The foundations of friendship begin at birth

The foundations of empathy (being able to feel ‘for’ others) and friendship (being able to relate well with others) begin at birth through a child’s first relationship with their primary parent or carer.

‘Responding to the emotional needs of children lies at the very heart of parenting. This is the foundation of children’s future wellbeing.’

Newborn babies love to look at faces and into their carer’s eyes and feel good when they are lovingly held. It is in these early months that babies start to learn how to be a friend and relate to other people. They learn social skills by watching how the adults in their lives relate to and interact with others.

Babies have lots of learning to do because everything is new to them, and they are trying to make sense of it all.

Give and take builds friendship skills and empathy

You can see the first signs of bonding in a very young baby as they gaze into your eyes, and relax when you hold or rock them gently. From a young age a baby will also recognise you by seeing you and hearing your voice. They may show this by greeting you with delight, huge social smiles or by laughing out loud. They will soon recognise their own name and love to play little turn-taking games with you. This is the start of the give and take of relationships. Babies will enjoy these and from these interactions with you throughout the day, they will learn other people are fun and they can have the ability to interact with others.

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Learning positive friendship skills

Turn taking

Being able to take turns with others is key for children’s social development. There are many ways adults can encourage children to take turns, some examples are:

- Presenting give and take interactions with babies (e.g., when the baby smiles, smile back; when the baby makes a small sound make the sound back and then wait for the baby to take a turn). This is the beginning of the give and take of social interaction—I talk and then I wait and listen and you talk, then it is my turn again and so on.
- Older babies love to play peek-a-boo (e.g., hold up a rug in front of your face and then look over it and say ‘peek-a-boo’, as the baby gets the idea give them the rug to take a turn).
- Rolling a ball backwards and forwards between you.
- Blowing kisses to each other, giving your baby time to take a turn.
- When you are playing a game with your baby leave a space for them to signal you that they want to go on playing, then respond.
- Take turns feeding each other.
- Take turns putting blocks on a tower.
- Join in your toddler’s game. Make some of the car or rocket noises, then wait and see if they want to take a turn.
- Sing songs and leave a space for the toddler to put in some words or actions.

Making up when things go wrong

All relationships have misunderstandings. Relationships also rely on being able to mend when things go wrong. When we show children relationships can be repaired we are giving them a very special gift. This can start from birth. The table below provides some examples of day-to-day learning about repairing relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misunderstanding</th>
<th>Repair</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baby is looking to carer for a smile, carer looks away.</td>
<td>Carer notices baby’s sad look and comes back to smile and reassure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby bites the breast and mother flinches away, says ‘no’ sternly.</td>
<td>Mother returns the breast and talks gently to the baby.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing peek-a-boo, parent or carer is lost to the baby when their face is covered.</td>
<td>Face is uncovered and parent/carer returns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddler plays with remote control and breaks it, parent is angry and toddler is upset.</td>
<td>Parent offers a hug.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developing the ability to relate well with others comes from learning that:

- other people will not let you down
- you are loved
- people will respond to you in a positive way
- misunderstandings can be mended
- there are culturally appropriate ways to relate to others.
What kinds of friendship skills and qualities are children developing in early childhood?

Babies (around birth to 18 months)
Through their relationships with their primary carers, babies build feelings of safety which enable them to gradually move further away themselves and develop more relationships with others. Although babies do not recognise other babies as playmates, they often like to be around them and show interest in looking at them. When a baby is at playgroup or child care, they need adults to play with and respond to them as well as support them in their interactions with other babies. Parents and carers can support the development of babies’ social skills when they:

- understand young babies have their own feelings and needs
- understand babies’ behaviour and respond quickly to meet their needs (e.g., understand a baby may cry because they are tired and put them to sleep)
- are warm and loving in the way they look at, talk to and hold their baby
- do things with their baby (e.g., look at or play with a toy, both look out of the window, sing songs and dance together)
- follow their baby's lead (e.g., watch for their cues about when they want to play, when to stop, when to be quiet and when to hold and comfort them).

Toddlers (around 18 months to three years)
Toddlers are on the move and are beginning to use words and express a range of feelings.

- Through those around them toddlers are learning about the world and how to relate to other people (e.g., how to be friendly, how to invite others to join in, talking together).
- Toddlers show their love for their parents or carers and other close people very affectionately and most will be interested in getting to know other friendly adults, especially if they play with them. They will copy what parents and carers do in their play (e.g., start making a cup of tea for their imaginary friends).
- Toddlers enjoy being near and watching others. At this stage they tend to play alongside others rather than with them. They benefit from group play such as dancing or singing games where they can play on their own or in the company of other children with the support of an adult. Playing together can be stressful for toddlers so they benefit from a lot of close adult support or having someone they can turn to when things are getting a bit too much.

Older toddlers (Three-year-olds)
Three-year-olds are very interested in playing with other children. At this age they:

- Have started to learn about feeling safe and loved, being friendly and coping with hard feelings.
- Begin to share their toys and understand the reasons for taking turns.
- Look forward to playing with other children; friendships are usually based more on what they want to play or what toys there are than on seeing the other child as a friend.

Preschool children (around three to five years)
Four-year-olds want to play with other children a lot of the time. This is a good time for lots of playdates and sometimes having more than one child over to play. Preschoolers are able to think about other children’s feelings and are learning the qualities and skills of being a good friend, including:

- taking turns
- including other children's ideas in play
- doing what other children want to
- sharing their toys
- understanding how other children may be feeling
- using words to describe their feelings and thoughts
- playing group games, acting out family or superheroes with friends and copying the behaviour of the adults they know
- spending time making up rules for their play as they start to learn about the social rules in their society. When someone gets tired of the rules and breaks them the friendship may temporarily end.

Imaginary friends
Some three- and four-year-olds have imaginary friends. This is a creative way for children to practise being with others. You might see a child who has been in trouble scold their imaginary friend, or tell their imaginary friend about what has happened. With the imaginary friend they can try out different ways of relating to others. Imaginary friends will gradually disappear as the child gets older.
Friendship skills children are learning

To develop good friendships, now and later, it is important children begin developing the following skills:

- Self-control: being able to wait for what they want, using words to express their feelings rather than acting disruptively or misbehaving, giving others a turn with toys
- Welcoming: being able to approach and respond to others positively (e.g., with a smile and greeting such as ‘hello’)
- Assertiveness: being able to say what they would like
- Consideration: being able to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, taking turns, being able to lead and follow what others want to do, being able to cooperate and share
- Play skills: being willing to take part in games and make suggestions for play
- Communicating: talking and listening to others in a friendly way, saying something to start a conversation
- Helping: being willing to help others
- Prediction: being able to understand how others might be feeling based on their behaviour, being able to predict how their behaviour might affect others
- Thinking: such as about alternatives when things go wrong (e.g., if other children want to play something different, thinking of whether to join them or find someone else to play with)
- Coping: being able to respond to rejection, disappointment or disapproval without experiencing too much distress or winning without gloating
- Empathy: being able to respond to others’ feelings with understanding
- Flexibility: being open to hearing or learning about other points of view or ways of doing things.

It takes a long time to learn these skills and we continue to develop them well into adulthood. We can help children develop these skills by being aware of what friendship and empathy skills they are developing, playing with them and giving some gentle coaching when children are really struggling with something. Children develop these skills through daily experiences; however, if you are aware of them you can give a hand at moments when some help is needed. You can do this by playing puppet games with children to help them practise these skills (e.g., what will the puppet do if we push him? If we smile at him? If we say we like what he is doing?).

Children develop friendship skills through daily experiences.
Helping children cope with conflict and disagreements

Children learn a lot about the give and take of relationships just from playing together, and they need lots of opportunities to learn to work things out for themselves. It is during play in the early years some children find they can get what they want through aggression, while others allow themselves to be pushed around or not get a turn. Due to this, sometimes children need adult help to work things out.

Watchful adults can help with problems between children by helping each child to see how others feel and to say what they want. It is important to help all children express their feelings and learn the skills to work things out. Sometimes, adults might be tempted to step in, take over and tell children what to do or not to do. This may make children feel that they are not capable of working it out for themselves and keeps them reliant on adults. Children need to learn why conflict arises and how to it out among themselves.

Parents and carers can help children manage conflict by:

- making a connection with each of the children involved in the conflict (e.g., by making eye contact and making sure that each child knows that you are there to care for and help them)
- teaching children to use words rather than actions
- helping each child to say how they feel
- helping children to understand some words are hurtful
- encouraging each child to say what they would like to happen
- supporting children to think of things they could do to try and solve the problem
- acknowledging children doing well. This can be shown with a smile, a friendly glance, a comment (e.g., telling them what they are doing well and asking them to tell you how they did it)
- following up and making sure children understand their problem solving worked well or talking to them about other solutions if things did not go so well.

It is important to consider what else may be going on for a child. If children are stressed or troubled by something that is happening in their lives, they have less resources to deal with life’s everyday challenges and will be less able to learn new ways of doing things.

Helping children cope with rejection, teasing and aggression

Young children are just beginning to learn about empathy and to think about how others feel, so they may not realise when they tease another child or leave a child out of a game it can be very hurtful. Sometimes they tease because of what they hear adults say, sometimes it is because of competition for friends and sometimes just because they are commenting on what they see (e.g., they might comment on a disability, call a child who cries a baby).

Parents and carers can help preschool children cope with rejection or teasing by:

- Helping children to address their unhelpful thinking (e.g., help them to remember when they have had a good time with friends and change their thinking from 'no-one ever wants to play with me' to 'Sam does not want to play with me today but yesterday we had fun together').
- Guiding your child through relaxation techniques (e.g., helping your child to take a couple of deep breaths when things go wrong and giving them time to think).
- Helping your child to think of something else they could do right now rather than playing with children that are being unkind (e.g., find someone else to play with).
- Helping your child think of what they could do to feel safe (e.g., tell an adult, stay close to other children).
- Help children find words to use in response (e.g., 'When you do that, I feel upset').
- Talking to staff about what is happening for your child and working together to address the issue.

Older preschoolers who tease another child may say the other child did something first. It is important to hear what children say but help them to see this does not make teasing behaviour acceptable. Younger children (e.g., toddlers) are not usually able to manage the suggestions listed above. It is helpful for name-calling or aggression to be managed at the time (e.g., by telling children it is not ok to say something hurtful, telling them how the other child feels, helping them to re-direct the behaviour, and checking that all children feel heard).
When children are aggressive to others

Young children may be aggressive from time to time because they are learning and developing their understanding about boundaries, sharing, and playing together. Many children have ‘grown out of this’ by about three years of age, however some children go on being aggressive, and this can turn into bullying as they get older. Bullying is damaging both to the victim and to the bully, and children who bully often go on to bully in adulthood. It is important to help children manage aggressive behaviour when they are young. Positive communication, positive methods of discipline and being aware of where children are and what they are doing are all good ways to help prevent aggression. Children who go on being aggressive sometimes need help in understanding how other children feel. It is often negative experiences in their own lives that are influencing this behaviour, and it is important that this is identified and addressed.

Children who are aggressive toward others benefit from help in developing their social and emotional skills. Children need to know their aggressive behaviour is not acceptable, and they also need understanding and support from adults to learn new ways of interacting with others and feeling good about themselves.

Parents and carers can help children manage aggressive behaviour by:

- exploring what is happening in their lives
- letting them know you like them and want to help them
- listening to how they feel
- helping them to think about how other children feel
- helping them to practise taking deep breaths before reacting
- helping them to have positive thoughts about themselves
- talking about other ways to get what they want, or express their feelings
- giving praise for successes and acknowledging them when they do something kind
- providing adult supervision and supporting them in their play.

Group-joining skills

As children grow older, friendships with other children become increasingly important and children need to be able to join into groups. This starts with four-year-olds who are at the beginning stages of making real friendships. As you watch children play you may find many children do this well and have no problems. Others have more difficulty being accepted by others and joining in. These children benefit from support and guidance in learning the skills they need to be accepted by others and to approach groups in a way that increases their chances of joining in.

What does ‘joining in’ look like?

1. When children want to join a group they first watch what the group is doing as they decide whether they want to join, to get a feel of what the group is like and whether new players would be welcome.

2. Then the child may come up to the group, with a smile or friendly look, and make an offer to join. Sometimes children just ask ‘Can I play?’ and sometimes they are invited in. Sometimes the answer might be ‘No’.

3. Children who have more developed friendship and play skills are more likely to be invited in by the group.

Children who come with an idea or a suggestion that interests the group are more likely to be able to join. For example, the child might say something like ‘That looks like a good game about trains, I could be the driver’. Here the child is not just asking to play but adding to the game and is more likely to be successful in being accepted by the other children. The child is building on the other children’s ideas and is not trying to change or take over the game.
Helping children who are experiencing difficulty joining in

When children are unable to join a group it may be because they haven’t yet learned the things they need to do to join in. Some children are just ignored by the group. They might watch and perhaps smile, but not ask to join or offer an idea or suggestion. This may be because the child is unsure about being welcomed and just stands near and hopes to be invited.

Some other reasons why a child may be rejected by the group may be because:

**The child wants to join in is not able to do what the group wants to do and may need adult help to find a role that works for everyone**

- If the group is still rejecting and there is something else going on, the adult needs to talk with the group about what their feelings and needs are and help all of the children to see each other’s feelings and wishes. Here is an opportunity for them to learn about understanding how others feel and how they could make room for another child.

**The group of children do not want others to play**

- The child’s first attempt to join may be rejected if the group have experience of previously having their play disrupted. This is where it is important to have adult help, because these first stages of learning to be a group member are fragile.

All of the children need to feel connected to the adult and that the adult is there for the group. When children are learning new skills they need recognition of small successes along the way. In this way adults can help all the children learn the social skills of being a friend. If not at first, in time the children will be able to lead the process, giving their own thoughts and ideas and working out what they can do.

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This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.

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7 Learning positive friendship skills

Information for families and early childhood staff Component 2 – Developing children’s social and emotional skills