

Helping Children Understand Social Shades of Gray

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Opinion

My 9 year old son is constantly accusing others of being mean but I think it has more to do with how he defines the behavior of his peers. Help is appreciated!

One of the many challenges of growing up is contained within the sometimes mysterious world of peer culture: misunderstood meanings of social behavior. The emphasis on dichotomizing peer behavior as either good or bad, reinforced by the broad definitions of bullying, has planted the seeds for many children to label peers as either nice or mean. This sets the stage for personalization, avoidance, accusation, and other social traps that are the result of skewed perceptions. Difficulty understanding social shades of gray can be resolved when children learn how to consider that the vast majority of peer behavior is not nice nor mean, but in-between.

If your child is often caught in the black and white blinders of peer perception read on for ways to help them appreciate the subtleties and shades of peer life.

Begin by explaining the concept of interpersonal behavior as “in-between.” Draw upon examples in real life reflecting how people are often relating to one another on neither extreme of nice or mean, but within the shaded zone where present situations impact upon our behavior. Distinguish between the hurried hello when acknowledging a neighbor in a grocery store vs. the cheery greeting when patiently sharing stories at the bus stop. Explain how the same person acts very differently depending upon the situation due to reasons that are often times unknown to us. This tendency to “show our shades” to others has a lot to do with situations, such as being in a hurry or concerns over the presence of others.

Further educate children by posing the question, “Is it nice, mean, or in-between?” Graphically display this rubric with vertical lines on a paper laid on a horizontal plane. Show how the two margins, the “nice” and “mean” sections, occupy about 25% of the page while the center section takes up the remaining 50%. Use this visual aid to place some of the past peer encounters shared by your child, depicting them as circles that reflect one of the three behaviors, or perhaps overlap on one side or the other. Explain how these “situation circles” are important in understanding why peers behaved the way they did, even if all the reasons are not clear.

Offer examples of the many reasons why children’s behavior falls in-between, or why the same child may behave in the nice zone when they are over for a play date but in the in-between zone at recess or within a group activity at school. Discuss how the presence of others effects the way individual children behave due to the pressure they feel to conform to the “group effect.” Illustrate this effect by describing how the wish to gain popularity, appear “cool” to others, or follow the lead of an admired peer can strongly impact upon the way one child behaves within the group, regardless of the presence of a good friend. Suggest that this can explain why a friend acts so differently in different places. Give examples of other in-between reasons.

Encourage them to take a “mental picture” of the rubric to have available in their thoughts. Ask them to use the “mental drawing” to protect themselves from having their feelings easily hurt when friends act differently or when they are confused by peer events around them. Continue to discuss the in-between zone as circumstances emerge that validate this notion.



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