How to Raise
Confident Children
Who Can Make Friends
and Build Healthy
Relationships

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Starting Kids Off Right

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Amy Van Buren, Ph.D.

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For Sharon, Lee, Brandon, Alex, Jakey, Emma, Noah, Gabrielle, Rachel, Shira, Jon, Lila, Andy, Jenny, Hannah, Soren, and Nicholas

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond hearing that a child is doing well in school, few things make a parent's heart leap for joy more than hearing that a child "has friends." There is something affirming about learning that offspring are liked by others their age. We are, of course, proud of them and pleased for them. But these are not the only reasons. Hearing that our children are liked may also recall our own childhood memories. We remember the fun of being around other children whom we called friends, and we remember the awful feeling of being rejected or left out or not counted among a friendship group. Whether we like it or not, having friends—being in relationships with others—is important for our children's happiness. As parents or caregivers, we recognize that the skills needed to make friends originate during the early years of a child's life. It will be largely through our love and guidance that these skills are formed and nurtured.

Professionals who observe children find a variety of friendship and relational patterns. Some kids seem to make friends easily; others have a little more difficulty, but eventually do okay; while a smaller number of children struggle to make and keep friends and may even end up with no friends at all. Probably some parents believe children either have it or don't have it when it comes to making friends. To be sure, there are some children who seem to have natural interpersonal skills. However, the ability to make friends is just that—an ability—and one that takes roughly the first five years of life to develop. Some people are really good at this skill, some are fair, and others are poor at it. And because it is a skill, it can be taught, learned, practiced, and mastered. This is

what this book is all about—the whys and hows of relationship building in kids up to the age of twelve.

As psychologists interested in relationships, we have spent decades studying the mechanisms through which people interact. In two previous books on this subject—*Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit In* and *Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success*—we focused on nonverbal language and the ways in which mastery of facial expressions, gestures, postures, personal space, voice tones, and the like help children become more effective interpersonally. Here, in this book, we broaden our scope to include more about relationships and how they develop. Our goal is to help parents and teachers of children to become relationship experts, to better understand the interpersonal worlds of the children in their care so they can guide them to increasingly richer and better relationships.

We have organized the book by developmental levels so that you, after reading the introductory material that describes how relationships work, can move more quickly to the section appropriate to the age group that concerns you. We tried to minimize psychological jargon and we included essential information from our own and others' research. Our goal is to help you become successful relationship teachers.

Starting Kids Off Right is composed of five chapters. The first chapter explains what we mean by "relationship" and describes how relationships work. The second chapter discusses the role that nonverbal communication and other communication skills play in forming relationships. The remaining three chapters are in-depth examinations of each of the three developmental time periods— from the infant and toddler years when most relationship learning is with adults through the early school years when the major relationship learning takes place with peers.

We distinguish three distinct developmental time periods:
>   1) **infant** (birth to around two years);
>   2) **child** (from around two to four or five years of age); and
>   3) **juvenile** (from about four or five to around nine or ten years of age).

We also consider what we call the ***chum*** relationship of pre-adolescence (from around ten to twelve years of age). You can concentrate your reading on the time period that is of most interest to you, but keep in mind that the skills learned in the early periods provide the foundation for later development.

WHAT ARE RELATIONSHIPS AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

✳

Sullivan's theory of human relationships

The four phases of a relationship

My daughter Ida is six months old. I'm over being scared of having a baby, but I don't know what I should be doing with her to help her to be happy…to get her ready for all that's ahead of her.

✻

Neha has just started preschool and I'm so nervous for her. I watched her the other day and all she does is stand in the corner and play with a doll. She doesn't talk to any of the other children. I don't want to force her to do something she doesn't want to do, but is she okay?

✻

I don't know if it is right or not but I'm concerned about Barney. Every time he scores a basket in a game, he does this trash talking and acts like he is big stuff. I see other kids doing that as well, but I wonder if I should come down hard on him. I'm afraid his being so cocky will stop him from having friends. And boy, what a poor loser! You'd think the world was coming to an end. Is that right? Should he be that upset?

✻

Janice and Tomika are like Siamese twins joined at the hip. They go everywhere together. Yesterday, when Tomika came home it wasn't two minutes before she was on the phone to Janice about something. I'm worried about them spending so much time together. Don't they need to have other friends?

Problems, problems, problems! So many of the important and troubling problems children have involve relating to others. As parents, one of our constant concerns is helping our children learn how to get along with others. This book provides ways to address relationship difficulties.

Watch elementary children at recess. See how they separate into groups of boys and girls. Many of the girls are most likely talking intently with one another in groups of two or three or playing catch or jumping rope. Most of the boys are probably interacting in larger groups, playing games with rules that have winners and losers, like soccer, kick ball, or football. But you may also see some children who do not interact with the others: Girls who stand alone, hands folded, looking down with no one to talk to. Boys who are on the periphery of the game, pawing the ground nervously because they were not chosen by either side and thus cannot play. Such children don't want to be alone, but that's where they've ended up.

Being excluded can happen much earlier than elementary school. Observe a preschool class. Children mill around, participating in what seems, at first, to be random and chaotic activities. Some run around, some sit, and some just look around the room. In time, however, this seeming chaos reveals itself as purposeful play. Most children arrange themselves around types of playthings like the sandbox or around kinds of activities such as playing cars. They grab trucks and roll them on the ground, making noises like roaring engines, engaging the interest of other children. They create sand castles. They sit side by side looking at books. But even at this young age, you can see children who do not seem to be connected to others. They are at the party, but outside of the festivities. They not only don't know how to get in, they may not even know to knock on the door.

What's a parent to do?

Our answer: Become more knowledgeable about relationships so that you can respond effectively to guide and support the ever-changing, continuously occurring interpersonal interactions your children will experience throughout their young lives. We begin with some basic ideas about the way relationships operate. There are, of course, many studies of how people learn to interact with one another, but we have found the ideas of Harry Stack Sullivan to be most helpful in explaining how young children learn to relate to others.

Sullivan's theory of human relationships

Harry Stack Sullivan was what is known as an interpersonal psychiatrist. Rather than focusing on what goes on inside individual people as his Freudian predecessors and colleagues were doing, Sullivan believed that the most important things in life go on between people. His special contribution was helping us become aware that one of the worst psychological pains humans experience is loneliness—the feeling that we are not connected to others and that we are helpless to change the situation. We need to emphasize here that *choosing* to be alone is not the sort of pain that Sullivan meant; quiet moments alone can be welcomed. What concerned Sullivan was involuntary solitude—being alone and wishing not to be, but having no way to remedy the situation. The antidotes for loneliness are simple and straightforward— interpersonal contact, connections with others, relationships.

Sullivan saw relationships as essential to a life filled with satisfactions and free of unnecessary psychological pain. Relationships were so important to him that he generated a theory of

social development based on them, and he saw interpersonal relationships with teachers, counselors, and psychotherapists as the sources of help for people who had gone so far into loneliness that they were in need of special guidance to recover from it.

Knowledge of Sullivan's theory of interpersonal development is a first step in understanding the specific relationship needs of children at various ages. He described several stages of life, each energized by a drive toward richer and more complex relationships and distinguished by a different, more mature manner of interacting with others.

FIRST STAGE: INFANCY (BIRTH TO TWO YEARS)

When children are born there is no such thing as interpersonal, there is only personal. At birth, despite being physically separated from their mothers, infants are not yet psychologically separated from them. Newborns have not yet differentiated between themselves and their primary caregivers (who most often are their mothers). This psychological fusion between mothers and their children can produce a variety of outcomes.

First, infants tend to feel what their mothers feel. This is shown nicely in the following interaction between a calm mother and a distressed infant in need of soothing.

ETHAN

❊ ❊ ❊

Four-month-old Ethan is having a difficult time falling asleep. He is fussing and has begun to cry. His mother knows he is tired and ready to sleep and has given him some time to settle down, but that is not happening. She goes over to the crib, bends over, and says in a soothing voice, "Ethan, you're just having a rough time of it, aren't you?"

*She rubs his back while she sings the lullaby that she
remembers from her own childhood. It takes a while but the
steady, calm hand motions and the gentle singing voice calm
Ethan down and soon he is sound asleep.*

Ethan, like most infants his age, can feel what his mother is
feeling. His mother has communicated her calmness through her
touch and her voice, and he has responded by calming down.
Through this special kind of communication between mothers
and their children, infants soon learn how to pick up cues of
calmness (or anxiety) not only from the primary caregiver but
from others with whom they interact.

Sullivan suggests that the interpersonal development of
infants begins when children have a budding realization that
mother (or another caregiver) does not, in fact, always know what
is going on in their minds and that, in fact, they actually are sepa-
rate from their parents. At this point, the fusion relationship
fades and psychological separation leads infants to develop an
attachment relationship with their mothers (and sometimes with
fathers or other caregivers), through which they eventually will
learn how to interact with others. As children become more
aware of their separation, they learn ways of staying connected to
their sources of physical and psychological support. This is where
learning to communicate comes in.

For the early infant, the communication patterns are rela-
tively simple: cry if you want something, and hope that mom or
dad will figure out what that something is. Happily, at this time
there are only a few possibilities, so parents can function pretty
well within this primitive level of information and interaction. As
the child's needs become more complex, however, it becomes
necessary for the child and the parents to develop more sophisti-
cated forms of communication, first nonverbally and then within

two years, verbally. It is at this point that we see the beginnings of sophisticated signals like facial expressions (e.g., turning away the mouth when offered baby food spinach, but smiling and opening wide for baby food chocolate pudding), gestures, vocalizations (coos and grunts), and then later, real words! When words appear, according to Sullivan, the child is ready to move into the next stage of social development, childhood.

SECOND STAGE: CHILDHOOD (TWO TO FOUR OR FIVE YEARS)

HEATHER JANE

✳ ✳ ✳

Grandma and Grandpa are having lunch with their granddaughter Heather Jane, who is visiting with her mother, June. Although there is much smiling and fun, things are not going well. Heather Jane keeps saying that she wants "buttoo." Grandma and Grandpa have no idea what that means, and they are becoming frustrated. Luckily June is in the other room and explains that buttoo is Heather Jane's word for peanut butter. Once this is cleared up, they are able to give Heather Jane what she is asking for, and lunchtime is much more pleasant for everyone.

The real words that begin to appear in most two-year-olds' vocabulary are typically words that work within the special relationships among kids and their immediate family. Mom and Dad know that "buttoo" means peanut butter or "getti" means spaghetti, and they all get along pretty well. However, there is a big difference between communicating to people in a limited family universe and communicating to people in the world at large. It is the task of the parent to teach the child a system of communication that will allow

him to relate effectively outside of his family. This process requires a few years, typically from ages two through five, and is accomplished largely through refined and enriched experiences guided by the attachment relationship with his mother.

During this childhood stage of social development, language shaping develops verbally and nonverbally. Parents are typically torn about what to teach during this time. On the one hand, they love the cute baby talk and vocalizations and treasure the special funny words and goofy facial expressions that they and their child share with one another. But they are also aware that the special words and nonverbal communications cannot be used outside the family circle. Thus, parents begin to carefully "shape" their child's verbal language by repeating the correct pronunciations of various words, restating sentences with proper grammar, and reducing their children's (and their) dependence on "baby talk." They refine their child's nonverbal expressions by using more subtle facial expressions. Over time, early word forms drop away, more universal words appear more frequently, and facial expressions, tones of voice, and gestures become more sophisticated.

As part of the teaching enterprise implicit in the attachment relationship, parents select other children with whom their child is going to interact, initiating play dates and sleepovers. Parents typically structure these interactions by deciding what the children are going to do, where they're going to do it, and for how long. They are usually present to orchestrate and choreograph the activities. In this way, children learn to interact with others of their same age—a crucial skill for the next developmental stage.

While maintaining control of their young children's interactions, parents also leave children some room to relate with others on their own. It takes time and experience for children to develop the social awareness or knowledge to do things like