

FRIENDSHIPS AND HIGH LEARNING POTENTIAL CHILDREN

Summary

Children with high learning potential may feel different to other children in their peer group and may have a small circle of friends. Frequently, high learning potential children can be more comfortable interacting with older children and adults but may also get on very well with younger children. This advice sheet explores friendships within the context of high learning potential.

Introduction

Forming and maintaining friendships can be difficult for everyone for a range of reasons. There are many types of friendship; best friends, acquaintances, colleagues, to name a few. Some of these people may be a part of our lives for a very long time, some a short while and some may come and go several times. No matter what age we are or where we are in the world, we can all feel hurt by our friends or acquaintances.

We are not born with coping mechanisms, skills and strategies for dealing with the situations that can arise out of friendships and social dynamics in general. Therefore, we all need guidance and support to help us learn the skills required to build meaningful connections with others, build our own communities and understand the expected social interactions within different environments and with the many people we encounter throughout our lives.

Friendships and High Learning Potential Children

Some children with high learning potential may feel they encounter barriers when forming friendships. If not supported, these children may feel they spend much of their lives isolated and lonely, unable to form and maintain those deeper connections. These children may avoid events like school trips, parties and meetings with larger peer groups, as they feel out of place.

Although intellectually they may be advanced and may be achieving high grades and accolades in many areas of the curriculum, socially and emotionally they may struggle to build positive and fulfilling relationships with their peers. Some children are more comfortable interacting with much older or younger children, whilst others prefer to engage with adults. To some extent, the reason for this can be attributed to their asynchronous development. Some high learning potential children are able to discuss and debate difficult and complex issues, they may enjoy playing complex, imaginative games that could isolate them from their peer group due to different interest levels, motivation or understanding. In other areas they may seem immature, emotionally dysregulated or sensitive in comparison to their peers. This asynchrony may mean that they struggle to know how to engage with their peers and ultimately feel like they do not belong in some social situations.

Sometimes high learning potential children may be perceived as arrogant or domineering and

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some may not show any interest in playing “typical” playground games, which can create a barrier when establishing friendships. Bullying, or being teased for interacting or behaving differently to their peers or societal expectations, can cause difficulties. Being referred to as a “smarty pants”, “boff” or “nerd” or being told, at a young age, that they cannot play with those they view as friends can be upsetting for your child to hear and deal with. It is important that any bullying is taken seriously by the adults close to the situation and that your child’s feelings around their peer relationships are validated and supported. It is key that any environment, home or educational setting, encourages a positive ethos where everyone is valued and accepted so that your child, and all children, feel valued and safe to be themselves.

Many of the barriers these children and young people encounter may cause frustration, upset and anger; this can sometimes lead to arguments and hurt feelings between friends or within families. As a result, some high learning potential young people may also need guidance about positively managing their feelings.

From a very early age (possibly much younger than we are aware of) children with high learning potential need parents, carers and professionals to teach, model and nurture their social and emotional development in order to equip them with the emotional literacy skills that can help them manage some of the future barriers that we know many high learning potential children and young people encounter.

How Parents Can Help

Positive communication, listening skills, how to show kindness, respect, empathy, and compassion towards others and ourselves, are all essential skills for building meaningful connections and supporting emotional wellbeing. These skills need to be learnt and supported as children develop because humans are not born with them.

Today, many parents and carers are busy and may find it difficult to be present and set time aside to support the social and emotional development of their high learning potential child. However, by modelling and supporting these invaluable life skills to your child, you are endeavouring to ensure that your young high learning potential child has the emotional literacy skills and strategies to find their place within society, build meaningful connections with others who value them and live fulfilled lives.

Friends out of School and Use of Media

Encourage your child or young person to join activities or clubs where they may meet like-minded friends. You may want to try tapping into their interests or area(s) of high learning potential to encourage them to take part in activities associated with these. You can even suggest they create a club themselves if they feel confident enough and supported to do so.

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In our post-lockdown and increasingly digital society, many young people may prefer to communicate via social media, online classrooms/forums or online gaming platforms etc. Many high learning potential children who may have found it difficult to form meaningful connections face to face, may also find this preferable and it does not limit them to their peers from a small geographical area. As our society becomes more reliant on technology, it is important to ensure you teach your child online safety guidelines, use content filters where possible and monitor young children's use of the internet carefully.

Further Information

PA601 Social and Emotional Development of High Learning Potential Children	Raising happy, successful children is the goal of every parent. As social and emotional problems appear often among high learning potential children, this advice sheet looks at the cause of these and offers some advice on dealing with them.
Potential Plus UK events	Online and in-person events offering challenging activities for children and young people; some of them with parent discussion groups. Look at the Events Calendar on our website for further details.
NSPCC online safety https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/	Online safety guidance and information for families
<i>Friends Forever: How Parents Can Help Their Kids Make and Keep Friends</i> by Fred Frankel	The author offers clear-cut friendship-making guidelines for parents and their children. He includes methods for dealing with bullying and inappropriate friendships, shows how to teach kids the social and emotional intelligence skills they need to form friendships and includes advice on the use of social media.
<i>Social Skills for Teens: An 8-step Program</i> by Vivian Foster	A practical book with exercises for teens and young adults to learn how to become self-confident, overcome social anxiety, build self-esteem, and build friendships.
<i>My Hidden Chimp</i> by Prof. Steve Peters	A book that can be worked through by, or with your child, providing strategies to help them understand and manage their emotions, thinking and behaviour.

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<i>The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children</i> by Maureen Neihart	This book summarises research about children with high learning potential and the issues they encounter, to expose and advise on their unique needs in these areas.
www.incentiveplus.co.uk	Incentive Plus – resources to promote social, emotional and behavioural skills in children and young people.
www.youngminds.org.uk	Young Minds is a charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of Children and Young People and empowering their parents and carers.

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