GUIDE 9. TEASING, NAME CALLING AND BULLYING

1 CLOSE OBSERVATION TO IDENTIFY DIFFICULTIES

Adverse social experiences that a child has during the early years may not seem to cause them to react at the time. This can be for a number of reasons, however, we need to be aware that the child will register other people's looks and behaviour even if they do not understand them. In later years, the understanding of these experiences can be the source of much distress.

For example, a small child with a visible difference may be teased by older children. When they approach the child and call them by some nickname, the child may perceive this as friendly attention, even laugh and encourage repetition of the name. Only as the child matures will they come to realise how spiteful and demeaning this behaviour actually was.

Other children witnessing this sort of interaction, where the young child being called names does not appear to be hurt at the time, may learn that name-calling is fun or clever. Alternatively, they may know that it is unkind, but not know how to respond to support the child with the visible difference.

Exclusion is another form of adverse social experience often seen in informal play. This may not be easy to detect because young children often play singly, alongside their peers but without apparently interacting. A child with a visible difference is more likely to be ignored.

For example, children play together with toy cars using a road mat on the floor. Sometimes they speed their cars round the roads avoiding each other's cars. Sometimes they bump another car out of the way. It is important to pay close attention to ensure that the bumps are random or shared. What sometimes happens is that one child (usually a more vulnerable or 'different' child) has their car bumped out of the way, first by one child and then by the others. As a single incident, this would not be significant but it is important not to miss patterns of exclusion.

Choosing a partner is another area where some children, especially children with a visible difference, are vulnerable to being hurt through not being chosen.

2 PROMPT AND SENSITIVE INTERVENTION

Early years workers, teachers and others working with young children need to be aware of the long term effects of teasing and intervene even if the child being teased does not appear to be upset at the time.

If you find that the children are calling a child names, you will need to take action. Children need to know that this behaviour is not permissible.

> "We always call each other by our real names. "Your name, Imran, is important to you. My name, Emily, is important to me. And Gosia's name is important to her."

A child should not be reprimanded in such a way that they will feel upset. This is likely to lead to resentment and retaliation and will not be helpful. Children often respond best to a combination of explanation and positive expectation.

> "Carly, would you like to help me? I need you to be as good and as grown up as you can be, because the other children like you and they will copy what you do. You remember we talked about how important it is to call everyone by their real names? I think it would be very helpful if you could be sure to do that so that all the other children will know how to be good too."

When young children tease or call a child names, they will be copying what they have seen older children doing – or even adults. It may be useful to approach the teachers of older children at nearby schools and invite them to address issues of difference, self-esteem and self-perception with their own pupils e.g. by using A world of Difference resources.

If a child or a group of children is using play to dominate or exclude another child, it will be best if you can join in yourself to model and guide the children towards sharing or taking turns. (See the Guide on Practical support with social skills.) During their early years all children need guidance and positive reinforcement of considerate behaviour.

For activities that require children to get into twos or work with a partner, it is important to plan carefully how this will happen. For example, prepare a tray of numbered card flowers and numbered card butterflies, all mixed up. Explain that each butterfly needs to be with the flower with the same number. Then give half the children a flower each and the other half a butterfly each. Now you can invite the children to find their partner. Alternatively, you can just use lolly sticks to ensure that the pairs are randomised.

Similarly, getting into small groups can be made fun and inclusive for everyone if you plan a brief game to create the groups. For instance, start by touching each child gently on the head and allocating them an animal. If you go around the group in sequence you will have roughly equal numbers of each animal. "Dog…Cat…Horse…Lamb…". Now ask all the dogs to make their noise, "Woof woof woof!", then all the cats, "Meeow!" and so on. Now you can ask all the animals to find the other animals that are the same as them, and make a group…ready for the activity you want to do with the children in groups.

By taking care how children choose partners and form groups, and by regularly changing the groups that the children work in, patterns of exclusion are less likely to develop.