

Don't forget your child's social "check-up" as school starts this year...

By Jill Crawford, LCSW

Summer is over, it's undeniable. For many of us, this means time to re-focus, learn to live with structure and schedules again, clear out the mental cobwebs and sharpen our attunement to our children's strengths and needs as they head back to school. As we take inventory of all that must be done, our primary concerns tend to fall into two priority categories: our children's physical health and their school performance. Our parental to-do lists often include tasks such as scheduling check-ups with the pediatrician, establishing contact with new teachers, and filling out endless forms for activities, classroom involvement, permission slips, etc., etc. It is all a bit of a whirlwind, and by the time some of us come up for air, we may find that it's almost Halloween. Beginning-of-year details can easily overwhelm even the most organized parents, and I am therefore dedicating this column to reminding all of us well-intentioned moms and dads to give due attention to your child's social health as they head back to school this year.

What is social health?

Social health is a term I give to a child's ability to form and sustain peer relationships, whether they evolve into friendships or remain more casual classmate relationships. Both types of interactions require a range of age-appropriate social skills in order for a successful relationship to form. For clarity sake, it is important to understand that two children need not become best friends in order for them to achieve "success" in their relationship. In fact, these more superficial interactions can present more challenges than a close friendship, as they are not based on a deep bond characterized by common interests, compassion, understanding, and at times, forgiveness. Being able to peacefully coexist with a diverse group of peers—whether in school, on the athletic field, or at a party—is a critical skill, not only in childhood, but certainly across the lifespan, and this applies not only to dear friends but also to mere acquaintances.

How can social health be measured?

As you reflect on your child's social health, ask yourself if he or she...

- ...is reasonably comfortable in new situations with new people
- ...is willing to approach a group of peers already engaged in conversation or activity
- ...can work collaboratively with a peer (compromise, resolve differences, find common ground)
- ...can assert needs, feelings, and opinions, even when different from a peer's
- ...feels generally liked by others
- ...is sought out by others
- ...can initiate conversation
- ...is able to be flexible in challenging situations
- ...can read subtle social cues, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and respond accordingly

Why is social health important?

One's feelings of social competence lead to increased self-confidence and thus a healthy self-esteem. Children (and certainly adults as well) who exude confidence are more likely to be socially accepted, and the cycle then perpetuates itself. Affiliating with a core peer group is a critical developmental task of adolescence, and the groundwork for this is laid in earlier years. In a nutshell, having friends and being socially active are important building blocks for success in school, extracurricular activity, and even family life. We know how invaluable solid "people skills" are as young adults go off to college and then eventually embark on new careers. Success in "the real world" is often linked to one's ability to establish and maintain positive relationships.

So, what can you as a parent do to look out for your child's social well-being, much like you would his or her physical health and academic performance? For starters, talk to your child often. Ask about budding friendships, social challenges encountered during the day, get to know classmates. Be available to listen when your child wants to talk. Offer advice, but also encourage your child to problem-solve independently. If your child is struggling to form social connections, provide opportunities for playdates, encourage group activities that may be appealing to your child. If your child is particularly shy or anxious, touching base with a teacher or guidance counselor can be helpful as the year gets underway so that they can offer useful interventions to support your child's social experience.

As our children get older, they will most likely not welcome parental involvement in their social lives, and certainly will not think we have anything useful to offer. So while they are still young, a little subtle observation, assessment, and intervention when necessary can go a long way toward helping your child build positive social skills and be socially healthy.

Jill Crawford, LCSW, is a psychotherapist and parent educator in private practice in Malvern, specializing in the treatment of children, adolescents, and families. For more information, please visit www.jillcrawfordcounseling.com.