The importance of socializing with peers for you and your child with special health care needs

Most humans are naturally social, and socializing with peers provides children with opportunities for problem solving, developing new perspectives, and social support. Children who are not well accepted into a peer group are at risk for later maladjustment including depression, anxiety, aggression, and possibly victimization (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). Children and adolescents with special health care needs are at increased risk for social problems due to health-related issues such as restricted activity, absence from school, and feelings of alienation (La Greca, 1990). Understanding the stages of social development can help parents identify strategies to help their child with a special health care need.

Children socializing across age groups

These are some of the social development stages that children go through.

- **Infants**: Point, smile, vocalize, take turns
- **Very young toddlers**: Parallel play: imitate others’ play, not particularly interactive. Toy struggles are common
- **Toddlers**: Fantasy play like run-chase games, playing pretend, and beginning to recruit others into pretend play. Scripted joint play like playing a doctor, mother, father, or police. Beginning of early friendships
- **Childhood**: Peer group size expands. Develops close friendships almost exclusively within gender. Recognize differences, sorts, and names items/people. Gossip increases—not necessarily negative (provides entertainment and builds group solidarity). Appreciates others’ perspectives, feelings, and ideas
- **Adolescence and beyond**: Peer network size decreases, friends provide support and advice more than parents. Intimate self-disclosure is common, accept and understand the need to establish relationships with others, dating

What parents can do

**Infants**
- Babble and coo back to your baby
- Talk to your infant—describe things using lots of color and shape words
- Place the infant so he or she can watch adults and children communicate

**Very young toddlers**
- Enforce a “no hitting” rule
- Watch your toddler play and imitate, describe and praise activity—“Special Time” play
- Avoid questions and commands

**Toddlers**
- Set up play dates or some time in child care if possible
Encourage fantasy play during special time
Describe, imitate, and praise your child’s efforts
Help your child to regulate his or her own emotions (You cannot do it for him or her)

**Childhood**

- Help your child ‘educate’ classmates about his or her illness
- Encourage aggression and emotional control
- Organize sports and activities
- Allow your child to attend summer camps or activities and participate in supervised online support groups

**Adolescence**

- Expect your child to be fun, enlightened, and joyful
- Encourage your child in daily activities and compliment his or her strengths
- Help your child fit in where possible (Make-up, hair—choose your battles wisely)

**How to help prevent bullying and cyberbullying**

- Help your child ‘educate’ classmates about his or her illness
- Teach your child to solve problems without violence
- Really listen when you ask about your child’s day
- Take reports of bullying seriously—it might be your only chance
- Establish rules about appropriate use of computers, cell phones, and other technology
- Be smart about what to post: Don’t share if it could hurt or embarrass someone
- Be aware of who should see the information and pictures your child posts online
- Keep passwords safe and do not share them with friends

**Resources for families**

**FIRST:** Check the association specific to your child’s illness or disability (e.g. American Diabetes Association)

**Camps for chronically ill children**

- National Dissemination Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities—http://nichcy.org
- Serious Fun (founded by Paul Newman)—http://www.seriousfunnetwork.org
- Summer Fun—http://fcsn.org/summercamps

**Support groups and other information for children**

- BraveKids—http://www.bravekids.org/
- Stop Bullying—http://www.stopbullying.gov/index.html
- Stop CyberBullying—http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/index2.html
- Common sense Media—http://www.commonsensemedia.org/
- Crime Prevention Council—http://www.ncpc.org/topics/bullying

**References**


