

“Joining In” Games

Read this book often with your child or group of children. Once children are familiar with the book, refer to it when teachable moments arise involving both positive behavior and problems related to playing together. In addition, use the following activities to reinforce children’s understanding of how to join together and play (adapting them as needed for use with a single child).

“Play” Practice

Preparation: Collect some toys and games to be used as props. On index cards, write prompts similar to the following. Place the cards in a bag.

Sample Prompts:

- Ask, “May I play with you?”
- Ask, “What are you doing?”
- Ask, “Can I have a turn?”
- Say, “That looks like fun.”
- Ask, “Can I use that when you’re done?”
- Ask, “Do you want a turn?”
- Ask, “Would you like to play with this now?”
- Ask, “What do you want to play?”
- Say, “You can go first.”
- Ask, “Do you want to play with me?”

After a child draws a card, read or have the child read it aloud. Invite the child to choose a toy, approach a nearby child, and say what is on the card. The two children can then briefly act out a scene of joining in to play. Encourage the exchanges and play to continue for a short time, prompting and assisting as needed. The child who was approached can then draw the next card and approach a different child. Continue play until each child has had a turn drawing a card.

What Would You Do?

Present a play-related problem situation to children and discuss possible solutions with the whole group. Then break children into small groups of two to four. Tell each group to decide on one way to help solve the problem. Monitor how the groups are doing and help guide their discussions as needed. Allow groups three or four minutes to talk about the problem. Then have the small groups take turns telling their ideas to the whole group. Use the following examples of problems that occur during play (or make up your own).

Examples: Someone called someone else a mean name, tried to be the boss of the game, pushed another person who was in line for the slide, took something someone else was using, wanted to follow different game rules, left in the middle of a game.

Possible Solutions: Let children know that there are several appropriate responses. Among other choices, these might include: telling the person how you feel, ignoring what someone did, talking to an adult, thinking of a way to be friendly next time you see the person, calmly reminding the person of the rule, and smiling. Remind children that it is always best to “treat others as you want to be treated,” and not to respond unkindly in return.

I Have Lots of Friends

Have children place chairs in a circle, with one chair too few. Invite one child to stand in the center of the circle while the others sit. Ask the standing child to think of a favorite activity (for example, playing tag at recess). Then have the child call out, “I have lots of friends who like to play tag at recess.” Those who like to play tag jump up and join the child in the middle. Then all scramble for a new seat, and the one left standing is the next caller. If needed, help callers come up with other play ideas (for example, building towers, dressing up, swings, card games). During or after the game, discuss the activities the children mentioned, and talk about which children liked each activity. Help children recognize that there are many friends to invite and ask to play, and discuss ways they might form groups and play together.

“We Are Friends” Mural

Materials: Slips of paper with children’s names written on them; drawing paper, crayons or markers, pencils or pens

Place the name slips in a bag or other container. Have each child draw the name of another child in the group. (If your group has an uneven number of children, draw the name of a child who will draw two names from the container.) Say: “We are going to make a mural that shows how we can play with different friends. On your paper, draw a picture of yourself playing with the friend whose name you drew.” When children are done drawing, have them write (or dictate for you to write) a description of what they are doing with their friends in their pictures. The pictures may depict actual or imagined play. Each child will be featured in two pictures; one drawn by the child and one by a classmate. Display the pictures as a mural on the bulletin board or along a wall. Label the mural “We Are Friends.”

Other Suggestions for Helping Children Join In and Play

Encourage smiles and laughter. Humor is an important part of children’s healthy social and emotional growth. Encourage and join in riddle- and joke-telling, silly dress-ups, exaggerated expressions and voices. Enjoy laughing together at appropriate times. Children who develop humor also develop assertiveness and empathy for others—both important traits in making friends. Children who can laugh at situations and have fun are sought out by other children. Potential conflicts can also be averted at times with humor or a smile.

Encourage and reinforce inclusive play. Encourage your child or group to be kind to all children; especially those who are new or who are looking for a friend. Applaud friendliness, taking turns willingly, and sporting attitudes. At home, provide a welcome atmosphere for your child to play with friends; be available to guide children to play cooperatively. At school, encourage children to welcome newcomers, to initiate play with different friends as well as with familiar ones, and to be creative in finding ways to invite and include others in play.