

You Can... **Develop better cooperation**

Learning to cooperate with others is an important, but tricky, skill for our children to master. There are any number of times when you will need your children to behave in a cooperative way. They might be working in pairs or small groups to complete a task or playing a game together in PE. You will also rely on your children's willingness to cooperate with you as their teacher, and with the rules of the school.

Thinking points

- Learning to cooperate helps build empathy: it helps us understand that we can make other people feel good or bad. It also helps the children learn that other people might feel or think differently to them, but that their opinions deserve equal respect.
- Cooperation is vital for building friendships. Those children who can share and play well together will be successful socially.
- Some children are natural 'leaders' who find it hard to cooperate with their classmates. You might have noticed how, in group situations, 'leaders' create tension by insisting that things run exactly to their own plan. Many natural leaders are intelligent, but lack empathy, and consequently find it hard to see why they should take other people's opinions into account.
- There will probably be some children who tend to get left out of group situations. These pupils can become isolated from the main social groups, and this can be the starting point for bullying.
- Disputes and disagreements between the children can lead to a tense and stressful atmosphere in the classroom. Learning to cooperate with each other plays a key part in building a calm feeling in your classroom.
- Similarly, a school at which the staff work together in a cooperative manner will tend to be a more relaxed, friendly and successful place.

Tips, ideas and activities

- If given free choice, children will probably want to work with their friends, and may get distracted by social chatter. Set the ground rules for group work right from the start, so that these issues do not arise. The message is that we work with anyone and everyone in our classroom.

- 'Puppets' is an excellent exercise for building cooperation.

Here's how it works:

- get the children into pairs
- one person is the puppet, the other is the puppet master
- the puppet has invisible strings on the hands, elbows, shoulders, knees and feet
- the puppet master can move the puppet by pulling on these strings
- as the strings are pulled, the person playing the puppet must move to create the illusion.

- Now ask the children to walk the puppet about, clap its hands, greet other puppets and so on. Swap over so that the other person gets a try. At first, some children might try to catch their partners out.

Explain that the aim is to work together to achieve the impression of strings. Talk about how the exercise works best when they work together and cooperate.

- Find exercises where the children must work together to succeed, such as 'Rafts'. Split the children up into groups of about five or six. Put large pieces of paper on the classroom floor (the rafts). Now give the children a minute to balance as many people on the raft as they can.

