

## **Core Strength: Affiliation**

Did you know that the human need to “affiliate” is hard-wired into our brains? The latest research in brain development gives us remarkable insight into the brain’s role in developing social connections. Because humans are not capable of surviving alone, our species forms groups that ensure our safety and continued existence. Over thousands of years of human history, our brains developed neurological structures that produce feelings of anxiety when we are completely isolated and feelings of pleasure when we experience connection with other people. We are biologically designed to live, grow and work in groups. As parents, it is important that we help our children gain the skills they need to successfully connect with others and form affiliations.

Successful affiliation requires some level of competence in the previously developed core strengths of attachment and regulation. Without the ability to connect with one other person and to interact with others while managing frustration and anxiety, children struggle in their attempts to join increasingly complex groups. Most children who have problems in groups have not mastered these earlier skills. They do not easily interpret social cues and when they are frustrated they act in impulsive or immature ways. This can lead to a vicious cycle in which poor responses by peers leads to further anxiety and frustration. Young children cannot understand these social transactions, and their responses reinforce a building sense of incompetence and alienation.

As parents, it is important to provide children opportunities to practice skills at their developmental level, even if that might not match their chronological age. Children learn to join with peers in sequential stages. They initially observe while playing in parallel, then explore playing with one other child, and finally learn to join more complex groups with multiple peers. By understanding your child’s social development level you can offer opportunities that have some level of challenge, but do not overwhelm. If your child is able to successfully play with one other child, create opportunities for her to play with a third. Prepare for new social experiences by practicing. Help your child recognize feelings of frustration that come when they need to share or lose at a game and practice ways to self-calm. With older children, meet their friends and support their increasing skills. With teens, acknowledge the importance of friendship groups and recognize this as a core, human strength. Encourage them to join various groups or clubs where these skills can be enhanced.

Developing strong affiliation skills is critical to your child’s healthy development. If you sense that your child is becoming isolated or not forming positive affiliations, do not hesitate to get help. And during the holidays, remember that the family is the foundational group for human bonding and connection, so enjoy those special moments you spend with family during this season.