Triangle Friendships

One of the issues that can come up for a young child is when two (or more) friends are vying for attention and want to be the exclusive or "best" friend. These are called ***friendship triangles*** and are incredibly common and part of the evolutionary "growing up" process that most children face in their social development. This can be an incredibly stressful and challenging social situation for a child and mom or dad may need to step in and help. It might be time to sit down and help the child understand some pretty strong and confusing emotions that might be churning, such as jealousy, envy, insecurity, intense like or dislike, etc. For children who are used to just playing and interacting with peers in a non-charged way, the development of this sort of a social triangle can be perplexing and stressful.

As a teacher, it is my job to help children problem-solve when triangle friendships fall apart. One of the first things that I stress is that we are all friends (the whole class) and that we **all** play together and do exclude anyone or pick just one friend to play with. It is a teachable moment where children can be taught to develop empathy, compassion, kindness and concern for others who are left out of play. The words, “you can’t play with us (or me)” become hurting words and are not allowed. However, a group of three will inevitably form and one child will be the “favored” and the others will be in competition for attention. Some triangle friendships only have occasional difficulties and these are easily handled with minor correction. More often, the triangles will become a problem with hurt feelings and strife. In this case, I try to encourage a fourth child to become included so there is not always one child being left out. If this does not work for the long term, I then will then give the child who is having problems (which will change regularly) the proper words, actions, and vocabulary to use with the other children to help them learn to verbalize what they are feeling and express their desires to the other children. Stressing empathy and apologizing to the child who is being left out is very important at this point. I then closely monitor the children’s subsequent interactions to make sure they have corrected the problem. (At this age, children are able to forgive and forget easily and will be “best-friends” again quickly). Following up with rewards and praise for good friendship and consequences for unkind friendships also goes a long way. If the triangle friendship is still dysfunctional I will then watch carefully for moments that I can pair up the children with others or I will discreetly separate the triangle to make sure that the children have a break from the emotional stress and competition. This might include a seating arrangement where they are encouraged (or forced) to sit with other children or, after repeated problems, even insisting that they do not play together for the day. If the friendships begin to have more fights than fun, I will ask the parents to counsel their children and help from home.

A parent can help by spending some time brainstorming possible solutions and talking over motivation with their child. Children need to know that they can trust you not to judge or tell them what they should do, but instead will be supportive and encouraging in helping them work through strong emotions and discuss ways they can use their words and actions to help solve their difficulties. They do not want you to “pick sides”, or criticize their friends, just to give them options. ***A good article for parents that I culled from the internet is attached.***

**Internet article taken from: http://www.becomingtheparent.com/subsections1/question75.html**

Friendship triangles are not uncommon, yet they are often confusing and hurtful to those involved in them. Young children, who have recently discovered the importance of peers are trying to figure out:

¤   what defines friendship   
¤   how friends act with each other   
¤   whether you can be friends with two people at one time   
¤   how many friends you can have   
¤   how many friends you can play with at one time;   
¤   whether friends have to be ranked in a hierarchy   
¤   whether you can still be someone's friend if you don't want to play with them right now

      What children learn about friendship in their young years will inform the ways they build and nurture relationships throughout their lives.

    Meanwhile, parents are struggling to decide what role they should play in helping, facilitating, teaching, empathizing, and/or limit-setting in their children's friendship dilemmas. Here are some things to consider as you support your child through these challenges:   
**. Think about what you want your child to learn about friendship.** Starting with the big picture of your goals for your child can help you figure out how to help him through his friendship struggles. Do you want him to learn that friendships are strong, durable and flexible and can withstand some conflict-and even become stronger because of it? Do you want him to learn that people make mistakes sometimes, but they can still be your friends? Do you want him to learn that you can have mixed feelings about someone, but they can still be your friend? Do you believe that he will be permanently scarred by the cruelties he (or she) experiences with friends or that he has the strength to survive, learn from and help others learn from those experiences?   
**. Consider your own feelings.** Most of us have old time hurts we carry around from unresolved friendship issues from our own school years. When we see our child facing rejection (or rejecting others), it is hard not to fuel the reaction fire with our own saved up hurts. If we can separate our own feelings we may be better able to stay present and supportive of his or her experience.   
**. Talk to your child.** After your child has described what happened, ask him what he did or has tried. Often when kids' attempts to solve the problem "don't work" they feel powerless and forget that they may have come up with some good solutions. It is easier to think of new solutions if he is reminded of his creative thinking so far. "So, when they said you couldn't play, you asked them, 'Why not?' That is a good start at getting information that could help with problem solving.   
**. Offer ideas, tools.** Often kids feel paralyzed in exclusionary play situations. You can brainstorm solutions with him, and practice or role play what he could do. Practicing in the safety of his home can give him good ideas and can also work to lighten the feelings around the situation. He could "be" the kid who is excluding or he could be himself. Sometimes kids are too self-conscious to actually play the roles themselves. You could ask other members of the family to take the roles or use some of his favorite stuffed animals, puppets of play-figures. Here are some dialogue ideas:

     Example: “You can't play with us.”   
     Possible responses:

1. You don't want me to play now. Could I play later?
2. Okay, I'm going over to play with someone else. Come on over if you want to play with us.
3. It's okay if you don't want any more people playing right now. I’ll play with you later.
4. You know, we could all play together. There is enough room. If I play it doesn't mean that anyone has to leave or be left out.

**. Help your child explore his options.** Before you begin thinking of solutions, you may want to talk about possible outcomes. Usually kids see that there are just two options. One is that they get to play and have fun with the kids. The other is that they don't get to play, will feel horrible and have nothing to do. Together (and with other family members) you can come up with many possible positive outcomes. Here are some ideas that might show up on your list:

1. They change their minds and let you play.
2. You find someone else to play the same game with.
3. You find someone else to play a different game with.
4. You find something fun to do on your own.
5. You find something fun to do on your own and other kids come to join you.
6. You ask a teacher/adult to help you talk to the kids who don't want you to play.
7. You leave for a while and come back to play with them later.
8. You just watch them play until you can come up with a good idea of something they could do or a problem they could solve.
9. You feel sad for a while and then think of something else to do.
10. (If the situation is a triangle) You spend some time making friends with the kid that is really wanting your friend just to be his friend.

**. Get together with kids one-on-one outside of school or group settings.** Sometimes group settings are overwhelming for kids and it helps them work out their relationships by playing one-on-one or in a smaller group at home. If the situation is a relationship triangle, you could arrange for your child to play individually, both with the "favored" child and also with the child who is competing for the other child's attention. If all of the relationships are strengthened, it may be easier for the three children to figure out how to play together.   
**. Talk to the teachers and supervisors.** It is useful to find out from the adults who are supervising kids what relationship dynamics they are aware of and what they are already doing. They may have helpful information for you and you may have helpful information for them about what is going on. Once you find out what they are aware of and what they are doing, you may want to work with them on developing strategies to support the kid's social skills. Here are some suggestions of things adults can do:

1. Set limits on name-calling
2. Provide information on the durability and flexibility of friendship
3. Facilitate discussion between children so that each child gets to talk about their idea and together they may be able to come up with a solution that will work for all of them.
4. Provide suggestions for solutions if kids are unable to come up with them. "Maybe Jason could bring the wagon over to hold the dirt from your hole." "It looks like you really want to just play with the two of you right now. Could you help Jason think of something else he could play?" "Jason, let's see if there is something else you might be interested in doing."