Dear Families…

We hope this newsletter finds you and your family happy and well! It has been another exciting year in the Social Cognition Development Lab here at Cornell University! This year we continued interviewing children, whom we have been following since they were three! These children are now in school, and their answers to our questions regarding memory, emotion and the self have become increasingly complex and nuanced. Furthermore, as children continue growing and interacting with others, peers become increasingly important in their lives.

In this newsletter we present two articles, the first describes the development of children’s friendships and the second discusses ways in which parents manage children’s negative emotions. We hope you enjoy the articles and we look forward to continuing working with you in the new year!

Children’s developing friendships

As children grow older, peers play an increasingly important part in their lives. Interactions with peers are arenas where children acquire social competence and moral reasoning skills. On the other hand, problems in peer relationships can negatively influence children’s attitudes towards schools and their long-term social emotional development. One of the current research areas in our lab is to examine how children develop peer relationships as a result of various personal, social, and cultural factors. There are distinct characteristics in development across different age periods. Even as early as preschool, children can tell you reliably whom they consider as their friends. The most common reason for children to become friends is that they share the same activity, for example, playing together. After entering elementary school, children become more concerned about peer group acceptance and rejection. They also tend to establish friendship with children of the same gender. You may find that your boy is not playing with the little girl next door any more even though he
has known her for a very long time. In addition to friendship networks, children will gradually join in “crowds,” which are reputation-based groups of children, such as “jocks” or “brains”. Those groups are not necessarily comprised of friends, but they may act as a social guide for school-age children to meet possible friends and maintain peer relationships.

Previous research has shown that parents can have both direct and indirect influences on their children’s peer relationships. As a parent, you have a great say in the kind of peer interactions you want your child to have. For example, you may decide which after-school programs for your child to go, which play dates he or she is prefer to talk to can shape your child’s peer such parental role as “gate keepers”. Furthermore, parents are role models for children to learn about social skills. The way you interact with acquaintances or friends is something that your child can learn from. Interestingly, a research study found that the size and density of adolescents’ networks were related to the friendship networks of their parents, especially mothers’. Let’s all pay more attention to children’s peer interactions and help them develop positive and healthy relationships with peers and friends!

**Coping with children’s negative emotions**

You have told your child for the fifth time that they need to practice their violin or piano for an hour. Your child makes some excuses. He wants some water first. He needs to go to the bathroom. He can’t find his music sheets. Once the excuses run out, there’s crying, yelling, and the insistent, “I don’t wanna!” It’s a common scene in a typical household. How do parents react to children’s negative emotions? What, if any, are the consequences of parents’ reactions for children’s social-emotional development? These are some of the questions we are asking in the lab.

Research on parental coping of children’s negative emotions have identified several ways in which parents react to children’s negative emotions. Some parents report feeling high empathy for their children, such that they experience the distress along with their children. Some encourage children to express their distress. Some tend to react punitively. And some act to minimize children’s distress by, for example, making a joke. These reactions are likely to vary from situation to situation. The way that parents react to their children’s negative emotions may reflect their values and beliefs regarding emotion. Their reactions are in a sense giving their children messages regarding whether and how an emotion should be expressed, in what situations the expression is appropriate, and in what situations it needs to be controlled. Some reactions, such as punitive and negative ones, however, are not conductive and may contribute to aggressive behavior and emotional problems in children over the long term. In our future research, we hope to link styles of parental reactions towards children’s emotions with other outcomes such as social competence.

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**About the Social Cognition Development Lab...**

The Social Cognition Development Lab at Cornell includes both undergraduate and graduate students working under the direction of Dr. Qi Wang. Students in the lab conduct projects examining the interplay between memory, self, and emotions across the life-span and memory sharing between parents and their children. Dr. Wang received her Ph.D. in Psychology from Harvard University. She came to Cornell in the fall of 2000 and currently serves as an Associate Professor of Human Development.