On Your Mind – September/October, 2019

Birthday Parties Theme

**Jonathan C. Robinson, Ph.D.**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

I love my little five year old Jack to pieces. Also, my heart goes out to him. He’s our only child and he spends a lot of non-school time with me. I don’t know if he is just painfully shy, a mama’s boy, or if he might have social anxiety or Asperger’s. I heard from a neighborhood mom that another 5 year old in the neighborhood is having a birthday party soon, and little Jack has not been invited. We are friends with the parents of this other boy, so Jack being left out really hurts. Suggestions? Signed, At A Loss

Dear Atta,

My heart goes out to you, as well as to Jack. Even if Jack were being excluded from this party, given the circumstances, you would hope that Jack’s parents would step in to add him to the guest list and make it a teachable moment for their child. You gave several concerns for Jack’s seeming lack of social skills. It’s clear that you’ve put a lot of thought into this.

Even as a fifth grader, my granddaughter wouldn’t look at a restaurant server, let alone order her own meal. I spent a lot of time coaching her, asking what’s the worst that could happen, and prompting her in new situations with peers to simply put her hand out and say, “Hi. I’m Kaitlyn. What’s your name?” To the extent possible, if it’s painful shyness, anticipate and prep Jack for upcoming situations. Even practice in role rehearsal at home. If he might be a mama’s boy, make sure his dad, or other male caregiver, has time with him, going on errands or doing “guy things.” Social anxiety and Asperger’s are mental health conditions and likely not the case. However, if your concerns persist, you can get an evaluation to clarify them.

To your immediate concern, if the parents of the birthday boy in the neighborhood are not amenable to stepping up, then plan an alternative fun thing that you folks can do as a family during the time of the party Jack wasn’t invited to. Active listen Jack’s feelings, to the extent that he is tuned into the sleight. Make it a fun day to counterbalance his potential hurt feelings.

Finally, as Jack gets older, find group activities where he can participate, such as Cub Scouts, Sunday School class, library groups, and other structured, adult supervised group activities. Hang in there.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

My 8 year old daughter and her best friend share the same birthday. They each want to feel “special” on their day and don’t want a joint birthday party. Our two families are all best friends with each other, and the joint birthday party has been the norm for years. So, now what? Signed, Baffled

Dear Baffled,

Are you all up for two parties on the same day? Flip a coin to see who hosts their party for lunch and who hosts the one at the dinner hour. Have your daughter(s) be involved in the process of invitation, theme, favors, cake, and the like. Promote each feeling “special” for their part of the day. They may be conspiring to just yank your chain. If so, when you start the process, either child might just ask to go back to the joint birthday party plans. If that doesn’t happen, forge ahead.

It sounds like the driving force is about feeling special. Draw your daughter out on what that means to her and, if separate birthday parties on the same day is not feasible, brainstorm with her how she can feel special for her part of the joint party.

It sounds like you are getting caught up in your daughter’s solution, when her request is really a symptom. As you talk with her, work into the conversation the question, “Sooo, I hear what you are saying, but I’m wondering what else is going on?” Children usually don’t do so well with such essay questions. When you get a blank stare or other non-starter response, follow up with a multiple choice question. You know her well enough to come up with other reasons as to why she’s not feeling special enough. After this discussion, I’m sure you won’t feel so baffled.