



**A Whole New Look at**  
*Socialization*

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We've been receiving request to reprint this 4-part series since the day it came out. Now, for your enjoyment and edification, here is a whole new way to look at socialization!

When people ask, "What about socialization?", something inside me snaps. My blood pressure and annoyance levels spike up, and I feel like Dr. Bruce Banner, just as he's about to turn into the Incredible Hulk. This highly charged emotional response has prompted me to question why I react so strongly when I'm asked about socialization.

Is it because my personal socialization experience involved being picked on and ostracized for years, right under my teachers' noses? Is it because millions of kids today are having their souls crushed in the exact same way, all within the process our society calls "proper" socialization? Or is it because "What about socialization?" really means "Don't you realize that homeschooling will turn your kids into weird, geeky social deviants?"

To be honest, all of these factors definitely affect my reaction to the socialization question. But something even deeper bothers me: I've realized that the socialization question is like a set of hoops that we homeschoolers are being asked to jump through. We jump them by going on the defense, by playing the questioner's game and testily responding, "Yes, our kids are indeed being socialized, through sports (hoop 1)! Through scouting (hoop 2)! Through church youth group (hoop 3)! So there!" By playing this game, we give our questioners the right to decide whether or not we have adequately jumped through their hoops. But let's face it, our hoop jumping rarely satisfies our smug critics.

In this article, I propose an alternative. Instead of playing along with this impossible and annoying hoop jumping game, instead of always being on the defensive, why not go on the offensive? Rather than hoop jumping, I believe we should instead spend time examining *the hoops* themselves. Are the beliefs they represent valid? Are schools and large group activities truly the best way to socialize our children? The best way to answer this question is by looking at the end product of hoop-jumping.

## The Ugly Truth

Kids who are socialized primarily through school and large groups learn to habitually and obsessively compare themselves with others. In addition, the following rules of socialization get seared into their brains:

- Your value as a human being and your place in the social hierarchy are based completely on externals: your looks, clothes, athletic ability, who you hang out with, and what others say about you.
- The social hierarchy dictates which kids you're allowed to associate with, which kids you're not good enough to associate with, and which kids aren't good enough to associate with you.
- If you violate the social hierarchy, you'll be ridiculed and possibly ostracized.

To protect themselves from rejection in school and large groups, kids develop socialization strategies that include:

- Focus on externals, because that's how you're judged.
- Remember that quantity and social status of friends trumps quality of friends.
- Herd around with as many other kids as possible, because being alone means you're a loser.
- Be a chameleon. Change your personality and behaviors to blend in with the people you're around, even if it means compromising your convictions about what is right and wrong.
- Don't reveal weaknesses, because they can and will be used against you.
- Being around parents and siblings is embarrassing and should be avoided at all costs.

The end results of the accepted socialization process are actually quite negative: educators and psychologists say it's very common for seemingly normal, well-adjusted teenage boys and girls to actually be in enormous emotional pain, because they've been socialized to suppress who they truly are. In her book *Reviving Ophelia*, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher describes the impact on girls:

"Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic and "tomboyish" personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies." (p. 19)

Harvard psychologist William Pollack provides similar commentary on boys in his book *Real Boys*:

"The boys we care for . . . often seem to feel they must live semi-inauthentic lives, lives that conceal much of their true selves and feelings, and studies show they do so in order to fit in and be loved. The boys I see—in the "Listening to Boys' Voices" study, in schools, and in private practice—often are hiding not only a wide range of their feelings but also some of their creativity and originality, showing in effect only a handful of primary colors rather than a broad spectrum of colors and hues of self." (p. 7)

## Growing up "Socialized"

Sadly, kids bring their knowledge of childhood socialization rules into adulthood, where these rules play out in similar ways. Just look around and you'll see cliques, social hierarchies, and ugly social climbing in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, and sadly, even in our churches. To cope and survive, we adults tend to rely on childhood socialization survival strategies, which we modify slightly for adulthood:

- Know your place in the social hierarchy at work, church, your neighborhood, your child's school, and society in

general, and function accordingly.

- Focus on externals to define success and happiness in life: your looks, job title, salary, square footage of home, make and model of car, and social status, as well as your spouse's and children's externals—their looks, social status, and achievements.
- Continue hiding your true self, if you even remember who you truly are anymore. Blend in and act the way the "in" crowd acts in your neighborhood, at work, and especially at church.
- Don't reveal weaknesses, don't get real with people, and don't ask for help from anyone.

The end result? A society of adults who:

- Are lonely and hurting
- Don't know who God created them to be, or what God created them to do with their lives
- Have a hard time withstanding peer pressure in adulthood
- Allow their children's peers to influence their parenting decisions
- Have a misguided philosophy regarding the purpose and significance of friends

Now, we'll take a closer look at each of these points to see what has gone horribly wrong with the "accepted socialization process," and how homeschooling gives us the opportunity to give our children something so much better. So here's something to think about the next time someone asks you, "What about socialization?"

### **Long-term result of the accepted socialization process #1: Lonely, hurting adults.**

In her book *The Friendship Crisis*, writer Marla Paul recalls an essay she wrote for the Chicago Tribune, about her struggle to make new friends when she moved from Dallas to Chicago:

"The essay appeared on a Sunday. By Monday morning my phone was ringing, and by Tuesday, the letters began to arrive . . . their response and relief were universal: "Thank God, it's not just me!" they said. When I wrote a similar story for *Ladies Home Journal*, I was also flooded with letters—this time from around the country. I'd yanked the curtain off a shameful secret, only there is nothing shameful about it. A lot of women are lonely."

As it turns out, a lot of men are lonely, too. Check out the following statistics from a study entitled "Social Isolation in America," conducted by researchers at Duke University and the University of Arizona and published in the June 2006 issue of *American Sociological Review*:

- 24.6% of American adults have **zero** confidantes (close friends with whom they can discuss important personal matters.)
- 42.8% of American adults have **zero** confidantes **outside of their family**.

Right now, some of you may be thinking: "But aren't people connecting through Facebook? Twitter? E-mail?" The answer is yes, but not very deeply. Lynn Smith-Lovin, a Duke University researcher involved in the study above, explained: "We're not saying people are completely isolated. They may have 600 friends on [Facebook.com](http://Facebook.com) and e-mail 25 people a day, but they are not discussing matters that are personally important."

After analyzing thousands of interviews conducted in 2007,

Barna Research arrived at the same conclusion, which they announced in an article, "Barna Finds Four Mega-Themes in Recent Research" on [Barna.org](http://Barna.org): ". . . adults—especially those under 30—regularly strive to be connected to a substantial number of other people and yet possess a nagging sense of loneliness, isolation and restlessness." In an [Examiner.com](http://Examiner.com) article of Feb 19, 2009, entitled "Could Facebook be killing you?" freelance writer Malia Frey wryly adds, "Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter help us to feel connected . . . but for the most part, we participate in online networking only when we are alone."

So, if a quarter of American adults have zero close friends they can confide in, almost half of American adults have no close friends outside of their family, and many adults continue to feel lonely and isolated, despite a cultural obsession with social networking technologies designed to supposedly connect people—then what does this say about the accepted socialization process? Does it really work?

Before you answer those questions, try factoring divorce into the whole equation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics, there were over 7 million divorces in the United States between 2000–2007. If each divorce represents two people who can't effectively communicate, resolve conflict, and get along with each other, and in many cases are abusive or unfaithful to the other—again, what does this say about the accepted socialization process that produced these people? Does it really work? Because if I'm not mistaken, getting along with others, communicating well, resolving conflicts, keeping your commitments, and treating others kindly are socialization skills, are they not?

When you consider all of these facts, it appears that the accepted socialization process is a complete sham.

### **Long-term result of the accepted socialization process #2: Adults who don't know who God created them to be, or what God created them to do with their lives.**

Kids are socialized at school to hide pretty much anything about themselves that their peers may deem uncool. Doing this eliminates a certain degree of social rejection and humiliation at school, but it comes with a huge price tag that I remember well: we end up viewing the things we've hidden as flaws, we become ashamed of these supposed flaws, and we tend to keep them hidden well into adulthood. These so-called flaws are usually related to our background, our distinct physical and personality traits, as well as our intelligence and opinions. But these are the very things that make us unique and point toward what God created us to enjoy doing with our lives!

I see the results of this flaw-stifling process all the time. I write resumes and provide career counseling to people as a ministry of sorts, and in the process, I've had very in-depth talks with dozens of men and women, ages 20–60. Many of them have confessed, "Well, my degree is in such and such, and my career has involved such and such, but I've never truly enjoyed any of it. I'm feeling unfulfilled and unhappy, but I really don't know what I want to do, and I don't know what I'd really enjoy doing." These are people who have lost sight of who they truly are, because they've been socialized from an early age to hide themselves and be someone they're not. This is a sure prescription for unhappiness!

I realize that this particular group of people I'm talking about might be a skewed sample, so to be a bit more scientific, I

enlisted the help of Google. When you type a phrase into Google and enclose it in quotation marks, Google will pull up only websites containing that exact phrase. Well, when I typed "I don't know who I am" into Google, 15.6 million weblinks popped up! When I typed "I don't know what I want to do with my life" (which is what happens when you don't know who you are), 38.3 million weblinks popped up. That's a *lot* of confused people!

**Long-term result of the accepted socialization process #3: Adults who have a hard time withstanding peer pressure in adulthood.**

When we began homeschooling nine years ago, it grossly violated the "stick with the herd" socialization principle that I learned as a child. I initially received a lot of gentle peer pressure to stop being so weird and put our kids in school like everyone else. But a year or two into our homeschooling journey, things became very ugly. Formerly polite people began openly criticizing our decision to homeschool, and in one case, a "properly socialized" family member called up and screamed that we were raising "psychological misfit homeschool [expletive deleted]".

During these moments of painful peer pressure, my inner conformist—developed through our accepted socialization process—would whisper, "Come on, just give in and send the kids to school. Then you'll be normal like everyone else! No one will pick on you anymore! Come on, it'll make you feel good!" I didn't give in, but I was very tempted to, and the peer pressure negatively affected my attitude toward homeschooling. For many years, I felt driven to make my kids perform in order to show up my many critics, and I dreaded any events involving openly critical family members or friends.

I've talked to enough homeschooling parents to know that most of us have felt this way at some time or another. And if we, as "properly socialized" adults, still struggle to deal with other "properly socialized" adults who are peer pressuring us to be like everyone else, then what does this say about how we were all socialized? And, more importantly, is it really realistic to expect our children to do any better if we allow them to get socialized in the accepted, yet clearly failing method of socialization?

**Long-term result of the accepted socialization process #4: Adults who allow their children's peers to influence the way they parent their children.**

The threat of one's child not fitting in, being bullied, or getting ostracized drives many parenting decisions, including the most important big picture decision: what kind of a child do I want to raise? Harvard psychologist William Pollack elaborates in his book *Real Boys*:

"Time after time women have voiced to me their doubts and confusion. Yes, they say, we want to raise boys who are sensitive to others, who can play with girls, who are aware of their vulnerable emotions and [are] not afraid to express them. But, they add, we also don't want to raise a boy who will be branded a wimp, who will have to endure teasing and beatings from other boys, who will have no friends and no dates in high school. How can we raise a son to be the kind of sensitive man we'd want to have a relationship with and still have him survive the relentless peer pressure of grade school and the adolescent years?"

This is a lose-lose dilemma: parents can either encourage

their children to conform to bully-driven social norms at school, knowing that it will often involve their children stifling the best parts of themselves. Or parents can force their children to not conform (where possible), knowing full well that non-conforming often results in social humiliation.

As an example of this, a friend once fretted to me about his fourth grade daughter. At the time, the other girls in his daughter's class watched the show *Friends* and talked about it all the time. His daughter wanted to watch it too, but he said no, due to the sexual content of the show. However, he questioned whether he was doing the right thing, because he was terrified that his daughter would be branded a geek by her classmates. In other words, my friend was being peer pressured by his daughter's classmates!

Within the accepted socialization process, these types of situations continue as children get older, except the situations become more complex. For example, what happens when your daughter wants to dress in the sexually suggestive style that is "in" at her school, or among her sports team, scouting, neighborhood, or youth group peers? What if your son is invited to a coed sleepover party (which are apparently becoming quite common) involving the popular crowd? Do you cave in to the peer pressure your child is facing, in order to help your child socially fit in? Even when you know your child's peers are leading your child astray? Unfortunately, many parents do so willingly, because they know the rules of the socialization game.

**Long-term result of the accepted socialization process #5: Adults with a misguided philosophy regarding the purpose of having friends.**

What is the purpose of having friends? The accepted socialization process teaches us that friends are needed to define who we are, and to validate—to us and to the world in general—that we are normal, acceptable, likeable, and not annoying, and that we therefore have value as human beings. Unfortunately, this misguided viewpoint persists well into adulthood. Marla Paul, the author of *The Friendship Crisis*, comments, "It's perfectly acceptable to be on the prowl for a man or partner, but don't go announcing to the world that you're looking for a friend. Women fear we have some glaring personal flaw if we're not flanked by companions."

But friends—or a lack thereof—should NOT be definers or indicators of how acceptable we are to the world, or of our value as human beings. Instead, our Creator and our relationship with him should define who we truly are: we are God's highly valued sons and daughters, each created with a unique, God-given personality and giftings, and each of us loved by God for who we are, not for what we do.

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)*

So if friends aren't there to validate that we are normal and acceptable, then what are friends really for? Well, in my experience, friends make doing things more fun, whether it's a trip to the store, a meal at a new restaurant, or just chatting over a cup of coffee. A good friend provides a sounding board when you're trying to figure out a problem, commiserates with you when you're feeling down, and celebrates with you when good things happen to you. A truly good friend helps you grow as a person, by speaking the truth in love to you when necessary, by

encouraging you to be who God created you to be, and by encouraging you to do what God created you to do. There's a saying that nicely sums this up: "A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and sings it to you when you forget the words." This is the type of friend I want all of my children to have when they grow up. And just as importantly, this is the type of friend I want all of my children to be when they grow up.

But how to get there from here? Definitely not through the accepted socialization process.

Given all of the information I have presented thus far, am I saying that large-group socialization is bad across the board? No. Sports, scouting, etc., are all good things. On a broad level, I simply believe it is better for children to develop positive social skills with individuals, then bring those skills into large group settings, rather than learning negative social lessons in large groups and taking the associated negative behaviors and beliefs into individual relationships.

Furthermore, I believe that we as parents need to stop viewing socialization in terms of, "How can I help my child fit in?" This question yields superficial solutions such as putting your kids into group activities and training them to talk, dress, look, and act like other kids. Instead, the real socialization questions that parents should be asking are: "How can I help my child develop the character traits and communication skills that will help him/her to be a good, godly friend and eventually develop deep, godly friendships? And on a deeper level, how can I help my child know and be who God created him to be, even when facing peer pressure as a child and as an adult to act otherwise?"

## Homeschooling Is Not Magic

Homeschooling provides an excellent opportunity to approach socialization from this perspective, because it removes a huge level of daily, value-based-on-externals, chameleon-creating, soul-crushing peer pressure from our children's lives.

But even so, we do need to recognize that homeschooling is not a silver bullet for socialization.

As homeschooling parents, we have the power to inflict huge amounts of emotional damage upon our children. We have the power to crush our children's spirits and God-given uniqueness every bit as much as a classroom of twelve-year-olds. We have the power to demonstrate, through our words and actions, that our children's value as human beings is based solely upon how they look, how they perform in schoolwork and athletics, how many friends they have, and *how good they make us look and feel as parents*.

We have the power to create our very own screwed-up family social hierarchy by showing conditional love, playing favorites among our children, playing favorites by gender, and allowing sibling bullying to go unchecked. We have the power to teach unhealthy, family-specific social rules that are unspoken but followed by all, rules such as: the loud, intimidating people in the family get their way; or block how you really feel and always pretend everything is fine. We have the power to teach our kids the socialization rules we learned at school, and train our kids to play by society's social rules and pecking orders. And in the end, we have the power to raise children who are every bit as conformist, focused on externals, chameleon-like, and unsure of who God created them to be as their schooled peers.

## Homeschooling Provides an Opportunity

But as homeschoolers, we also have the power to help our children learn to socialize in a vastly different way, and from a vastly different, God-centered perspective!

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey counsels his readers to "begin with the end in mind." That is—before jumping into a new project, think first about your ultimate future goal for the project, and then work backwards from that point to figure out the steps you must take, to reach your goal.

## The 19 Goals of Highly Effective Socialization

Given this framework, my future goals for socialization are focused on raising my children to be godly men and women who:

- Are comfortable being who they are, no matter who they're with
- See and understand the fallacies behind social hierarchies and accompanying social rules
- Function with godly integrity within a society of social game players

I want them to understand and embrace:

- Their unique, God-given personalities and talents
- Their identity and value lie in their relationship with God
- That God loves them for who they are, not for what they do
- That we're all equal at the foot of the cross, regardless of race, gender, beauty, possessions, achievements, etc.
- That God's opinion, and obedience to his opinion, is more important than other peoples' opinions

I want them to demonstrate the godly character traits of a good friend:

- Loyalty
- Compassion
- Self-awareness: recognizing, identifying, and owning one's emotions/motivations vs. carelessly inflicting them on others
- Integrity: being the same person in all situations and with all people
- Authenticity: able to get real with others, admit weaknesses, and ask for help, not hide behind a mask
- Fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control
- Honesty: includes not manipulating or using passive-aggressive behavior to get something one wants
- Ability to handle envy in a godly way
- Courage to stand up for, protect, and defend victims of injustice

Finally, they should have effective, empathic communication and conflict resolution skills, including the ability to:

- Examine and discuss motives
  - Talk through misunderstandings
  - Ask for and offer forgiveness
  - Speak the truth in love
  - Set and enforce healthy boundaries vs. being a dominating jerk or a passive doormat
- If my husband and I can raise our children to do and be a large

percentage of the above, then I believe they will have no problem cultivating and maintaining deep, meaningful friendships throughout their lives.

The reason I say this with such confidence: imagine that you've met someone who demonstrates a large portion of the list above. Would *you* want to be friends with this person? Of course you would! Who wouldn't?

But this is pretty tough stuff to teach to a child—or even an adult, for that matter. So how on earth does a parent go about developing these attributes in our children?

As you'll see next, it begins with us. Up to this point, we looked at how the socialization question is like a set of hoops that we homeschoolers are being asked to jump through, and how the "accepted" socialization process frequently has horrifying long-term results.

Now, given that homeschooling offers the chance to give our children something better, how *should* we socialize them?

## We First Need to Develop the Character Traits and Relational Skills That We Want Our Children to Develop

How can I possibly train a child to behave in ways that I can't or won't do myself? Not only is that unfair, it is also incredibly hypocritical, and children can smell a hypocrite a mile away. This doesn't mean we have to be perfect, it just means that we must practice what we preach to our children. And when we screw up (as we all will), we must make a point to apologize to our children, ask forgiveness for our hypocrisy, then explain that when adults mess up, we don't give up. Instead, we pick ourselves up and keep working at growing in our character, just as we're asking our children to do. Modeling these things to our children will help them understand that character growth is an ongoing process, and that it's okay to mess up, as long as you acknowledge you've messed up, make amends as necessary, learn from your mistake, and **keep going!** This will also hopefully prevent us from being hypocritical stumbling blocks who cause our children to turn away from God.

In addition to modeling these traits to our children, there are many good resources available that can help us develop various character traits in our children. Some of the resources I would recommend include good fiction and biography read-alouds involving people who demonstrate specific character traits. (Our favorites thus far: *A Little Princess*, *The Hundred Dresses*, *Tales of the Kingdom*, Christian Liberty Academy's *Pinocchio's Quest*, and books from the Lamplighter publishing company.) These will provide your child with other "role models" who can "show" what it looks like to demonstrate certain character traits amidst the messiness of life. Keepers of the Faith also sells inexpensive and excellent "Write It On My Heart" character development workbooks that include short stories, poems, Bible verses, and excellent practical application questions.

## We Can Help Our Children Develop Good Relationships with Each Other

As adults, home is where true happiness in life is made or broken. You may have a great job, good friends, and be involved

in an abundance of fun activities, but if you're not getting along with your spouse and your children at home, you're ultimately going to end up very unhappy in life. Furthermore, given the study I cited earlier in this article, the one that found almost 50 percent of American adults' only confidantes are their family members—shouldn't it be important for our kids to learn how to get along with their family members?

Unfortunately, there seems to be little societal emphasis on this—most movies, books, and magazines portray "properly socialized" kids as rude, snotty brats who shun their parents and siblings, viewing them as uncool embarrassments.

And yet, learning to get along with family members is a social development challenge that is actually *more* relevant to the complexities of real life than socializing solely with friends who have similar personalities.

Here's why: you can't hide your annoying habits when you're living with someone 24/7. This forces our kids into relational conflicts that, if worked through properly, can be an excellent training ground for similar conflicts they will inevitably encounter with future friends, dorm roommates, boyfriends/girlfriends, and spouses/children.

Furthermore, family members often don't have the personalities you'd seek out in friends. Learning to get along with such vastly different personality types in a healthy way—learning how to get real with them, saying what you mean, and setting healthy boundaries—is excellent training for dealing with different personality types in the workforce, in the neighborhood, in church, or wherever our kids end up going.

Again, the key to implementing this in your family is learning to do it yourself first. Do you have healthy relationships with your family of origin? My therapist says that learning to relate with your family of origin in a healthy way spills over into our other relationships, and I'm finding this to be true. I've been learning to be more honest about who I am and how I feel about things with my family of origin, and to stand up for myself with the pushier ones, especially where homeschooling is concerned! As I'm doing this, I'm finding it easier to do these things in my friendships and my marriage, and this makes it easier to train my children in the same things. When they fight, I'm teaching them to step back and think:

- What is really going on here?
- Why are you doing what you're doing (motivation)?
- How did this make you feel?
- What did this make you believe about yourself? Is this belief true? What does God say about who you are?
- How do you think the other child felt?
- If the other child is being manipulative, how can you stand up for yourself in a firm but gentle way?
- Is there a boundary that needs to be set?
- Should you ask for forgiveness or possibly offer it?
- What character trait is God trying to develop?
- How do you think God would prefer for you to behave?
- How will you do things differently the next time something like this happens?

It's been downright frustrating trying to get my kids thinking anywhere along these lines! But when I get frustrated, I remember that I didn't learn to think this way overnight—it took me years of being disciplined by an older woman at my church, and a year of counseling with a Christian therapist to truly understand why I react the way I do when I'm provoked, as well

as how to respond in healthier, more God-honoring ways. If it has taken me this long to get there, then expecting my children to learn conflict resolution quickly is completely unrealistic! So when I get frustrated, I remind myself to just keep working at it with my kids, and eventually they'll learn, just as I did.

## We Can Help Our Children Develop Their Conversation Skills

For many kids (including some of mine), conversational skills aren't natural and don't instantly materialize when they're thrown into a crowd of kids. In fact, crowds of kids can often impede the development of good conversational skills. But the good news is, conversational skills can actually be taught and practiced, and I am living proof that this is doable.

As a child, I was horribly awkward and had zero conversational skills due to lack of parental training, combined with years of being picked on and rejected by kids at school. In short, I was the product of socialization as we know it.

One summer when I was 14 years old, my sister Madeline came home from college. As far as I can tell, Madeline seems to be one of those people who have a natural ability to make conversation with others. She saw that I was socially struggling and asked, "Hey, do you know how to make conversation with other kids? Because I can teach you how, if you're interested."

Boy, was I interested! So that summer, she taught me one skill at a time. Examples of such skills included: how to strike up a conversation, how to make small talk, and asking people about themselves (people love to talk about themselves).

In addition, Madeline took me under her wing and invited me to hang out with her and her friends. They were all four years older than me, and I felt safe practicing my newly-learned skills with them, because they treated me kindly, with the respect and acceptance that were completely lacking among my peer group at school. And when kids feel safe, they're more willing to try new things!

As I gradually developed conversational skills, I was able to make a few friends at school. After college, I worked in broadcast journalism and corporate public relations, both of which are highly people-oriented fields involving lots of required socialization on the job. Not bad for someone who previously had a complete inability to make conversation! But note—I learned these skills *outside of*, and in spite of my socialization experience at school.

## We Can Create Social Opportunities Where Our Kids Can Apply the Skills They're Learning at Home

I have found that the best way for this to happen is in a *small* group of kids or by arranging playdates. Being in a group of any kind demonstrates why this works best—the more people you add to a group, the more superficial the conversation becomes, and the greater the potential for conformity and groupthink. Take people away from the group, and the conversation tends to go deeper, while getting more vulnerable and honest.

As a homeschooler, setting up playdates takes some effort, because it involves me needing to socialize with mothers of

potential playmates. This does take time, but it has been worthwhile—my circle of close friends has expanded as a result of my children's playdates!

The other nice thing is that I still exert a great deal of influence over my children's friends.

Why is this important? In his book *Making Life Work*, Bill Hybels explains that we spend more time considering our options for doctors, accountants, and even tennis pros than we do on the friends we spend time with. But the friends you spend time with are very important, because the person you are today is directly related to the people you've spent time with and the books you've read in the past five years. Conversely, the person you'll be in five years will be directly related to the people and books you're spending time with today.

Apply this to your kids, and you'll see the value in proactively setting up playdates with kids who will be a good influence on your children, and vice versa.

Even if the kids don't care much for each other at first, repeated exposure can eventually change this. This happened with my oldest son, who had frequent playdates with another child he didn't really play well with. About two years after they began playing together, they began to really enjoy each other's company and eventually, they became best friends. Which was great, because the mother of this boy became one of my closest confidantes in life as well.

One final point in this section: if there are no potential prospects for your child to befriend, pray for God to send your child a good friend or two! I've done this for myself as well as my kids, and God has answered my prayers every time, and in really neat ways.

I also recommend that you proactively seek out a homeschool group. As a mother of five, I know exactly how overwhelming it can feel to juggle a homeschool group into your busy schedule. But it is truly worth the investment in time and energy, especially if you meet another family or two with similar values, whose children really get along with your children. In addition, being around other homeschooling parents who understand your fears, insecurities, and triumphs as a homeschool parent is also worth its weight in gold!

## We Can Choose to Not Freak Out When Our Kids Go Through a Season of Loneliness

Despite our best efforts, our kids sometimes go through seasons of isolation or loneliness, and we need to realize that this is okay. One of my seminary professors, Bobby Clinton, says in his book *The Making of a Leader* that God often puts people into seasons of isolation because He wants us to spend time with Him, getting to know Him better, and allowing Him to shine a light on character traits that require some sanctification.

Applying this concept to our children: one of my children recently complained that even though she has friends, she wants a best friend. I asked why she wants a best friend, and it turns out she wasn't sure why—she actually wanted one because she kept reading about girls with best friends in various "American Girl Doll" books, and reading about the concept made her feel lonely.

This led to a long, rich discussion about the purpose of godly friendships. I encouraged her that I didn't meet my childhood best

friend until I was 14, and I didn't meet my closest adult friends until I was in my late 20's/early 30's. I also pointed out that her father didn't meet his best friend until he was 25, and that even David and Jonathan in the Bible must have been at least teenagers when they met. My daughter looked downright relieved, and asked, "Really?" I then asked her to write down the traits she'd like in a best friend, and when she was done, I asked her to look at her list and check off the traits she regularly demonstrated herself. She grinned and admitted there were several she needed to work on.

I then suggested that we pray together for God to send her a best friend when the time is right, understanding that this person might not come immediately. Perhaps she already knows this friend, or perhaps God might continue to send her good, godly friends who are not best friends. In the meantime, I suggested that she start developing the character traits on her list, so that she would be a good friend to the friends she already has, as well as to the friends God will send in due time. I also suggested that the best place to develop these character traits would be with her siblings—and that perhaps one of them might even end up being her best friend.

She went to bed with a smile on her face, and I have noticed a huge change in the way she interacts with her siblings. Loneliness is not always a bad thing!

## **We Must Realize That If We Allow Our Kids to be Socialized in the "Acceptable" Way, They Will Probably Need to Relearn Socialization as Adults**

Earlier, I mentioned that I learned how to make conversation and overcome my relational awkwardness during my teen years. But that's only half the story. Here's the other half: although I outwardly overcame the effects of the accepted socialization process, the inward effect on my self-esteem and thought process was devastating. Deep down inside, I was afraid to truly be known—even after I had grown up! As an adult, I was still afraid that if people saw who I really was deep down inside, they would reject me. So I continued to hide myself, the way I had been socialized to do during my school years. But this is a lonely way to live, and I found myself craving deeper friendships. However, the only way to have a truly deep relationship is to allow others to see who you really are, and this is very hard to do.

This was actually the hardest part of my socialization experience, because it essentially involved throwing away everything I had learned through school-based socialization, putting an end to social posturing and game playing, and learning how to be comfortable in my own skin. Like many adults in society today, I was a social chameleon who had spent many years allowing my environment—my job title, my salary, my performance reviews, my house, my appearance, and others' opinions—to define how I felt about myself. I also feared rejection and was a huge people pleaser, unable to articulate my opinions, and unable to stand up for myself. It has taken me years to identify and work through these issues, which involved figuring out who I originally was (before I was socialized to repress my individuality), and learning to ground myself in my identity as a daughter of God.

Doing this has been enormously freeing, and interestingly enough, has resulted in honest, deep, rich friendships that have more than made up for the lack of friends I experienced earlier in life. God is good! And I intend to pass everything I've learned along to my children, to the best of my abilities, so they can enter adulthood without having to relearn socialization as I did.

## **The Socialization Question Revisited**

Let's go back to the original question from the start of this article: "What about socialization?"

Today, I refuse to be a hoop jumper, and I instead point out the stupidity of the hoops, by asking the questioner: "When you ask how my kids are getting socialized, do you mean how are they learning to be good friends who are thoughtful, loyal, compassionate and respectful to others? Or do you mean getting socialized as in: learning how to obsessively compare themselves with others, learning that their value as a human being is based on the brand of jeans they're wearing, and learning that being physically attractive gives you the right to treat others like they're trash?"

Whenever I say this, the questioner inevitably pauses for a few moments, then slowly says something along the lines of, "Gee, I never looked at it that way, but you know what . . ." This is often followed by some kind of school-related social horror story from their childhood, regardless of whether they were popular or unpopular. I then rattle off various facts and statistics from this article, and by the time I'm done talking, my questioner is seriously questioning his/her own socialization experience.

## **Final Thoughts**

Preparing our children to be good friends is tough. Learning to know and be who God created you to be, learning to be truly comfortable in your own skin, learning to truly get along with others, and learning to consistently demonstrate godly character to the people God places in your life—these are just as hard for adults as they are for a child!

But if we persevere in developing these things in our own lives and instilling them in our children's lives, we will prepare them to do better in marriage, friendships, parenthood, their vocations, and most importantly, their walks with God.

And that's what we're all after, isn't it?



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