

Your Lonely Child's Path to a Happier Life

New research shows that rejection has a deeper impact than previously thought on children, but parents can steer them toward resilience

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Many children come home from school around this time of year with a lament no parent wants to hear: "Nobody likes me."

While childhood inflicts emotional bumps and bruises on most people, feeling rejected by playmates and peers can be particularly painful, according to several recent studies. Left unchecked, that kind of exclusion can trigger self-doubt and anxiety, undermining a child's well-being and school performance.

But the pattern isn't irreversible. Even small children who feel ostracized can learn new ways of thinking and behaving to help them build a healthy social life.

The topic is heating up amid rising concern about harassment on social media and incivility in public life. Many researchers are wondering, "How do we raise kids to be resilient in the face of real stressors?" says Stephenie Chaudoir, an associate professor of psychology at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass.

Feeling rejected can be devastating to a child. "They have no idea, how do I move past this?" says Eileen Kennedy-Moore, a Princeton, N.J., clinical psychologist and author of a forthcoming book on self-esteem, "Kid Confidence." It's a minefield for parents, too. "Sometimes it echoes the experience they had growing up and they think, 'Oh my God, my kid is doomed,'" she says.

The best first response is often a hug. Feeling accepted and loved at home is especially important when children feel rejected at school, Dr. Kennedy-Moore says. Parents also can coach children on thinking less negatively about other children's unkindness and behaving in ways that will make others want to be around them. "This is the kind of struggle that can make kids stronger," she says.

Chris Brandenburg's daughter, August, had a little trouble making friends when she started elementary school. "It was tough to hear when she would come home and say, 'Nobody wants to play with me,'" says Mr. Brandenburg, of Ellsworth, Wis. "I'd get her to talk about how she's feeling and help her understand that just because she's feeling that way, it doesn't mean other people are thinking that," Mr. Brandenburg says.

He coached August on social skills, including letting other children set the rules sometimes on the playground. Mr. Brandenburg, co-founder of Twin Cities Dads Group, a networking

organization, also encouraged her to empathize with others who are feeling left out. He asked her, “How would you feel if you were the new kid at a new school and didn’t know anybody?” August, now 9, recently welcomed a new classmate.

Social rejection is an especially potent developmental cue for youngsters. It can cause them to behave in ways that invite the ostracism they fear, such as sulking. Teens and young adults who are highly sensitive to rejection are less responsive to others’ friendly gestures. They’re also quicker to turn cold and defensive when companions are feeling down, according to a 2018 study of 240 college students.

Persistent fears of rejection may hamper the body’s ability to respond to stress, according to a 2017 study of 32 youngsters ages 8 to 17. Participants were asked to do several stressful tasks while being evaluated by two strangers, including giving a speech and doing mental arithmetic.

Those who ranked high on laboratory measures of rejection sensitivity tended to get more nervous and upset while performing, according to the study, led by Dr. Chaudoir. Their bodies even reacted differently. Researchers detected lower levels of an enzyme called alpha amylase in participants’ saliva, signaling a muted response to stress.

“Normally kids have a quick and robust response that returns to baseline pretty quickly. You need a little bit of adrenaline” to do your best, Dr. Chaudoir says. That response was blunted in children high in rejection sensitivity.

Children who fear rejection tend to perform worse in school, research shows. These fears are made worse when children embrace and compare themselves to idealized images of physical beauty on social media, according to a 2017 study of 365 children ages 9 to 14.

Children’s patterns of relating to others begin forming by 3 or 4 and remain remarkably stable if nothing is done to change them, says Mitch Prinstein, author of “Popular,” a recent book on forming positive social bonds. However, “these are easily modifiable behavioral patterns” that can be changed with coaching and practice, says Dr. Prinstein, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

While some children want to be popular, Dr. Prinstein encourages parents to stress skills that will make them genuinely likable. Too often, popularity is a marker of status, social power, attractiveness and sometimes aggressiveness. Children who are popular because of their status may attract positive attention, but they’re often not truly well-liked, and they tend to be less happy over time, he says.

Children do better when they learn to form lasting bonds with others and earn their trust, Dr. Prinstein says. He suggests asking your child, “Did you do anything to help others feel included today?”

Erin Anderson’s daughter, Teela O’Marra-Chen, came home from seventh grade last year claiming nobody liked her. “My heart broke for her, because I remember being in those shoes at

her age,” says Ms. Anderson, of Westfield, N.J. “You have this burning need to be part of a group.”

She tried to help Teela distinguish her feelings from facts. “We sit down and get quiet for a minute, and talk about how the feeling is just momentary,” she says. Physical activity, such as taking a walk together, also helped, Ms. Anderson says.

To calm her fears, Teela says she names the negative voices in her head after a character she distrusts, such as Lord Voldemort. She also talked to other students who seemed isolated. The result: “You’ll probably have a new friend,” Teela says. Now 13, Teela says she’s feeling pretty good about her social life this year.

Battling Playground Despair

When your child declares, “Nobody likes me!”

DO:

- Offer comfort and support and let your child vent.
- Ask questions and listen closely to what actually happened.
- Encourage your child to suggest possible solutions.
- Coach her on friendly behaviors, such as joining a group on the playground.
- Discourage off-putting behaviors such as bragging or being a sore loser.
- Interact with your child in ways you want him to engage socially with friends.

DON’T:

- Tell your child she shouldn’t feel that way.
- Assume the other children are bullies.
- Interpret the incident as a sign of serious social problems.
- Vow to intervene immediately with playmates’ parents.
- Become so protective that your child feels helpless.
- Complain to the teacher immediately.