted by a situation that he does not believe he can handle and becomes fearful of failure. A boy who tries to join his peers in a ball game may make mistakes more easily because he does not believe in his himself and is afraid of what others will think. Failure in activities make a child less liked by his peers.

When a child experiences anxiety, her mind freezes up and she enters a fight or flight situation. She will often not know what to say or how to react in a given situation. This sabotages social interactions since the child experiencing this will be unable to respond to social interactions in a natural, uninhibited way. This will usually lead to unsatisfying and unproductive social experiences which will in turn generate more separation from her peer group. She will also distance herself from further social interactions as a way of protecting herself from continued emotional hurt. The child can become preoccupied with her own feelings and lose focus on understanding the feelings and needs of others. This makes the child seem self-centered which alienates her even more.

A child who likes himself, is confident in his ability and accepts that although he will make mistakes they don't define him is a child who will be able to excel in any social situation. He will be able to be a better friend and a better person.

What can be done?

A caring adult can help a child understand what makes him or her uncomfortable in a social situation. That adult can challenge distorted beliefs and help the child focus on what makes her truly unique and special.   When other kids see that she is confident in her own skin they will want to be her friend. At this point social skills training may be beneficial, as there is now a solid foundation to build upon.

Another crucial ability to develop is the ability to feel comfortable playing alone. This ability goes together with a child feeling secure with herself.   Being comfortable with being alone ensures a child will never have to be reliant on other people or on being included to feel good about herself.

If these changes cannot be accomplished and the child is still struggling profession intervention may be required.

Instead of spending time and energy trying to arrange social interactions for a child focus on the child himself.

Free the child socially and emotionally to the point where he no longer needs to rely on the kindness and acceptance of others.

Help the child make the necessary changes and watch as the child achieves mastery over social navigation.

On her own.

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