

Chasing Friendship: Acceptance, Rejection, and Recess Play

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“Hey! Up here!” Jeff flashed a try-and-catch-me grin and ducked inside the white plastic turret, disappearing from view. Giggling at the confusion of his pursuer on the ground below, Jeff peered down through the diagonal slots that served as windows in the playground tower. Perched on top of the largest piece of equipment on the school grounds, the look-out tower was the perfect spot for dropping handfuls of soft shredded wood onto the unsuspecting heads of friends and foes below. Jeff’s target, Kevin, crawled under the protection of a nearby slide and began digging in the thick layer of mulch with his bare hands, shoving dusty bark chips into soft rounded mounds, stockpiling a source of future ammunition.

Meanwhile, Jeff waited, nestled inside the tower, hidden from view and protected from the intermittent bursts of wind that swirled across the playground. From his vantage in the circular tower, Jeff could scan the entire playground for potential allies: at the center of the L-shaped playground, clumps of first graders swatted balls toward each other on various lettered or numbered four-square grids that dotted the large blacktop circle. Surrounding this expanse of grayed asphalt, wide patches of exposed dirt spread out into tawny grass not yet worn away by the erosive force of hundreds of sneakers. Squealing children twirled and dropped from steel and vinyl equipment sets that sprouted up out of islands of mushroom-colored wood chips. A few children seeking a private space or a hiding place tucked themselves in the nooks under plastic slides or like Jeff, inside the protection of the look-out tower.

“Aaagh!” Jeff shrieked in mock distress as Kevin’s smiling face bobbed above the top rung of the tower ladder. Quickly wriggling out of his hiding place, Jeff slithered

down the adjoining slide and darted off to join another group of children. Kevin crawled inside the abandoned lookout tower, and waited for Jeff to reclaim his spot, unaware that Jeff had abandoned him for another set of friends.



The tension in this game of hide and seek typifies the social flight and pursuit recorded in an ethnographic study of recess play during weekly observations on this elementary school playground. Analysis of fieldnotes revealed that first grade children frequently blurred the line between acceptance and rejection while they worked

through peer relationships within the complex social web of playground friendships.

One body of research on childhood relationships indicates that children may suffer peer rejection as a result of ineffective play behaviors or lags in their social development (Yanghee, 2003; McCay & Keyes, 2001). Other ethnographic studies (Scott, 2003; Corsaro, 2003; Kantor & Fernie, 2003; Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995) expand interpretations of exclusion beyond individual deficits, situating peer rejection within the social context of children's culture and the institutional structure of schools. In this article, inclusion and exclusion are interpreted not as functions of individual developmental deficit but as socially-constructed phenomena within the peer group, highlighting the need for teachers to intervene with the entire class rather than focusing on social skills deficits in isolated children. The following three sections describe how children in this study used play materials and themes to create play group affiliations, to restrict or challenge group membership, and to stretch peer social boundaries. The final section offers classroom implications and suggestions for teachers to help young children form more inclusive play groups.

Creating Play Group Affiliations

During play, children explore and reproduce cultural roles and expectations of gender, race, and class but also test and resist these cultural conventions as they set up and break down boundaries in their play groups (Corsaro, 2003; Thorne, 1994). On the playground, the relative freedom of recess play and its uniquely autonomous zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) affords children the time and space to work through issues of friendship which matter greatly to them.

...the term free play suggests "openness" or a lack of structure, yet we believe that it is still structured in many ways: by the possibilities and limits of the physical environment, by the socially-constructed peer culture of this event (a patterned history of who plays with whom, around what themes, where, and with what materials), by the wider school culture (norms and expectations for materials use, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, etc.), and by participants explicit and implicit understandings of this way of doing everyday life in their setting. (Kantor & Fernie, 2003, p. 210).

Thus, the frame of peer culture offers broader explanations of social inclusion and exclusion. Social boundaries provide a means of protecting fragile or emerging play scenarios or maintaining friendship groups as children explore multiple ways to manage their social interaction (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995).

Restricting and Extending Group Membership

As Kantor and Fernie (2003) suggest, the physical environment creates opportunities for structuring group affiliations through children's use of playground materials. For example, children used a domed climbing apparatus as a dungeon where access or escape required negotiation. Children also guarded swings for particular friends, or hoarded balls and jump ropes to restrict membership in games of four-

square, soccer or basketball. Ethnographic research in preschools shows that children control distribution of play materials to indicate group affiliation “as a socially-constructed signal of membership in a social network” (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995, p. 160).

Children also restricted or extended access through non-material means such as themed play. When enacting “Lord of the Rings” or “Pokemon”, children negotiated roles before beginning play. At times, play group members cited the lack of an available role as the reason for excluding a child; at other times, children wishing to join a group would offer ideas for roles or plot action as a means of gaining entry.

Verbal rituals expanded opportunities to join play groups. In an elimination chant such as “One Potato, Two Potato”, children were included by merely placing a hand or foot in the circle. Although these chants ostensibly eliminated players to determine who would be “it” in a game of tag, all the children who participated in the opening chant also participated in the ensuing game. Kevin easily joined one play group in this way and even taught the children a new chant variant, “Blue shoe, Blue shoe. Who’s it? Not you!”

Stretching Play Group Boundaries

Children appropriated material from popular culture as a highly effective strategy for joining play groups. A newcomer could demonstrate competence in a group’s shared play theme by describing a character’s special features. On this playground, Pokemon cards or specific knowledge of Pokemon characters’ powers constituted “entry vehicles” that children used to join an “affinity group” (Fernie,

Kantor, & Whaley, 1995, pp. 164-165). In several instances, Kevin leveraged his knowledge of popular television cartoon shows such as Pokemon or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to join groups that had previously rejected his overtures.

Implications of the Collective Nature of Inclusion/Exclusion in Children's Play

How does recognition of the collective nature of social inclusion/exclusion affect classroom practice? Individual children will continue to need adult help to cope with peer rejection and to learn strategies for gaining peer acceptance (Saracho, 2002). However, a narrow focus on modeling and teaching strategies to excluded children overlooks the powerful influence of peer culture with its emphasis on the playful testing of physical and social limits. A sociocultural perspective that looks beyond individual social development reveals how children enact their shared beliefs about their social worlds through play membership. This recognition clarifies the need to intervene with the whole class rather than simply offering social skills training to an excluded child. "You cannot just work with the child and his or her behavior, because it is a social construction by the group that has a social history that must be undone over time" (Scott, 2003, p. 92)

To foster inclusion with the entire class, teachers can encourage children to bring unresolved recess problems to democratic class meetings (DeVries & Zan, 1994) as a means to make visible play group restrictions. After problems were openly discussed in class meetings, the children in the study appeared more consciously aware of the effects of play group membership and more lenient in granting access to others. In this school, ground rules for class meetings prohibited naming specific children to avoid

placing blame and to focus on solving problems. Discussions resembled those in *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Paley, 1992): children expressed frustration over interruptions in their play, pain over peer rejection, indignation over closed social groups, and concern over disparate play goals. At the core of these issues, freedom vied with friendship; the rights of children to autonomously choose their own playmates and direct their own play were pitted against other children's desire to belong. Solutions were proposed, discarded, revised, attempted, recalled, and agreed to as children, with teacher support, worked together toward equitable play.

How Can Teachers Support Friendship within the Frame of Peer Culture?

1. Value diversity, recognize the influence of the teacher's role in shaping student attitudes toward difference (Manning, 2000) and model unconditional acceptance of all children. Teachers should self-critically ask themselves: "Do I restrict activities for some children or allow more freedom for others? Do I follow up on tattling by certain children while ignoring others?"
2. Create an observation checklist using the dimensions in figure 1 to discover the local peer culture on the playground. Use the checklist to focus on one dimension at a time during recess observations.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Peer Culture on the Playground

<u>Play Groups:</u> Track play group membership <i>Who plays together?</i> <i>Who plays alone?</i>	Large Groups	Small Groups	Pairs and Singles
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<u>Valued Activities:</u> Tally numbers of children in each <i>What activities are popular?</i> <i>Who plays?</i> <i>How do children control access to an activity?</i>	Sports/Games Ball Games Jumprobes Chants/Games	Climbing Equipment Swings Slides Favorite Themes	Fantasy Play Chasing Walking/Talking Other
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<u>Valued Materials/ Areas:</u> <i>What locations or materials are valued?</i> <i>Who has access to these?</i>	Scarce Materials in Demand	Crowded Locations in Demand	Who Gets Access? Who Does Not?
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<u>Rules & Routines:</u> <i>How is friendship limited by rules?</i> <i>In conflict, are children separated, punished, or helped to talk?</i>	Handling Conflict: Tattling? Time-out? Forced apology? Negotiation?	Who Benefits? Who Loses?
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<u>Teacher Interaction:</u> <i>What effects do my actions have on friendships? Whose play do I restrict, mediate, or expand?</i>	Restricting Access: How often did I... Ignore tattling? Separate players? Send a child to timeout?	Mediating Conflict: How often did I... Listen to both sides? Prompt children to talk it out? Settle an impasse?	Expanding Access: How often did I... Suggest roles that would allow a new player into play? Initiate a valued play activity with an excluded child?
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3. Provide a play environment that encourages children to share their personal expertise in popular culture by allowing children to bring in objects or enact themes that reflect children's interests. In Kevin's case, popular culture provided a shared context as a play base and an effective means of gaining entry into closed play groups.
4. Teach children the social language of friendship. William Corsaro (2003) compares children's peer culture to an adult cocktail party, with unstated expectations that set up appropriate ways to approach an established group. Children often successfully use direct references to friendship in their entry bids to play, announcing and confirming affiliations before proposing new play ideas. Teachers can smooth the way for children to join a new group by mediating with entry phrases that refer to friendship "You're friends, right?" or a shared affinity "OK, you both like soccer."
5. Introduce activities that open up access to play such as silly rhymes, jokes, and humor. The contagious nature of humor makes it a powerful entry vehicle for play. Yet, teachers tend to consider play a serious activity and tone down humor rather than encouraging it (Bergen, 2002). Instead, laugh with children at silly jokes, teach them nonsense songs, and curb the adult impulse to squelch the playground pratfalls that children find hilarious.
6. Trust children to resolve their own conflicts. Whenever children seek adult help for peer conflicts, teachers can ask "What have you tried?" followed up with one or two suggestions such as "Listen to the other person" or "What

can you do to make things better?” Misunderstandings are a common source of conflict. Among this group of children, opponents sometimes merely needed the chance to clearly explain their side of the issue to each other and play would resume without further negotiation.

7. Encourage children to address peer social problems (DeVries & Zan, 1995, 1994; Adams, 2001) through negotiation and perspective-taking (Piaget, 1965), rather than by tattling and relying on adult intervention. When children meet to discuss conflicts, teachers can help both children understand the other’s feelings and clarifying possible solutions by asking “How did that make you feel?” and “What do you want to happen now?” Children often think of solutions which are eminently sensible to them but would not occur to adults, such as one solution where children solved the problem of “Whose turn is it?” by agreeing to simultaneously throw their balls at a basketball hoop.
8. Empower children to challenge exclusion. One tool that children used to gain access to closed peer groups was a *friendship meeting*, a conflict resolution strategy that allowed children to protest exclusion or other wrongs by interrupting play to hold a meeting. Friendship meetings, usually called by the injured party, had three rules:
 - Only two children at time in a meeting; if more than two people have a problem, get an adult to help.

- Children in a friendship meeting need to talk until they both feel better.
- Anyone can call a meeting. If you are called to a meeting, you have to meet or stop playing until you are ready to meet.

The children needed help initially to work through the process of listening to the other child, offering ideas, and generating solutions, but soon resolved the majority of their conflicts independently.

9. Intervene in conflict resolution when children’s physical or emotional safety is concerned, in ways that keep children’s dignity intact. Spend time listening and questioning, rather than placing blame or dispensing punishment. When describing a conflict to a mediating adult, children often begin with dueling accusations to deflect blame; ignore these and keep the tone solution-focused by asking “What would make you both feel better?”

10. Work with the entire group in class meetings to create more accepting peer cultures. Class meetings in this school had three ground rules:

- Anyone can call a class meeting, as long as the problem concerns the entire group
- No names are mentioned when describing a problem to the class
- Listen to and respect other people’s ideas even when you disagree

After a problem is aired, children can generate possible solutions. Children sometimes offer overly general strategies “Everybody be nice” or punitive solutions “Send them to time-out.” Teachers should ask questions that

prompt specific suggestions “What would that look like?” and positive outcomes “Would that be fair to everyone?” (Child Development Project, 1996). Remember that the consciousness-raising generated by the discussion is as valuable as the potential solutions.

11. Appreciate peer culture and the resilience of its socially-constructed history,

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history created by children over time. Teacher mandates, and even rules voted on by the class, often just send prohibited activities underground within the peer culture. Teachers should take a participant role in class meetings, bringing up issues but also refraining from orchestrating the discussion or engineering group decisions. Open discussion that respects children’s insights allows teachers and children to work together to build networks for friendship and cooperation.

Conclusion

Through their play, this group of first graders grappled with cultural conventions on their own terms. Playground problems raised by the children reflected not only personal social behaviors but also their concerns over gendered, classed, ethnic, and religious differences. Class meetings served as a forum for bringing problems to the children’s attention. However, the children frequently discovered that the solution to recess exclusion lay not in discussions but within play itself. The dynamic nature of children’s play groups created plentiful opportunities for shifts in membership tied to changes or innovations in play activities or themes.

Teachers should act with an awareness of the impact of our prohibitions and interventions upon the social landscape of the playground. By discouraging children from bringing action figures or trading cards to school or from engaging in play about popular cartoon themes, we may inadvertently exacerbate excluded children's isolation by banning a powerful tool that children use to access peer play. By appreciating peer culture and considering the collective nature of inclusion and exclusion, we reduce our tendency to assign deficit labels to already excluded individuals while expanding our conceptualization of social development in ways that hold more promise for understanding children in their actual cultural context.

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All children's names are pseudonyms.