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Helping children learn positive friendship skills

Importance of children’s friendships

At any age having friends provides support and promotes mental health and wellbeing. Children’s friendships are also very important for their social and emotional development. Through friendships children learn how to relate with others. They develop social skills as they teach each other how to be good friends.

Most children want to have friends. Children who have friends are more likely to be self confident than those without friends and they perform better academically in school. When children have difficulty in making friends or in keeping them, it often leads to feeling lonely and unhappy with themselves. Feeling rejected by others may lead to significant distress. Learning positive friendship skills can help children socially so they feel happier and more confident.



How friendships develop and change

Friendships require give and take. By sharing toys, time, games, experiences and feelings, children learn that they can have their social needs met and can meet the needs of others. Since friendships develop through this kind of mutual exchange, close friendships are usually based on well matched needs.

Children's friendship needs and skills change as they grow. Similarly, children's ideas about friendship change as they develop. This is reflected in the different kinds of activities that children like to spend time doing with their friends at different ages. The table below indicates the ways children tend to describe close friends and the kinds of skills that support positive friendships as they develop.

Approximate age	A friend is someone who ...	Friendship skills
Up to 1 yr		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking, smiling, touching, imitating
1–2 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays with you Has good toys Can do fun things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying friend by name
3–5 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does something that pleases you You know better than other people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playing well in a twosome Approaching others to join in
5–7 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps and looks after you You help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking others' feelings into account Seeing others' viewpoint
8–10 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays fair – follows the rules Talks and shares interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking and listening to each other Forming groups with similar interests
10–12 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trusts you and is trustworthy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing confidences Negotiating Respecting one another
12–18 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands you and who you understand You can talk to about feelings or problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking about personal and social issues Supporting one another

Friendship patterns in the primary years

Children choose friends who have similar interests and enjoy similar activities. During primary school close friendships are most often with a child of the same sex. This is related to children's preferences in play. Boys tend to prefer active kinds of play in groups, whereas girls typically prefer gentler games in pairs or threes and use talk more than action. Such preferences may be especially strong around the ages of 8-9 when many children become more aware of social expectations regarding girls' and boys' behaviour. These expectations can create difficulties for boys who are interested in gentler kinds

of play and for girls who prefer the kind of active play that is usually associated with boys.

Friends cooperate and communicate more with each other than with other children. They also have conflicts more often, but usually manage to settle them without upsetting the friendship. Friends influence each other's behaviour. Over time they may take on similar mannerisms, language and preferences. Although friendships usually have positive effects, friends who have behavioural problems may encourage problem behaviour in one another.

As children's interests and developmental needs change their friendship patterns may also change. By the middle of primary school it is common for children to form small friendship groups based around similar interests. These groups often establish their own rules about who can join them. Setting rules and learning to negotiate them is important for helping children to develop their understanding of social relationships. However, when children lack cooperative relationship skills it can lead to friendship groups being dominated by some children and excluding others.

Social skills that promote friendship

Children who are good at making and keeping friends use positive social skills. Parents, carers and teaching staff help children learn positive social skills by guiding them as young children, being positive examples for children to follow, and providing opportunities for play where children can practise their skills. Key social skills that help with friendships include cooperation, communication, empathy, emotional control and responsibility.

Positive social skills are shown in behaviours like:

- Starting conversations
- Taking turns
- Expressing feelings
- Asking questions
- Complimenting others
- Accepting others
- Refusing to join others' negative behaviours
- Sharing
- Asking for what one wants/ needs
- Apologising to others
- Following rules of play
- Playing fair
- Listening to others
- Being a good loser
- Helping others
- Cooperating

Poor social skills are shown in behaviours like:

- Physical aggression (kicking, hitting, etc)
- Arguing
- Interrupting
- Name calling
- Bossing others
- Whining, complaining
- Showing off
- Being a poor loser
- Getting into others' space
- Talking too much
- Breaking rules of play
- Being too rough in play
- Taking others' possessions



All children go through relationship conflicts. Even usually popular children experience rejection sometimes. When this happens children's confidence may be affected. They may blame themselves or others. Beliefs about the reasons for the friendship problems they experience affect the ways that children react.

Some kinds of thinking are more helpful than others for managing the conflicts children have with friends. The following example shows different possible reactions to being refused when a child has asked to join in a game with others.

Thoughts	Beliefs	Feelings	Behaviour
"I'm just not much fun." "Other kids don't like me."	It's my fault and it won't change.	Anxious Sad Low confidence	Withdraws from social contact with other children.
"They're out to get me." "They're being mean on purpose."	It's their fault and they shouldn't have done it.	Angry Hostile	May become aggressive or try to get back at them in other ways.
"It's because they already started the game. Next time I'll ask first." "I can look for someone else to play with today."	The situation wasn't right. I can change it.	Resilient (disappointed at first but quickly recovers) Confident	Accepts what has happened and looks for other ways to solve the problem.

It is very beneficial for children when a parent or carer helps them solve friendship problems by encouraging resilient, cooperative attitudes. Rather than simply blaming the other children the adult may say something like, "What else can you do? Are there other children who might be interested in playing a game?"

Research suggests that mental health and wellbeing throughout life is more strongly related to how children get along with others than to their school grades or classroom behaviour.¹

1. Hartup, W. W. (1992). Having friends, making friends, and keeping friends: Relationships as educational contexts. [Electronic Version] ERIC Digest. Available from: <http://ericece.org/pubs/digests/1992/hartup92.html>

Further ideas for helping children develop friendship skills are provided in the accompanying materials:

- *Everyone needs a friend*
- *Supporting children's friendship skills – Suggestions for parents and carers*
- *Supporting children's friendship skills – Suggestions for teaching staff*

General principles for supporting children's friendship skills

Parents, carers and teaching staff have important roles to play in helping children develop friendships. They set examples for children to follow through the ways they manage relationships. They can also act as coaches and mentors for children, teaching them helpful social skills and talking through friendship issues to help with solving problems. As they learn how to manage social situations, having opportunities to talk about relationships with parents, carers and teachers helps children feel supported and develops their communication skills.

- **Provide children with opportunities to play with peers**
Children gain experience and learn important social skills from playing with friends. For children who are still learning how to get along, it can be helpful to plan what to do before having a friend over for a play date. This could involve deciding whether to share all of their toys or only some, or encouraging them to think about what games the other child would like to play when they arrive.

- **Teach positive social skills**
Observe your child to work out which negative social behaviours your child uses too often and which positive social behaviours your child could use more. Little things like smiles, looking at the person, knowing names and using a confident, friendly voice can make a big difference when making friends. Being able to better control negative emotions and paying attention to the needs and wants of others are also very important.

Teach one behaviour or social skill at a time and make sure the child is able to do it before introducing another skill. Show your child what to do. You may act out the situation and even demonstrate what to say. Take turns 'acting' until your child can demonstrate what to do. Don't be too serious. Make it a fun experience.

- **Be a coach**
Coaching is critical for helping children use new skills in real-life situations. Coaching involves prompting, reminding and encouraging (but not nagging!) children to use the skills they have learned. Coach your child to practise positive social skills in everyday situations with family members and friends. Support children's learning by giving positive feedback and praise.
- **Help children solve friendship problems**
Talking problems through with a supportive adult helps children to think about what happens, how they feel about it and what to do next. Thinking things through like this helps to build more mature social skills.

For further information on helping children develop friendship skills look for the accompanying KidsMatter list *Children's friendship skills- Other resources*.

Further information on KidsMatter is available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au

