

RaisingOurKids
HELP!
 My child has no friends



By Christine LaCerva

What do you do when your child is having difficulty making friends? How do you help when she comes home, crying, after being told by classmates that there's no room at the lunch table? How do you handle it when he is teased about wearing the wrong kind of sneakers, or her new computer game is taken out of her backpack when she is not looking, or - worse case scenario - he is cornered in the schoolyard?

Parents are often at their wits' end, and don't know where to turn. They're pained to see their child lonely and unpopular. Some remember the experience of being ostracized themselves when they were kids, and jump in to try to fix things. While well intentioned, this often makes matters worse.

The therapeutic question I frequently raise for parents is: Can we be there for our kids in ways that allow them to grow from painful life experiences? Can we use these experiences to teach them to be proactive in changing the things that hurt?

Recently, a 9-year-old girl and her mom came to talk with me. Mary is a bright and attractive youngster, who was having problems in school and failing to make friends. Talking with Mary and her mom, we learned that Mary's school was not unlike most adult work environments - full of cliques and exclusive social clubs. The unofficial clubs included the "popular group" (also known as

"the beautiful people"), the "nerds", the "losers", and the "girlie girls".

I asked Mary how she felt about the groups and her part in

them. Like most children, Mary aspired to the ranks of the popular clique, and was consistently rejected. While she tried not to let this bother her, her grades had dropped and she had become more angry and frustrated at home. I worked with Mary's mom to learn more about Mary's life. I urged her mother to take things slowly - not to blame the other children, or try to make Mary feel better; but instead, to work with me to offer her some

clear direction on more productive ways to deal with the situation. Mary needed to learn - with our help - how to take greater control of her life.

Mary and I talked about her experience of rejection, her difficulty asking her teachers for help, and her own rejection of children with whom she could be friends. I helped her examine her assumptions about the other girls, and asked her if she thought anything could be done to change the situation. Mary decided that the situation was bad for everyone - not just for her.

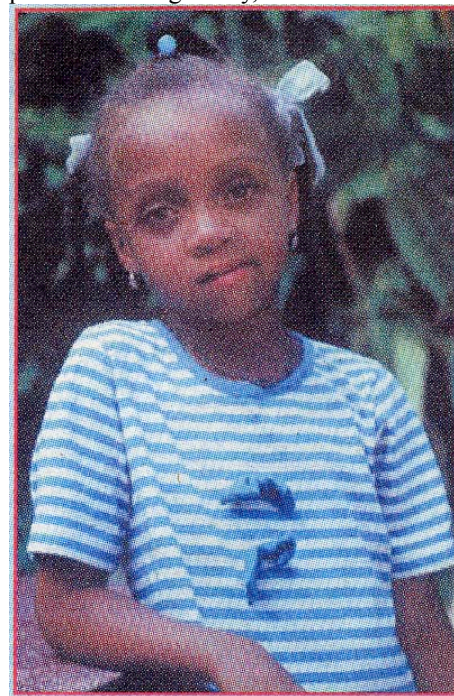
We discussed how she might go about being a more positive force in her school and decided because she had very good relationships with the adults at school, she could approach her guidance counselor. Mary's job, if she wanted it, was (not to tattle anyone!) but to enlist the guidance counselor's help in changing the ways the girls in the school related to each other.

Her mom was worried, that Mary might become more ostracized by this move. Mary was skeptical, too. Doing what I suggested would require that she have more grown-up conversations. She worried that she wasn't mature enough. I told her that having more grown-up conversations might help her actually be more grown up! Mary decided to give it a try.

The guidance counselor listened. She, too, was concerned about the cliques. She and Mary decided to ask some of the students if they would like to come to a group meeting to

talk about the situation. A number of girls volunteered to attend an informal weekly get-together. They talked about social pressures, their competitiveness and their difficulty getting along together. The girls realized that although they might not all be best friends, they could stop being so hurtful to one another.

Through this process, Mary began to feel better about herself. She learned that she could have an impact. She made some new friends. Her grades began to improve. All the problems didn't go away, but her life and the



When a child is experiencing a hurtful situation, parents can help by talking about how to be proactive — and finding a solution that will also boost the child's feeling of self.

lives of other students were more relaxed, and less upsetting. And she is still asking adults for help when she needs it.

It's difficult to see our children in pain. We rush in to protect them. But one of the most important gifts we can give our children is the opportunity to see themselves as changers of their hues. If we are successful in teaching our children that they can impact what is happening in their lives, we can rest assured that we are giving them lifelong tools to help them become responsible and caring adults.

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