

# Skill-Building Opportunities

## Getting Along with Classmates

**Question:** My son has some trouble getting along with his classmates. He complains that other kids are “mean” to him, and sometimes he hits them when he feels he’s been treated unfairly. His teacher doesn’t think he’s being bullied, and she suggested that he might just need some time to mature. How can I help him interact with his friends more successfully?

We feel for you and for your son. This might help. Children who understand their own thoughts and feelings, as well as those of others, are better able to deal with challenging or frustrating social situations. You can help your child learn to get along with his classmates by promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves learning what others think and feel, and forms the basis for children’s understanding of the intentions of parents, teachers and friends. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

1

### Make sure it isn’t a bullying situation.

Even if the teacher doesn’t think this is a bullying situation, you might want more information. Ask the teacher to describe exactly what’s happening in school, using specific examples. Ask your son to describe the situation from his perspective. Knowing the details will empower you to help your son more effectively. If you think it is bullying after hearing the details, you may want to get additional help from a counselor.

2

### Help your child see the whole picture.

Learning to step back from a situation and make sense of it is an important part of Perspective Taking. You can help your child learn how to evaluate and understand social situations by:

- **Real life experiences.** Encourage him to think about people’s responses to everyday situations by asking questions like, “Why do you think your aunt got upset when her friend said she looked tired?”
- **Books and television or movies.** Ask your child to think about characters’ thoughts, feelings and actions. Ask questions like, “I wonder why the main character yelled at his little sister? How do you think he was feeling?”

You can then have your child apply this kind of thinking to what’s happening at school.

3

### Talk about others’ feelings and thoughts—beginning with YOURS.

Your child looks to you to show him how to label his emotions and how to respond to the world around him.

- Share your feelings without burdening him. You can say things like, “I had a hard day so I am feeling grouchy.”
- Share your strategies for coping. “I’m not going to yell at people but instead I’ll wait until I calm down. Then I’ll talk with my boss about what’s bothering me and see if we can come up with a better solution.”

Role play with your child.

- Try re-enacting a time when there was a conflict or making up a scenario like one your child might face at school.
- Ask your child to switch roles with you. You can be your child and he can be you.
- After pretending together, brainstorm with your child to create other possible ways to deal with this situation beside hitting— thus, promoting problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills.

## 4

### See discipline as teaching. Help your child understand the impact of his behavior on others.

Parents’ use of discipline strategies influences the types of behaviors children show, as well as their ability to understand others’ perspectives.

Martin Hoffman of New York University studied discipline techniques and found that what he called other-oriented discipline was most effective. This means that parents make the child aware of the impact of his behavior on others. For example, if you see your child hit another child, an other-oriented approach would be: “I bet when you hit your classmate he gets angry and doesn’t want to hang out with you. What other ways could you work things out with him?”