

Helping Kids Navigate Healthy Relationships

Tips for Parents:

A caring adult plays a significant role in helping guide children in ways to develop empathy and pro-social skills that are critical in positive peer relationships. This tip sheet is designed for parents/guardians of children ages 3 to 8.

Tip #1: Perspective Taking at the Park

Use unstructured playtime to observe how your child plays with others. Try to stay in tune with the dynamic and see what role they take on in the play. If a conflict arises, or feelings are hurt, talk to your child and ask them about what they think the other child is feeling and what their motivation may have been. You can even role-play and have them practice being the other child. For example, if your child pushes someone out of the way to use the slide, stop your child, ask them to wait and then ask them, “How would you feel if it was your turn to use the slide, and that child pushed you?” If they don’t respond, identify an emotion the other child may be feeling.

Tip #2: Empathy Building in Stories

Reading stories with your child, and helping them understand characters’ feelings and motivations can help boost children’s emotional intelligence. Prompting questions can include:

- How do you think that character feels?
- What would you do if you were that character?
- How would you feel?
- How do you think that character would act in a different situation?

Tip #3: Model Pro-Social Behaviours and Empathy

Children learn by watching their parents and caregivers. As much as possible, try to model in front of your child how to behave in a healthy relationship by offering support and kindness to others. Try to avoid engaging in sarcasm and teasing in front of your children. The more they see parents and caregivers being kind and compassionate, the more they will learn to be empathic towards others. Visit: www.makingcaringcommon.org to learn more.

Tip #4: Learning Through Games

Playing games, such as board games and card games help children develop pro-social skills, such as waiting their turn and coping with disappointment.

Tip #5: Support Your Child to “Bounce Back” from Stress

It is okay for children to experience difficult emotions. Parents and caregivers are there to help children learn to cope with stress, and this in turn helps them manage difficult peer interactions.



Tip #6: Coaching Children to Use Assertive Communication

Teach kids to use clear language when setting friendship boundaries with their peers. You can coach them to use a script that they can place into their own words. An example would be: “When ____ happens, it makes me feel _____, and in the future if this does not stop, I will have to _____ (set a limit).”

Tip #7: Talking about Relationships Outside of the Home

Engaging with other people is an important part of growing up and allows children to make new friends and learn about other people. School and summer programs give children an opportunity to create these new relationships. When you and your children come together at the end of the day, ask your children about their day with a few simple questions:

- What did you do today?
- Who did you play with?
- What did you talk about with the teacher, counsellors or staff?
- What are you looking forward to tomorrow?

Tip #8: Teach Your Kids About Consent

As early as possible, teach your child the basics about consent. Explain that consent means permission. Your child has the right to control their own body, and no friend, family or adult can tell them what to do with their body, unless the child is in danger. This includes the child having a right to say no to a hug or a handshake. Children should also know that they cannot consent to anything sexual because they are too young, and that would never be their fault. Children can practice consent with friends by asking for hugs and high fives. It is best when parents model that behaviour at home.

Tip #9: Communication is More than Talking

We interact with people in lots of ways. We use words and language, but we also communicate through our facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. When children are struggling to understand someone else’s emotions, help them identify how someone’s face, the way they are speaking and how they move their bodies communicates feelings. This information helps children learn how to become more sensitive to others’ emotions and to learn to respond empathetically.

Tip #10: Teach Your Child It is Okay to Ask for Help

Children should learn to problem-solve, but they also need to know that they will need to seek help from a safe and trusted adult. Help your child identify safe and trusted adults in different settings such as home, school, camp, daycare, neighbourhood, etc. Allow the children to know that if they have a problem with a peer or adult, they should ask for help, even if someone says not to tell anyone.

Learn more at www.tdsb.on.ca/gbvp

