**Social Development**

Host: Today we have Dr. Erin Olufs with us. She is a clinical assistant professor in the department of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics. I saw your video profile on the university website which was quite lovely. You noted that you had interest in teens with chronic pain conditions or medical conditions in addition to working with children with recent ADHD diagnosis. Dr. Olufs, you, also run an ADHD clinic with Dr. Gunderson and lead teen Dialectical Behavioral Therapy groups. Thank you for joining us today. We have had some earlier discussions with Dr. Kopelman about child development and we are also excited to have your thoughts regarding social development.

Erin Olufs: Thank you. As humans, we are very social creatures. I think sometimes as adults we take it for granted that kids will develop socially. It may be challenging for us to describe how that will look like. We have this sense that as kids grow and understand language, they will make friends, they’ll someday form romantic relationships, and they will have their own lives.

Host: Do friendship relationships look different at different ages in terms of how they communicate or how they play?

Erin Olufs: Yes! We can think of children as developing in their social relationships over time. Children’s relationships often look different from adult relationships as they learn to how become friends. Friendships shift from a more short-lasting, self-focused form of play and connection to more long-lasting relationships focused on that shared feeling of friendship and they become more thoughtful of the other person. When children are in pre-school, friendships are based on having fun and what is easy. Children this age often assume friends think as they do and become upset when this is not the case. It can be common to hear a child tell their friend they are not friends today. As children enter elementary school, those friendships become more stable across activities, but remain practical and self-focused.

Children view friends as those who do nice things but can use friendship as bargaining chips to get what they want. You will often hear them say things like “I’ll be your friend if you do this” and “I won’t be your friend if you do that!”. In elementary school, children begin to view friendships as a two-way street. Friendships are focused on rules and fairness, and children can begin to worry about being the exact same as others. As children enter late elementary school and middle school, friendships become more intimate. Friends care and share with one another, help each other out, and confide in one other. Friendships move beyond keeping score to doing kind things for another because they care for one another.

At times though, they can be jealous of friends spending time with other friends. Finally, as children enter middle school and high school, they begin to develop mature friendships. They really value emotional closeness with friends. They are better able to accept differences while remaining friends and feel less threatened by other friendships. These friendships emphasize trust, support, and remaining close in times of struggle.

Erin Olufs: That is a wonderful description of the social changes that happen during child and adolescence. It brings to mind those coming of age stories that are popular for that age group. Is it normal for teenagers to spend so much time socializing with their peers? Why can’t they just socialize with their siblings?

Erin Olufs: It is very common for teenagers to spend most of their time with their friends! Teens spent about 1/3 of their waking time with friends, which means about 4-6 hours per day. The time children spend with friends is greatest in middle school and high school. About 80-90% of teens have mutual best friends, typically 1-2 best friends and then several good friends. So, you are not alone! Often, teens are wanting to spend their time with friends., Given the different ages of brothers and sisters they may not be at the same place developmentally, in terms of friendships.

Host: That makes a bit more sense based on where they are at in terms of their emotional and social growth. However, should kids have a certain number of friends? Sometimes parents express concern that their child maybe has one or two friends at most.

Erin Olufs: There isn’t really any certain number of friends that children should have. The number of friends children have is actually often smaller than parents would expect. Prior to elementary school, boys have on average 2 friends while girls have one friend. When children transition to school, the number of best friends a child has varies from 3-5. By the time children enter middle school and high school, they often have 1-2 best friends and then several good friends. Once again, these are just averages! The number of friends children have can vary greatly, but it is not uncommon for most children to have a small group of close friends.

Host: I am a bit surprised that boys have more friends than girls before starting school. Often when we talk about the differences between boys and girls, we describe girls as being more socially savvy. Then again, it also sounds like this gender difference lessens after school starts. For a parent, should they worry if their child’s peer group changes?

Erin Olufs: Not necessarily. Friendships are highly impacted by the situation that children are in, and can change over time, shared interests, and location. Where children attend school and engage in activities is important. Most children will identify a different best friend over the year they move from elementary school to middle school, and most best friends attend the same school. When children are younger, it is common for friends to change over time. It really isn’t until children are older that their friendships begin to stay the same. However, even then things like moves, changing schools, changing activities, shifting interests, and other events can result in changing friend groups.

Host: What if they count imaginary friends as part of their friendship circle?

Erin Olufs: Having imaginary friends is very common for children, and even children in elementary school and high school have imaginary friends and companions. It really is seen as a healthy form of pretend play, and for children in preschool it tends to be tied to positives like good ability to see things from others’ points of views, good language skills, and the ability to get along well with others. For children in middle school, having an imaginary friend was found to be associated with using more positive coping strategies. We find that socially competent and creative adolescents with good coping skills are more prone to creating “special friends”. We find that imaginary friends are found in boys and girls, though can be more common in girls. Both boys and girls invent imaginary characters, though boys tend to impersonate their imaginary characters while girls tend to treat them as friends.

We often find children developing imaginary friends between ages 3-6, peaking around age 4. The presence of imaginary friends ranges from 20-50%, and about 28% of school-aged children ages 7-12 have imaginary friends. When we look at teenagers who keep a diary, about 40% address those diaries to imaginary friends. So, the presence of imaginary friends is common in children and adolescents; we think they just learn to stop talking about their imaginary friends due to social and parental pressures.

Host: That is comforting to know. I will make sure that my imaginary friend knows they are perfectly normal. Thinking of parents who just want to make sure their kids are growing well and well supported. What can parents do to support their child if they have a hard time making friends? It seems like having a friend is protective in some ways. I also think it is a common desire for parents to not one their child to be lonely.

Erin Olufs: You are right that friendships are protective for children. Children with friends tend to have better attitudes towards school and better self-esteem and sense of well-being as adults. A group of friends can really be helpful for protecting children from the impact of bullying, more so than having a single best friend. This is because a group of friends can decrease the likelihood of bullying and allows a child who is bullied to spend time with someone who will listen to them and help them out. The belief of support is important in friendships, and children really benefit from feeling their friendships are felt both ways and that they are liked by their friends.

First, it is important to be there to listen to your child when they are struggling socially. Friendships go through stages, and they may be struggling in that moment but will be okay overall.

Host: So, it would be ok to just listen to them and validate their feelings by noting they are having a hard time but that this moment will not last forever?

Erin Olufs: If your child is younger, you can work with them on skills that we find are related to having friends. This may involve organizing play, using “Let’s” statements such as “let’s play cars”, sharing with others, helping others, and giving compliments to other children. If your child is older, you can think about their ability to engage with other children with whom they could become friends. For example, have them join in activities such as Scouts, clubs, and sports. You can look to get them to join in clubs and activities where there are structured interactions. A good fit for kids can be sports where they are part of a team yet are competing against themselves. Good examples can be running, swimming, tennis, martial arts, and others. Whatever your child’s interests are, find ways to get them involved with other children with similar interests. For some of our teens, they enjoy Magic the Gathering, and join groups at their local comic bookstore. There are a lot of opportunities to get you child involved in activities that they prefer!

Host: Great! I am hopeful that this will give parents some ideas of what may make sense for their own children and their family. I would like to talk about a bit more sensitive topic, however. I have had a few cases in my clinic where children have engaged in some sexual behaviors and their parents do not know what to do. Do you have a different mindset in how you approach sexual behaviors in toddlers vs. school age children? What advice would you give to parents?

1. Sexual behaviors that appear to occur the most often include self-stimulating behaviors, exposing themselves, and behaviors related to personal boundaries. Behaviors that happen less often tend to be the behaviors that involve getting into someone else’s space. As kids grow, they are less likely to engage in these unwanted sexual behaviors. You can think of these behaviors as being related to their development and within normal limits (Pediatrics, 1998)
2. Sexual play with other children usually has the following traits
   1. Lighthearted and spontaneous – children are giggling and having fun
   2. Play is between children of roughly the same size, age, and development
   3. Play is part of ongoing and mutually enjoyable play relationships/friendships
   4. When adults set limits, children can follow the rules
3. What parents can do:
   1. Remain calm when talking with children about sexual behaviors. This is normal behavior, so avoid criticism or shaming children for their behavior.
   2. Set limits and clear rules around sexual behavior with regards to personal boundaries, privacy, and appropriate behaviors (i.e. wear clothes at daycare, touch self in privacy of room, respect others’ right to privacy, consent)
   3. Create a family environment that does not exposure children to sexual behavior, conversations, or materials.
   4. Provide current information about sexual development and reproduction
   5. Discussed healthy relationship behaviors, including importance of consent
   6. Seek out help if behavior is concerning

Host: Thank you so much for talking more about that. I know it can be challenging to address these more sensitive topics, but it is also a part of development. I just have a few more questions for you Dr. Olufs while we have you. Are there certain areas where you would be more concerned if a child is struggling with social behaviors? Are there resources you would recommend or are there certain places where parents should turn to first?

Erin Olufs: I would be more concerned if the child has on-going struggles making friends. If they have difficulties understanding social relationships or with sharing or considering the feelings of others. I would be concerned if the child states they are lonely, do not have any friends, or are being bullied at school. If they struggle to play with other kids in a back and forth manner. I would recommend talking with the child’s school first. They are a great resource for gaining information on how a child is doing in class and often schools have peer support programs. A parent can also talk to their child’s pediatrician about their concerns.

Host: Finally, with current global health concerns surrounding COVID-19, our society at large has experienced several changes that have changed how we socialize. There has been an increased use of technology for education and general communication along with social distancing measures to limit the spread of infection. Do you believe this will have a lasting impact on the social development of children?

Erin Olufs: It is unclear the lasting impact on social development. Parents can help kids with coping by focusing on the here and now. Many children are used to engaging with friends online, either through social media, facetime, or video games and other shared activities. One key is to remember that children develop over time, and social skills develop throughout a child’s life. This is one to two years of time, a small percentage of their life overall. They had time before the pandemic to develop socially, and they will after as well. Parents can continue to help their children by helping their kids spend time with friends in a safe way and encouraging their children to engage in imaginative play at home. Parents can also help engaging their kids in social activities with their children that focus on sharing, helping others, and engaging others in non-electronic play. Remember, parents are still important for modeling social skills and relationship development. Parents can foster these skills with their child to help during this time.

Host: Well, thank you for sharing your time and knowledge with us Dr. Olufs. I hope you will join us again in the future.