

# Friendships and the Brain

By Kristen Race

Our brains are wired to pay more attention to the negative than the positive. We are actually 3-5 times more sensitive to negative information. Given this tendency it is no surprise that children tend to get caught up in the relationships that aren't working so well. When we intentionally focus on what's going well, such as the relationships that make us feel good, it affects the levels of neurotransmitters, including the releasing of dopamine, in our brain. Dopamine makes us feel good. It also triggers higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, energy, determination, and attentiveness.

## So how do we teach our kids to focus on the good?

**1) DON'T: Interview for pain.** This term was coined by one of my favorite authors, Michael J. Thompson. It describes a parent's tendency to keep negative situations alive long after the child has worked through the problem.

For example: Your child comes home from school upset because they had a horrible fight with their best friend, Molly. You listen attentively, offer suggestions to help, and send them to school the next day armed to solve the problem. This can be helpful, but here is where the problem often arises. The next day you pick your child up from school and the first thing out of your mouth is, "How did it go with Molly today?" and the next day you say, "Are things still ok with Molly?" This is interviewing for pain. Instead, ask them "How was your day?" Your child may still need help with the situation, and he or she may bring it up again, but in most cases this stuff works itself out in a day or two. When parents continue to bring it up, it keeps a negative situation alive in the child's mind long after the wounds have healed.

**2) DO: Pay attention to the good stuff.** It is easy for kids to get caught up in the one or two kids who are not interested in being their friend instead of focusing on all of the kids who are kind to them and want to play with them all the time. My friend Sylvie told me that her father always used to ask her, "Who was a good friend to you today?" What a great way to keep the focus on the positive! Try it at dinner or when you pick your kids up from school, ask your kids, ask your spouse, and see what emerges. After they've weighed in on who was a good friend to them, ask who they were a good friend to, today, as well. Help them understand that having good friends means being a good friend.

**When your child is feeling the burden of social situations, understand that this is normal, listen mindfully, focus on the positive and resist the urge to immediately swoop in and solve everything for them.**

Part of our roles, as parents, is to help our child come up with their own solutions. Sometimes that means being aware of how you might be feeling while listening to your upset child. If you notice your own internal stress levels rising, remember that a few mindful breaths will get your own prefrontal cortex back online. As you're able to get out of your alarm brain and into your smart brain, you'll be a much better sounding board and support system for your child.

