

Why Will  
No One  
Play  
with Me?

**THE PLAY BETTER PLAN**

**TO HELP CHILDREN OF ALL AGES  
MAKE FRIENDS AND THRIVE**

**CAROLINE MAGUIRE, PCC, M.Ed.**

**WITH TERESA BARKER**

## THE INTERACTIVE CONVERSATION GUIDE

### STEP 1. Set the Scene

Pick a time and place most comfortable for your child to have this initial discussion. A half hour to forty-five minutes should be sufficient. Kids tend to be more receptive to conversation when they're physically comfortable, unhurried, and undistracted. Other helpful starters:

- Approach your child when he is in a pretty good mood, not on the heels of a blowup or meltdown. Talk together privately, without other siblings around.
- Pick a quiet place—no phones or screens to distract you.
- Make your point clearly and keep your tone warm.

You can say:

- I have something I'd like to talk with you about.
- You know how you are so good at math and it's easy for you? And how some of your friends have tutors because it's not so easy for them? For some kids, being social is easy. It's not so easy for you, and I'd like to be your go-to person for that—your friendship tutor.
- You know how people take piano lessons and you take karate lessons? Well, I want to think about some friendship lessons. And we can do them right here at home—or anywhere we feel like it.

Suggest that you are going to have some fun times together practicing social stuff so she can get better at it and then she'll have some playdates to practice. You might use a specific sport or activity she likes as an example. Say: "You know how Coach works on your swings in baseball, and how, if he didn't, you wouldn't know how to hit that curveball? Well, we are going to teach you how to get better at social stuff and I am going to coach you."

Other tips for setting the scene:

- Some children focus better when they have something to do with their hands—just not digital devices or games. Try giving your child a fidget toy or a notepad to take notes. If he reacts or overreacts to being approached about the subject, try to give

## Why Will No One Play with Me?

him something comforting to play with or hold.

- Assure your child that you have plenty of time to talk so he doesn't feel as if he needs to rush through the conversation.
- Start the conversation with a discussion about your child's strengths. Use examples. Refer to one of his gifts and brag a bit to him about a special talent he has. Compliment your child on some things he does well, like asking for snacks politely or being gentle with his little sister.
- If you and your child have had disagreements about social skills in the past, then you can acknowledge that and you can apologize for not understanding. Repeat that you want to help her with this social stuff and now you know how.
- Refrain from using negative statements, such as "You're bad at sharing."

### **STEP 2. Use open-ended questions**

By asking open-ended questions, you encourage your child to talk about his friendship situation. Open-ended questions use the words *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how*. Some conversation starters:

- Who are you playing with these days?
- How do you feel your friendships are going?
- What are you doing well as a friend?
- How can you be a better friend?
- I have noticed that sometimes you have a hard time with (identify a behavior). What makes (name the behavior) hard for you?
- When do you feel you have a hard time finding friends?
- How would you like your friendships to change?
- Where could you approach someone?
- How come that happened?

If your child resists, ask her, "What feels hard about this?"

If she denies there is any friendship problem, you can say, "Well, I have noticed..." and then name a few specific situations. Ask her what feels uncomfortable about changing. Share with her the positive things that could happen if she were willing to work on her friendship skills and ask her what *she* would like to be different. Share with her a picture of possibilities—what it could be like. Some phrases that may help soften resistance:

If your child resists, ask her, “What feels hard about this?”

If she denies there is any friendship problem, you can say, “Well, I have noticed . . .” and then name a few specific situations. Ask her what feels uncomfortable about changing. Share with her the positive things that could happen if she were willing to work on her friendship skills and ask her what *she* would like to be different. Share with her a picture of possibilities—what it could be like. Some phrases that may help soften resistance:

I am curious . . .

Tell me more about that.

What is that like for you?

What does that feel like?

### **STEP 3. Clarify concerns and express empathy**

As your child responds to your questions, be sure to show that you hear his concerns by being a reflective listener: Listen closely, repeat back what you understand your child to be saying, and ask if you understand correctly. You can say: “Here’s what I hear you saying . . . Is that right?” If your child feels that his concerns are heard and validated, he’ll be more open to hearing what you have to say. Below are some tips on how to be a good reflective listener:

- Repeat back your child’s statement without giving an opinion. By repeating his statement, your child also hears what he has said.
- Confirm with your child that you captured his thoughts and feelings accurately.
- Clarify your child’s thoughts and feelings by asking questions.
- Express empathy and validate your child’s feelings: “I hear you. I get it. That must be hard.”
- Use *you* and *I* statements, such as “I notice you seem overwhelmed” and “I’m hearing you are lonely.”

Here’s an example of a conversation guided by reflective listening:

**CHILD:** I don’t have any friends, and I never will. Other kids are mean.

**PARENT:** It sounds like you feel left out. And you think other kids are mean.

*(Parent recaps the child’s message and repeats it back to her.)*

## Why Will No One Play with Me?

**CHILD:** There is no point in trying. No one gets me.

**PARENT:** It sounds like you feel that things can't get better?  
*(Parent clarifies the child's thoughts and feelings.)*

**CHILD:** Yes. Things won't get better.

**PARENT:** I'm sorry you are feeling so frustrated. I want to help you with that.

*(Parent expresses empathy and segues into the problemsolving part of the conversation.)*

### **STEP 4. Problem-solve**

Next, you want your child to brainstorm with you to help come up with solutions to his friendship problems, so he feels engaged in the decision-making process. Encourage some suggestions. Your child's suggestions may not all be helpful, but try to focus on the good aspects of his suggestions and then offer your own ideas. Discuss how changing his behavior could bring about positive results in the future. Here are some questions to help him understand that accepting help would be beneficial for him:

- What gets in the way of you making friends?
- What do you think would have made this playdate better? (mention past playdate)
- What are your options for making your friendship situation better?
- What would it feel like if you could get better at making friends?
- What would it be like if you were happier?

### **STEP 5. Discuss the *Play Better Plan* and coaching approach**

After brainstorming about the social situation and the desire for improvement, you can introduce the idea of the playdate coaching program and incorporate some of your child's suggestions into the plan. You can introduce the program with these conversation starters:

- What if we could work on being a better friend?
- What if we could work on helping you with (a problem behavior)?
- Everyone needs to practice things sometimes. (Give an example of what you are working on in your life right now, like stressing out less about deadlines or eating more salad.)

CAROLINE MAGUIRE

- What if we could figure out a way to help you create stronger friendships?
- I think I know a way for you to find good friends.
- You told me before that you would like to have an easier time playing with kids at school. I have an idea on how we could work on that goal together.

**COACH NOTES**

- Don't be a historian. Recounting a long list of past mistakes only shuts kids down. If your child doesn't know what you're talking about, give one or two specific examples.
- Talk frankly with your child, but try not to shame or judge her.
- Do not get angry even if your child refuses to talk about hard things.
- Avoid words like *always* and *never*.
- Allow your child to express his viewpoint whenever he feels the need to.
- Allow for degrees of buy-in. A child does not have to say "Hooray, let's do it!" A shrug and "Okay, sure" might be her way of signaling she's willing to give it a try.

For more information, please visit  
[www.CarolineMaguireAuthor.com](http://www.CarolineMaguireAuthor.com)