Correctly interpret other children's body language and tone of voice. Well-liked children can distinguish subtleties in emotions. For example, they can distinguish between anger directed toward them versus toward a parent.

Directly respond to the statements and gestures of other children. Well-liked children will say other children's names, establish eye contact, and use touch to get attention.

Give reasons for their own statements and gestures (actions). For example, well-liked children will explain why they want to do something the other child does not want to do.

Cooperate with, show tact towards, and compromise with other children, demonstrating the willingness to subordinate the self by modifying behavior and opinions in the interests of others. For example, when joining a new group where a conversation is already in progress, well-liked children will listen first, establishing a tentative presence in the group before speaking (even if it is to change the subject).

These skills are crucial in initiating and maintaining relationships, and in resolving conflicts. By contrast, rejected children tend either towards aggressive, antisocial behavior, or withdrawn, depressive behavior. They also don't listen well, tend not to offer reasons for their behavior, don't positively reinforce their peers, and have trouble cooperating. Antisocial children will interrupt people, dominate other children, and either verbally or physically attack them. Depressive or withdrawn children may be excessively reserved, submissive, anxious, and inhibited. Competitiveness or dominance by itself is not necessarily indicative of low peer acceptance. In fact, popular children tend to have the characteristics of both competitiveness and friendliness.

Although biological predisposition may be a factor in a child’s social competence and level of peer acceptance, environmental factors are also extremely important. Some of the factors contributing to peer acceptance include (1) during infancy, the quality of attachment between mother or primary caregiver and child; (2) during childhood, the quantity and quality of opportunities for interaction with different types of peers in different environments (in the family, at school, church, camp, activity centers, in sports, or in the neighborhood); (3) the type of parenting style. A highly nurturant but moderately controlling “authoritative” parenting style is associated with the highest levels of social competence. By contrast, a low nurturant, highly controlling “authoritarian” parenting style is associated with children’s aggressiveness, while the high nurturant but low-controlling “permissive” style is associated with failure to take responsibility for behavior.

Children learn to relate to peers by engaging in peer relationships. Often a vicious circle develops where a rejected child is given fewer and fewer opportunities by his peers to relate and thereby learn new skills. Lack of opportunity to participate normally in peer interaction is especially problematic for children who differ in some obvious way, either culturally, racially, or through some mental or physical disability. Issues of peer acceptance should be addressed as early as possible in order to prevent loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.

In addition to providing direct social skills training or counseling for the child with peer acceptance problems, parents and teachers can create opportunities for non-threatening social interaction to occur. Though children should never be forced to play together (this can create the rejection it is intended to remedy), popular and less-popular preschoolers can be encouraged to interact with one another. For example, a less sociable child may be encouraged to answer and ask questions of others. Older children should be provided opportunities to interact in smaller groups and in one-on-one situations, where it may be easier to try out new behaviors and make up for social mistakes. Shy or withdrawn children can be encouraged to develop outside interests that will place them in structured contact with others. In school, peer helping programs and collaborative learning provide opportunities for popular and less-popular children to work together. Ideally, collaboration should highlight the less-popular students’ strengths, such as special interests and talents, rather than weaknesses. At any age, the smallest positive change in behavior should be reinforced with attention and praise.

Further Reading
ing parties converse with the goal of finding a mutually satisfying solution to their disagreement, and a neutral third party facilitates the resolution process. The salient feature of peer mediation as opposed to traditional discipline measures and other forms of conflict resolution is that, outside of the initial training and ongoing support services for students, the mediation process is entirely carried out by students and for students. Due to the rise of violence in schools, the sharp increase in serious crime committed by youths, and the increasing awareness of the need for social skills instruction in education, peer mediation programs exploded in the 1980s. In 1984, when the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) was formed, there were about 50 mediation programs in school districts nationwide. Eleven years later NAME reported over 5,000 programs across the country. Peer mediation programs that have gained national stature include the early Educators for Social Responsibility program, San Francisco’s Community Board program, New York’s School Mediators Alternative Resolution Team (SMART), and New Mexico’s Center for Dispute Resolution.

**Purposes of peer mediation**

In accordance with the principles of conflict resolution, peer mediation programs start with the assumption that conflict is a natural part of life that should neither be avoided nor allowed to escalate into verbal or physical violence. Equally important is the idea that children and adolescents need a venue in which they are allowed to practically apply the conflict resolution skills they are taught. Peer mediation programs vary widely in their scope and function within a school or system. In some schools, mediation is offered as an alternative to traditional disciplinary measures for low-level disruptive behavior. For example, students who swear at each other or initiate fights might agree to participate in mediation rather than being referred to the playground supervisor or principal. In other schools, mediation takes place in addition to disciplinary measures. In either case, peer mediation is intended to prevent the escalation of conflict. Serious violations of rules or violent attacks are not usually addressed through mediation.

Although peer mediation is primarily carried out by students, at least a few staff members and teachers are actively involved in training and facilitation. Ideally, peer mediation will encourage a culture of open communication and peaceful solutions to conflict. According to the NAME, five of the most common purposes of a school mediation program are:

1. to increase communication among students, teachers, administrators, and parents.
2. to reduce school violence, vandalism, and suspensions.
3. to encourage children, adolescents, and teens to resolve their own disputes by developing listening, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.
4. to teach peaceful resolution of differences, a skill needed to live in a multicultural world.
5. to motivate students’ interest in conflict resolution, justice, and the American legal system, and encourage active citizenship.

**Training of peer mediators**

Programs vary in whether they train all the students in the school to act as mediators, or only as a “cadre” of selected students. The cadre approach may be used initially with the intention of expanding later. Mediators either volunteer or are nominated by teachers or other students;

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**PEER MEDIATION PROCESS**

The process varies, but most programs use the following general format:

I. Introduction—The mediator introduces him or herself and explains the rules. The mediator tries to make the disputants feel comfortable.

II. Identifying the Problem—The mediator listens to each party describe the problem and writes down an agreed-upon “agenda” that includes all the elements of a dispute.

III. Identifying Facts and Feelings—The disputants tell their sides of the story to each other. The goal is to “surface” all of the underlying facts and feelings pertaining to the problem. The mediator asks many questions with the goal of helping to refocus the problem by viewing it differently.

IV. Generating Options—The mediator asks both parties to brainstorm how they might solve the problem. The mediator writes down all the solutions, marking the ones that are mutually agreed upon. If none are forthcoming, participants return to previous steps. Sometimes, individual sessions with each disputant and the mediator are necessary.

V. Agreement—The mediator writes a contract using the solutions to which both parties agree, and everyone signs it.

VI. Follow-Up—After a period of time the former disputants will report back to the mediator on whether the contract is being upheld by both parties.