

How to Use This Book

In writing this book, I drew on twenty years of observation, my studies of the research, and my experiences providing intervention as a speech-language pathologist working with young children and their families.

All of the stories cited are true and the children referred to are real, though details have been modified to protect the identities of the people described. While the children in this book come from a variety of backgrounds and upbringings, they all had one thing in common: they had struggled ever since they first started interacting with peers.

Many of the children described had language abilities that were in the average range on paper, but they were missing crucial elements in the functional *use* of the language they had. Some of them had trouble coordinating their thoughts in more abstract, complex ways. It was as if they just couldn't seem to pull together what they knew to make and keep friends—kind of like sitting in the car without keys to make it go.

Drawing from research and identifying what socially successful children do from infancy to the second grade, I attempted to deconstruct social skills to best identify the key elements needed to successfully interact with peers. Each major element is represented as a rung on a ladder.

The first rungs begin for most children in infancy; the last rungs are more developed by about seven years old—an age when classroom social hierarchies are more clearly defined and most children have already developed a solid foundation of social interaction skills.

After reading this book, you will be able to identify:

- where your child is on the social skills development ladder
- how to set goals to help fill in gaps and help your child learn to make and keep friends
- how and when to support your child during play
- how your child's play preferences can help or hinder making and keeping friends
- what to watch for and how to help your child be able to participate fully at recess

If you are unsure how to get your child to engage and play with you, or if your child runs away or gets irritated when you join in, then the first three rungs on the ladder will be of particular interest to you:

- **Rung #1: Joint Attention**

This is where the magic of moving from being self-directed toward true interaction and sharing experiences begins.

- **Rung #2: Emotional Awareness**

In this chapter, we will explore how and when children learn to recognize emotions in themselves and others and the impact on social interaction.

- **Rung #3: Imitation**

Here you'll learn how imitation in play helps your child to be included by other children, helps your child pay attention to others, and gives him or her access to being allowed to stay in play with other kids.

- **Rung #4: Early Perspective Taking**

This is where children learn that other people think and feel too and that those thoughts/feelings may even be different than their own. This is a major shift from an egocentric, literal world-view toward a more inclusive, flexible one. This change forms the basis for being able to see things from another's point of view, which accounts for being able to "read" social dynamics.

- **Rung #5: Later Perspective Taking (Theory of Mind)**

Theory of Mind ability builds on your child's understanding that others have different ideas and knowledge, which informs their unique perspectives. Helping your child develop theory of mind will support understanding of why others may behave the way they do and how to adapt his or her own behavior based on who he or she is playing with.

- **Rung #6: Narratives**

Your child most likely has challenges with narratives if you and your child enjoy playing together in a variety of ways, but it's hard to follow your child's train of thought in conversation, your child changes topics in conversation abruptly, or leaves out information crucial for friends to follow his or her ideas. Helping children describe their experiences in an organized way with appropriate inclusion of necessary details so that the listener can follow their ideas is crucial to be included in play with others.

- **Rung #7: Conflict Resolution/Executive Function**

When young kids fight, well-meaning adults often intervene by saying, "Use your words." Of course kids need to learn to ver-

bally deal with conflict, but it can be very difficult for many children. If your child has all of the skills developed on earlier rungs but persistent challenges organizing and expressing his or her thoughts during heightened emotional situations, then you will find your child's skills at this level.

At this point, it is important to consider that while the ladder image gives the appropriate sense of how skills are built up, child development is not always quite so neat and tidy. Some children will have developed just enough of the foundational social skills needed to reach more complicated upper rung skills, but they may continue throughout life to need to reinforce lower rungs that relate to paying attention to others (e.g., joint attention, emotions/nonverbal communication, and imitation). Some children may be a bit more rigid in their approach to life and will need ongoing support for flexible thinking (imitation, perspective taking, conflict resolution) in order to build and maintain friendships. Still others may struggle with intense and immediate responses to social situations and will need a great deal of extra learning in the areas of emotional recognition, perspective taking, and conflict resolution.

The ladder image, in essence, then, is a guide to help you understand the foundational skills your child needs to make and keep friends and to help you identify strengths and areas needed for growth. It is not necessarily a one-way ticket to social success—but it may be a means to visit and revisit skills as needed to support your child's ability to make and keep friends. You may need to go up and down the ladder many times depending on social demands placed on your child; some days your child's social skills may hover around the bottom, but on other days, or with different kids, he or she can handle higher social rungs. Compared to other children, your child may need more people at the bottom keeping the ladder steady and stable as he climbs, or his rungs may be spaced further apart. This metaphor can and should be individualized to your child's specific and always-changing needs.

In later chapters, we will explore how the ways your child prefers to play can potentially affect his ability to make and keep friends, discuss what makes kids “cool” in the schoolyard during the younger years, and finally look at what your child needs to be ready for recess with friends.