

When Your Child Doesn't Fit In

Dr. Marlo Archer

Infants enter this world with no preconceived notions about how things are supposed to work. They have no idea that they are going to be expected to eat using silverware or that it's not going to be acceptable to walk around naked or that not everyone is going to get enjoyment out of their loud releases of body gas. These are all things they're going to learn by what they see the adults in their life do. If the adults in their life eat with silverware, wear clothes in public and practice discretion, they will also do those things. If the adults in their life watch football, do crossword puzzles, and e-mail their friends, chances are that they'll have some interest in those things as well. Possibly. This is where genetic variables come into play. It is not uncommon for a very athletic couple who enjoy hiking and biking to produce a child with almost no coordination. It is not unusual for a very musical family to produce at least one child who simply cannot carry a tune. When this happens, parents are often quite disappointed. They have certain interests that they enjoy and they want to pass those interests on to their children. Well, sometimes that just isn't possible for whatever reason and the sooner that parents just accept that about their situation and move on, the better. Here are some suggestions for what to do when your child's interests are different from your own or different from those of his peer group:

Observe, respect, and capitalize on your child's strengths. That is, maybe he's no good in football or art, but he's got to be good at something. Find out what that something is and support his involvement in that interest. Perhaps he's got a real interest in astronomy. You can take the family to the planetarium, borrow library books on the subject and read them with him, and allow him to join an astronomy club. This will give him a chance to enjoy and explore his interests, expose others in the family to something new, and give him a chance to fit in with others that share his likes.

Don't get more upset than your child. Perhaps your child is simply not good at math when his mother was an honors math student. Perhaps the child is only able to make passing grades in math, rather than the straight A's that mother achieved. If the child has done his best and is pleased with his passing grade, that's good enough. There is no need for you to be more upset than the child. Likewise, if your child accurately assesses that he simply is not good at throwing a baseball and that his life is going to be okay without playing baseball, there is no need for you to get upset that he will not play baseball.

Help your child to learn and understand that it is more important to have a few genuine friends than a multitude of superficial associates. This is learned by experience and that experience is gained when a child actually has a few good friends with whom he shares interests. It may be up to the parents to continue to expose the child to a variety of different children before the child finds someone with whom he can be good friends. Children who are not good at whatever the popular activity is have a hard time making friends. That is, if most of the kids in the class want to play kickball and your child does not, the other kids may be quick to ostracize him and he may come home crying that the other kids don't like him. This is not a time to freak out. It's probably true that most of the other kids don't like him because he can't or doesn't want to play kickball. That's just how kids are. What is important is to help him understand that he doesn't have to be friends with all those kids. He needs to find someone with whom he shares interests and

if there is no one in his class that fits that bill, then you, as parents, must look to expose him to a wider group of children, possibly through classes or clubs organized around his interests.

Remember that it is your child who must live his life, not you. You are responsible for living your life and should do so as courageously as you can. Many parents expect that their child's life should be so much better than their own. Why? What was wrong with your life? If you think your own life was so horrible or that you are such a flawed person, chances are that it was a bad idea for you to have a kid before you worked those issues out. However, it's never too late to exorcise those demons. If your own self-esteem is not what it should be, take care of that and your child will benefit as a result.

Understand and accept that a troubled childhood does not absolutely mean disaster in adulthood. Kids tease each other. Kids get into fights. Kids fall down and hurt themselves. Kids get sick. Kids cry. That's all a part of growing up. Basic trials and tribulations are a normal part of childhood. If your child has a particularly rough time growing up because he or she is quite different from the norm, that does not necessarily mean that he will have a horrible adult life. On the contrary, often individuals that have a rough childhood because of their uniqueness continue to be unique adults and we actively seek out unique adults as leaders, entertainers, role models, teachers, business partners, and the like. Some of the most powerful, famous, and influential people are unique folks who had rough childhoods.

So, relax, enjoy your kid the way he is, and help him find others who share his interests.

About the Author

Dr. Marlo Archer is a licensed psychologist treating kids, teens and families in Tempe, Arizona. www.DrMarlo.com. A certified psychodramatist, Dr. Archer co-founded the Arizona Psychodrama Institute which unites creative individuals from across Arizona under the common mission of teaching Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy to organizations, professionals, and students whose practices would be enhanced by using action methods. www.AzPsychodrama.com. She was also the 2013 winner of the Zerka T. Moreno award from the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama.