

# Peer Interaction Strategies

Children are born to learn and they absorb information through imitation. They parrot back words that they hear, copy household activities such as sweeping the floor, imitate grooming tasks such as brushing their hair, and they learn how to behave based on their observations. Children watch others and they learn how to interact with adults and peers and they understand acceptable and unacceptable behaviors based on what is reinforced (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963).

Peer interactions help children develop a healthy emotional development of their social role, self-concept, self-esteem, and identity; peer engagement is essential for social, cognitive, and language development. Fostering peer interaction help boost a child's social emotional skills enhance their confidence, offers them the ability to build foundational relationship skills with others, allows children to learn to problem-solve, and fosters effective communication skills.

Here's a short list to promote and facilitate healthy peer interactions:

**Reinforce** prosocial behaviors and praise your child when she does well socially. For example, say, "I liked seeing you share your favorite book with your friend" or "You did such a good job waiting for your turn to go down the slide."

**Model** appropriate behaviors including taking turns, interactions with others, and reciprocity.

**Imitation** skills are important, especially when children learn and copy others. Prime your child and play games such as *Simon Says* or *Do What I Do*.

**Facilitate** play dates and match your child with other peers that complement your child. For example, if your child is strong in motor skills but would benefit from talking more, sync up with another parent whose child is more advance with communication who might need exposure to movement activities.

**Circle Time** at the library or structured play dates help children learn to follow rules by imitating others' good behavior.

**Social Stories** help children learn about their role in social relationships. Read stories about sharing, reciprocation, recognizing emotions, understanding non-verbal cues, and resolving issues.

**Boundaries** help children learn about what is appropriate or inappropriate. Talk about personal space, whom they can play with, whom they can trust (e.g., adults at the play center versus strangers), and what to do if the boundaries are broken.

## References

Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S.A. (1963). Vicarious reinforcement and imitative learning. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 6, 601-607.

