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BOOK SUMMARY:

Why Doesn't Anybody Like Me?

(Marano, 1998)

In American culture, significant attention has been paid to parenting strategies and skills that may embrace our children's IQ, confidence, self-esteem, happiness, pride and a sense of responsibility. Parenting strategies to enhance children's degree of popularity have remained a relatively taboo subject.

Social development is the cradle of intellectual development.

Western culture over-emphasizes linear, deductive, analytical thinking and doesn't explicitly educate for social intelligence. Yet it is the degree of success in forming and maintaining relationships that affect people most deeply in their lives and most heavily influences their day-to-day happiness and their health. Relationships are vital to human functioning and full development of children.

As Americans, we subscribe to a powerful set of beliefs that help us define ourselves, such as the mythology about rugged individualism. We habitually ascribe any success to our own individual powers and fail to see that emotional support is the true pillar of self-reliance. We cannot embrace popularity because myths of self-sufficient individualism obscure the reality of our essential social nature. The dark side of our all-powerful belief in individualism is loneliness.

Self-esteem has no intrinsic value; it is a kind of sociometer built in to detect and prompt us to avert the threat of social rejection. Western culture has taught us to override the sociometer; i.e., when feeling low, we don't attempt to do what we need to do to fit in.

We become social beings only through interactions with others. Today's children are having more difficulties relating to people; more children are growing up socially disadvantaged. Peer rejection puts children at risk for dropping out of school, becoming pregnant teens, using drugs and alcohol, criminality, use of violence, and need for mental health services later.

The goal is not to make every child popular, but to see that every child is at least socially competent, so that each can choose his/her course in life and so that no shot at success in life is cut off from him/her.

There is in all of us a yearning for reciprocity, for mutuality; we make emotional investments in friends. At the heart of relationships is a mutuality of influence, a deep need for feeling equal. The most striking feature of friendship is the assumption of equality.

Two sides of social competence: acceptance by one's overall peer group and friendships.

Rejected kids experience a high degree of emotional loneliness and over time become more and more socially isolated. As a result of the isolation that rejection brings, it becomes a virtual incubator of distorted ways of thinking.

Socially children sort themselves into 5 basic groups: the popular, the socially average, the rejected, the neglected, and the controversial.

Popular children develop the skills forming the basis for empathy. Empathy is the ultimate pro-social skill: it is both an act of the head and an act of the heart.

Nothing predicts being disliked more than aggression and negative interactions.

Aggressive boys tend to misuse physical power; aggressive girls tend to misuse the power of intimacy.

Throughout the culture, there are rising pressures against social competence and against valuing social competence. Misunderstanding the value of social competence allows parents to distort child rearing in ways that are in tune with their own anxieties.

One effect of the reliance of structured activities is that children draw their identity from their performance in that group. Kids take on a sense of identity, but essentially by forcing others to give it to them. They are set up to feel that only if others applaud them do they exist or have any value. They are groomed for narcissism.

Only one variable could predict level of success based on quality of jobs: verbal fluency, a basic social skill.

What breeds anxious children is parents overprotecting them from stressful experience. Parents who allow their children to deal with life's daily stresses by themselves are helping them overcome their inhibition and develop resiliency and better coping strategies.

The way a child is viewed by peers between 1st and 3rd grade is a better predictor of mental health problems 11 years later, than IQ, school achievement, teacher's ratings, personality test scores, or absenteeism.

Kids who are consistently rejected by peers feel enduringly deeply lonely. They suffer 2 tiers of rejection: loneliness (not being part of the peer group) and disconnection (having no close friendships). One high quality close friendship may be all it takes to buffer a child from feelings of loneliness.

When one's social fabric is threatened or weakened, it is massively stressful. The body reacts with changes in immune function, hormone function, cardiovascular activity, and probability of illness.

Rather than contempt, we need social partners who regularly communicate acceptance. Communicating acceptance while discussing anger not only prevents marital conflict from bogging down in gridlock, but also boosts immune function.

Our perceptual, emotional, and immune systems seem much more attuned to pick up negative signals than positive ones.

A longing for stable relationships is a fundamental human need. It has two requirements: regular contact and persistent demonstrations of caring.

The evidence adds up to an overwhelming rationale for understanding and supporting the social life of children; making room for kids' play is the first step.

Elements of social competence: sociable disposition, pro-social orientation (the root of empathy), emotion regulation, reading emotional states, initiating interaction, group or game entry, responsiveness, paying attention to relationships, handling provocation, and managing disagreements without fighting.

If there's one thing that characterizes social competence, it is the ability to make positive responses to others even in the face of negativity. The ability to decelerate negativity makes kids popular; it is the same quality that researchers find accounts for happiness between partners in marriage.

The transformation of early aggressive behavior into bullying depends in large measure on the responses adults make to the child's aggression.

Aggression is a particularly strong contributing factor to rejection among boys.

Children who are rejected because of aggressive tendencies are unable to decode or read emotion effectively, so the misperceive and misinterpret social signals in others.

Bullies turn into antisocial adults, and are far more likely than non-aggressive kids to commit crimes, batter their wives, abuse their children, and introduce another generation of bullies.

Bullying may begin in childhood, but continues in adulthood; it is among the most stable of human behavior styles. Bullying involves 3 core elements: aggressive behavior, negative intent, and a power difference.

Studies reliably show bullies have a distinctive cognitive make-up: a hostile attributional bias and paranoia. In social situations they have trouble reading intent. They perpetually attribute hostile intentions to others. They make a defensive response to perceived provocation, perhaps a pre-emptive strike. Problem is, they perceive provocation where it does not exist. They endorse revenge. They believe that aggression is the best solution to conflicts. They have a strong need to dominate others. They lack pro-social behavior. They do not know how to relate positively to others. No caring, helping, cooperative or other pro-social attitudes hold them in check. They are untroubled by anxiety. They see themselves quite positively. Blindness to the feelings of others permeates their behavioral style and outlook. Bullies are clueless as to how little they are liked. They don't see the impact of their own behavior on others.

The evidence points to a very self-serving, narcissistic form of social insensitivity. They overestimate their social competence. Bullies have highly accurate acceptance- and rejection-detectors when it comes to other kids. Their social judgment is impaired only with regard to themselves. They engage actively in denial. They esteem themselves more highly than others do.

Physical aggression is negatively correlated with testosterone levels in adolescents. Testosterone levels reflect not brute force but social success.

Bullying does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs in context. Peer groups fan the flame of bullying by conferring reputations that keep bullies and victims frozen in their roles. Bullying can be tackled only with a school-wide program.

The core of aggressive behavior in children and adults is noncompliance. The basic problem with their parenting is that it is non-contingent. All that is needed are a non-hostile, non-threatening, non-physical sanctions for rule breaking applied consistently.

Bullies never group up. They are locked in an infantile pattern of noncompliance, frozen into one way of solving problems. Lacking social skills, and especially the ability to handle conflict, their relationships tend to be unstable and short-lived. When they do take partners, they often become spouse abusers.

Power and aggression are not synonyms. "Tough leaders" = boys who are aggressive but have no pro-social skills. They don't get their way by physical aggression or verbal abuse. In new situations, they quickly take over and establish dominance, using verbal fluency skills. They are the most socially successful, they are the best liked, and they have the highest testosterone levels of all.

Victims increasingly withdraw from group interactions and play more by themselves; their non-assertive behavior increases the likelihood they would be targeted for victimization. Being victimized leads to feeling bad or anxious, which then increases vulnerability to further victimization. While bullying is painful, it is the social isolation that probably is most damaging to victims.

Victims have close relationships with their parents and tend to disproportionately come from over-protective families. Over-protection shields kids from conflict and prevents them from learning new skills necessary to avoid exploitation. This makes them more anxious and fearful in peer conflict and sets them up to be victims to bullies.

Emotion-coaching parents recognize their children's emotions when the intensity is still low, before it escalates. They help the child regulate the physiologic arousal of negative emotional states. When children can label their emotions correctly, talk about them, and feel understood, negative feelings dissipate. The ability to children to soothe themselves physiologically underlies social competence. It arises only out of emotional connection being important in the home.