

SMALL RELATIONSHIPS

Few things in life can lift the heart more than watching young children at play. Their innocence and small personalities are in full view. They bring a smile to our faces.

I see this daily and never grown tired of it. It not only brightens my mood but those who I work with. And there is always a different behavior, reaction, or facial expression on their faces you have never seen before. It appears to come out of nowhere.

Some of the sweetest are watching children building new friendships. Little is more precious than observing this.

Recently, I got a chance to see a three year old I'll call Jason, trying to make friends with Jane who was also three. It was a bit awkward for both of them and it moved me knowing they were going through their own individual development of their social skills.

Jason approached Jane in a cautious way. You could tell he was nervous and it wasn't going to be easy. Before he started out, he picked up a toy, turned it over a few times in his hand, and decided in his mind that this was the toy he wanted to play with Jane. He looked at the toy and then looked back toward Jane.

You could tell that he was thinking this through carefully and for a time I thought he might not make the initial move toward her. It was like I was watching a teenager approach another and asking for a date. Or maybe, even like us decades later, putting ourselves on the line, as we ask someone if they might be interested in joining us. So Luke moves over to her with a doubting facial expression, his head is a little down, and his shoulders are slumped. He slowly lifted the toy in his hand up to hers, and asked if she would play with him. A quick smile rushed over her face as she extended her hand to take the toy.

Jason let out a sigh of relief. You could see his on his facial expression that he was now more relaxed. The risk of being turned down had gone. As they sat down together to share the toy they both began to laugh and giggle. They played for the next ten minutes. A relationship was born.

Ten years ago, we thought relationships only began to form later in life. Educators thought a child needed to be five or six to understand and feel the meaning of a relationship.

Now, we believe this can happen at much younger ages. Even at 16 to 24 months a child begins to develop their capacity to react to others around them. Their formation is significant to developing a healthy feeling of one self.

Sometimes this behavior is good and sometimes it's not so good. They can go from playing with a toy together to a one child banging the toy on the other's head. Acceptable social behavior must come early, as does the reaction of the parent to explain this is not acceptable.

I'm sure you've seen small children act with a quizzical face when you tell them not to do something. They look up at you wondering "what did I do wrong?" You ask yourself "how could they think this was acceptable"? But those who spend their full day with children know it is only part of growing up.

What might seem obvious to you is not so obvious to little ones. To children the concept of acceptable playing and sharing is tough to understand. When they are very young, we are the ones who play with them. As a child develops they begin to play more by themselves. And finally, as the child gets older, they learn to play with others.

The socialization process can be a wonderful thing to observe. Young kids don't have political agendas. They play because it's fun. It makes them happy. They trust other kids because others don't usually have agendas.

When we get older play becomes more organized. Rules are put into play. We even look for our children to play better than other children. Competition appears to naturally take over. It will be something they face for the rest of their lives.

We learn that the world is not as easy as we thought. We look for other's agendas. We see that others do not necessarily have our own best interests at heart.

As parents, we can become overwhelmed with these thoughts about our kids. We need to recharge by taking time to observe the innocence of young children. Instead of looking at them as a distraction we need to look at them to learn.

Watch their smiling faces. Listen to their laughter. Feel their happiness. Take pride in their small accomplishments when they make new friends.