



### **The Middle Years: Peer Relationships**

Friends can help your child learn how to cooperate, solve problems, and develop long-term relationships with others. Most children spend lots of time with their friends. It is not surprising that children who have healthy friendships also have higher self-esteem and do better in school than children who do not have healthy friendships. It is also not surprising that children who are consistently rejected by others are more likely to drop out of school and have relationship problems later in life than those who are well liked.

Bullying can become a problem during the middle years. A bully is a child who has a strong need to feel powerful and in control. A bully tries to gain power by teasing, threatening, hitting, and stealing from other children, and by ignoring adults and rules. While many children may act like bullies occasionally, a child who frequently bullies other children is likely to have more social and behavioral difficulties as she or he grows.

Boys and girls show bullying behavior in different ways. Boys tend to act out their bullying in physical ways such as hitting. Girls tend to show their bullying in relationships by excluding other children from activities or gossiping about other girls. The effects of either behavior can be equally damaging. However, research has shown that parents can play an important role in encouraging healthy friendships and helping prevent or change bullying behavior. As parents, you can help your child build positive relationships in a variety of ways, including:

- *Providing lots of opportunities to play with other children.* Children learn about healthy friendships through practice. They should have ample time to play with other children each week.
- *Supervising your child's playtimes.* In some neighborhoods, it is safe for children to wander down to a friend's yard or the park, or to ride bikes in the street. Parents can talk with each other and organize who is watching the interactions between the children and who is available if the children need help solving problems.
- *Organizing playtimes.* Sometimes, informal play with other children is difficult to arrange. Parents can help by setting up play dates or a playgroup in their home or at a nearby park or recreation center.
- *Intervening early to prevent bullying.* Parents can help their child learn how to respond effectively to bullies by teaching him or her how to use words to solve problems. If the aggressive behavior persists, parents can seek extra help from teachers, school counselors, or a psychologist.

If parents have ongoing concerns about their child's ability to make friends, they can talk with other parents, school counselors, parent educators, social workers, and other health care professionals.

*The information contained in this summary is taken from the Middle Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).*

Funding for this publication was provided in part by the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority. The views and statements expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract number ED-99-CO-0020. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.