



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

Countercultural Parenting, Part 2 **PEER APPROVAL**

Feeling accepted and being included is the fixation of many students and the hope of every parent for their child. Sometimes the desire for peer approval is so strong that children make poor decisions, act in ways that are artificial to their personal history, or follow the crowd even when they do not agree with the direction. Children often feel, “Nobody likes me” or “I’m not likeable” or “I can’t do anything right.” Though feelings are legitimate and deserve to be honored, be ready to counter such feelings with objective data that paints the opposite picture. For instance, when Joey says, “Nobody wants to play with me. I’m not good at anything” it would be helpful to counter with, “That is a hurtful feeling, Joey, but your conclusion is not accurate. The truth is that you are skilled at swimming, computer games, packing lunches, and telling stories. And if you give me some time I can name lots of other things that you do well. Do you want to practice some of the games that the kids are playing?”

FRIENDS

In order to have a friend you must be a friend. Take time to learn what interests the other person, express support, ask questions, read about the topic, share the interests. Care more about giving than getting. Become a good listener and an encourager. Preplan an activity that interests the other person. Invite that person to join you. Later plan a half-day of sharing. Friendship grows with time, mutual appreciation, joy, and shared interests. Use this same strategy with two or three others, one at a time. Then arrange a play date or party and invite all four. Dismiss the feeling that “They never invite me. I always have to initiate.” When friendship takes root, the give and take will be mutual.

Basic to friendship is unselfishness, patience, forgiveness, sharing, not counting the cost, being able to sacrifice and put the welfare of the other person before personal interests. These are counter-cultural values that need to be exercised in the home and transferred to situations outside the home. St. Paul gave a useful blueprint for friendship in his description of love (Corinthians 13: 4-7). He wrote, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

CLIQUEES

A clique is an exclusive group of people. Members feel a sense of belonging, empowerment and confidence. Children who are outside the clique feel unpreferred, inferior and inadequate. Being on the fringe is lonely and hurtful. Children in both positions benefit from parent formation on topics like peer cruelty, resisting peer pressure, coping with rejection, and developing empathy so that they avoid isolating other children. Help children to handle the clique situation gracefully:

- Make efforts to strengthen self-esteem (security, self-reliance, responsibility, accomplishment).
- Focus on positive abilities and attributes. Create a visual reminder of the child's personal strengths and interests.
- Encourage a child to be purposeful, to set realistic goals and to develop a hobby.
- Role-play ways to initiate "small talk" and to show interest in another's opinion or accomplishment.
- Discuss friendship-making qualities: smiling, a friendly attitude, asking help, inviting another to join in an activity, being honest, polite, encouraging, reliable, loyal, respectful, and confidential.

- Develop communication skills: timing and location conducive to discussion, using eye contact and "I sentences," thought-filled listening, avoid interrupting, and sum up what was said.
- Be prudent about what to share, how much, with whom and avoid gossip.

PARTY TIME

Hurt is inflicted when some students are invited to a party and others are excluded. Invitations ought never to be distributed in school or in front of a child who is not included. Teach children to be sensitive to the feelings of others. Consider class parties or "open" parties sponsored by several parents. Relieve self-consciousness by hosting action parties like bowling, skating, picnic games, sports or a party with planned activities to engage each child, i.e., game boards, card games, charades, or *Pictionary*. Unscheduled parent appearances during a party ward off many problems. Do not be a source of harm by providing unsupervised sleepovers, videos with objectionable content, cigarettes, alcohol or drugs.

Dr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, a former Catholic schoolteacher and catechist, is a formation education consultant, an author of several books as well as the PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK feature of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, and director of **IHM Formative Support for Parents and Teachers**, Arlington, VA. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of child formation. Reach her at DrPatMcCormack@aol.com.

This article originally appeared in the (August/September 2008) issue of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, © Peter Li, Inc. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved. This article is protected by United States copyright and other intellectual property laws and may not be reproduced, rewritten, distributed, disseminated, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast, directly or indirectly, in any medium without the prior written permission of Peter Li, Inc.