

Reading,  
'Riting,  
'Rithmetic...



## Teaching the Fourth "R"

# [Relationships]

by Richard D. Lavoie

Teachers, parents, social workers, researchers and school administrators have spent the past two decades working to correct the academic difficulties of children with attention problems. As a result of such efforts, our nation's schools are now better able to provide these youngsters with behavior management techniques and curricula that allow them to reach their fullest potential.

However, the average child in America spends approximately 1,000 hours annually in the classroom. That amount represents only 15 percent of the child's waking hours. The great majority of a child's time is spent *outside* the classroom—in school hallways and cafeterias, playgrounds, soccer practices, church groups, community activities, neighborhoods and weekend visits to grandma. Because attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) is pervasive and neurologically based, the disorder has impact on the child's performance *all day long*. The idiosyncrasies and complexities that affect the child's academic progress serve to complicate his or her social development as well.

Children with AD/HD often have significant difficulty establishing and maintaining peer relationships. Because of their impulsive, unpredictable and often disruptive behavior, they can, sadly, be rather unappealing social partners. Decades ago, sociologist John Thibault put forth the Social Exchange Theory: "People tend to maintain relationships that are beneficial to them in some way." As human beings, we constantly weigh the cost/benefit of relationships and decide

whether the cost of the affiliation outweighs the benefit. Unfortunately, the child with AD/HD is often the loser when this formula is applied to peers.

Of course, there are many children with attentional disorders who do not manifest the symptom of hyperactivity. These children have inattention as their primary symptom. Adults often find it quite frustrating to deal with the child's lack of focus, inconsistency, slow processing speed, inability to follow instructions and poor memory. Unfortunately, these behaviors and traits also have negative impact on the child's ability to establish and maintain friendships given the inconsistency, lack of responsiveness and undependability.

As a result, youngsters with AD/HD, with or without hyperactivity, may have difficulties making and keeping friends. Their solitary lifestyle can make them vulnerable to depression or anxiety. The short-term impact of this loneliness is quite obvious. However, the long-term impact of friendlessness must also be considered. Childhood friendships provide a social laboratory for youngsters. This informal laboratory—

a pick up basketball game, a Saturday afternoon Monopoly game, an impromptu excursion to the local mall—enables a child to practice and master innumerable social skills including sharing, taking turns, gracious winning, gracious losing, following rules, negotiating and patient waiting.

When a child has no friends, he or she has no opportunity to learn these critical skills and will enter adulthood with limited and ineffective social competencies. Numerous university research studies have shown that social incompetence is the primary cause for unemployment and underemployment for adults with AD/HD.<sup>1–6</sup> These data provide a clarion call for parents and teachers to assist the child to develop social skills and foster peer friendships.

Parents can and should play an important role in helping the child to develop friendship skills. A well-intentioned and devoted parent once told me, “Scotty doesn’t have any friends, but we are a very close-knit family and we do lots of things together. We play games, visit museums and go to restaurants. Scott will learn his social skills through these activities.” Unfortunately, mom is wrong in this case. Surely, this social immersion will be helpful and beneficial for the child, but there are some social competencies that kids can only learn by interacting with other kids. This devoted mother would be well advised to provide her child with opportunities to interact and play with other children.

In many communities, playdates have become the primary social activity for children. A playdate is a pre-arranged appointment wherein a child will go to the home of a classmate to spend an afternoon. These activities can be extraordinarily difficult and challenging for the child with AD/HD and learning problems—whether the child is in the role of host or visitor.

When children with AD/HD host a playdate, they may have significant misimpressions about the dynamics of this activity. These children are often bullied or isolated at school and, understandably, come to view their home as their “castle.” The children feel safe and secure there because it is “their

turf,” and they are in charge. As a result, when they invite a guest for a playdate, they may feel that they are entitled to choose the activities, the rules and the agenda for the visit. (“It’s *my* house, so we will play what I want to play!”) Of course, this runs contrary to the dynamic of a guest/host relationship. In actuality, “the guest is always right,” and it is the social responsibility of the host to accommodate the needs and wishes of his or her visitor. Be sure to explain this dynamic to your child before arranging a playdate at your home.

In order to ensure that a playdate goes smoothly, the following steps are recommended before, during and after a playdate.

#### Before

- Invite *one* guest: If you invite two guests, it is quite likely that a “two against one” dynamic will evolve—with your child being left out, isolated or bullied.
- Exile the siblings: Inform the child’s siblings that they are not to become involved in the playdate. The brother or sister may be a more appealing social partner and—once again—the child with AD/HD becomes the “odd man out.”
- Establish and explain the house rules. Provide your child with the guidelines for the visit (“You and your friend can’t go into the garage,” or “You kids can use the sprinkler, but you are not to go in the pool.”) By establishing these rules, you can avoid conflicts during the guest’s visit (“Yeah, I know that the garage looks cool, Mike, but my mom doesn’t want us to go in there because that is where my dad keeps his tools.”)

#### During

- Your child should participate in the preparation of the playdate by cleaning his or her room, gathering the sports equipment or shopping for the snack. Your child (and not you) is the host and should learn that it is appropriate to prepare for the arrival of a visitor. Your child should greet the guest on arrival and introduce the guest to family members. These are important social skills to learn.
- You should provide a structured activity (basic cooking, arts and craft project, board



game) to begin the playdate and hover a bit until the activity gets going, then make yourself scarce.

- Avoid scolding or punishing your child in front of a guest. If a problem occurs, whisper into your child’s ear or ask him or her to come into another room. Remind him or her of “the rules” (“Remember, Jason, the guest is always right!”).
- Children tend to remember the final 15 minutes of any event. Therefore, be sure that the last minutes of the playdate go well. You may want to serve a snack or have an enjoyable, structured activity at the end of the playdate. Even if the visit did not go particularly well, the guest will remember the playdate as being an enjoyable experience and will be more willing to return.

#### After

- When the guest departs, have a positive and supportive conversation with your child regarding the visit. Discuss the aspects of the visit that went well and those activities where trouble occurred. Help the child analyze these activities and discuss ways that he could have avoided or solved any difficulties that happened.

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### Being the Guest

Only after your children have had several successful playdates where they served as the host, should you attempt to have them be the guest at a classmate’s home. When they will be going to a friend’s house, gently remind them of some basic rules that any guest should follow:

- Don’t snoop! Respect the privacy of the host family.
- Don’t “make yourself at home.” Always ask permission before using the television, computer or refrigerator.
- Be nice to everyone in the host family. Just because your host bullies his sister, that doesn’t give you permission to do so also.
- Clean up after yourself.
- Give compliments and thank your hosts at the end of the visit.

Parents and teachers must work together in order to foster the social competencies and friendship skills of the child with AD/HD. Insightful teachers are now

recognizing that it is in everyone’s best interest to assist these children in establishing friendships. As one fourth-grade teacher told me, “If Justin is worried about being bullied at recess or sitting alone at lunch, he will have great difficulty focusing on that morning’s lessons. If I can help him to make a friend or two, he becomes far more attentive and motivated during the school day.”

When people reflect upon their childhood and school career, they are unlikely to recall their grades, test results or specific content from their history or science classes. Rather, they remember their friends—the boys and girls who shared that adventure. Thinking about them will, undoubtedly, resurrect some wonder-filled memories.

Now imagine the school years *without* those friends. A sad, bleak existence indeed. This isolated, lonely and friendless existence is the fate of many children with AD/HD unless the adults in their lives make a concerted effort to assist them in establishing and maintaining meaningful peer relationships. A multi-disciplinary effort to focus on “the fourth R” is the next logical step in the development of our field. Our kids simply cannot do this on their own. ■

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