

## Everyone needs a friend

### Lina's story



Three-year-olds, James and Lina, were playing together at Lina's home. James said 'Let's go outside, I want to play with the ball'. Lina said 'No, I like playing here'. James said 'I am not your friend then'. James went outside and Lina continued what she was doing. Later, Lina asked her father why James was not her friend any more. Her father explained that sometimes children think that friends are just the people they are playing with. When they are older they will know they can still be friends even when they are playing different games or playing with other children. He told Lina that she was still James's friend and that they will play together often.

'The single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, not school grades and not classroom behaviour but rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children ...'<sup>1</sup>

### Friendships and empathy: What children need

Friendships and relationships with other children become more important to children as they grow. Children who have good friendship skills have been shown to develop better relationships with others, which benefits their mental health and wellbeing. This does not mean children will always want to play with others; many children like some time to do their own thing, but they need to develop the skills to be able to relate to others when they want to or need to.



<sup>1</sup> Hartup, W. (1992). *Having friends, making friends, and keeping friends: Relationships as educational contexts*. Available from: <http://ericece.org/pubs/digests/1992/hartup92.html>.

## Empathy

Empathy is the ability to feel understanding for other people's feelings. Children and adults who have empathy for others not only understand when others feel sad, joyful or angry, but can also offer appropriate support. Children develop their capacity to feel empathy over their early years of life.

- ▶ Babies do not see other people as different from them so they cannot empathise, although sometimes a baby will cry or look sad if another baby cries.
- ▶ Young toddlers are learning that other people are separate, but they are likely to still think other people feel the same as them, for example, if they are sad or angry, then so are others.
- ▶ Older toddlers are starting to notice other people can feel differently from them and this is the beginning of empathy. For example, a two-year-old may say about her father 'Daddy loves books' because she has seen his reaction when someone gives him a book and is also beginning to see him as a separate person.
- ▶ When children notice others are upset, they may show their developing empathy skills by offering a toy or telling an adult in order to try to help.

Empathy is important to friendships and children who are able to empathise with others are less likely to bully or exclude other children as they get older. Social and emotional skills are also essential to being able to do well at school.

Children's mental health and wellbeing is supported when they develop a positive sense of self and the social skills to help them relate well with others. During the early years children are developing:

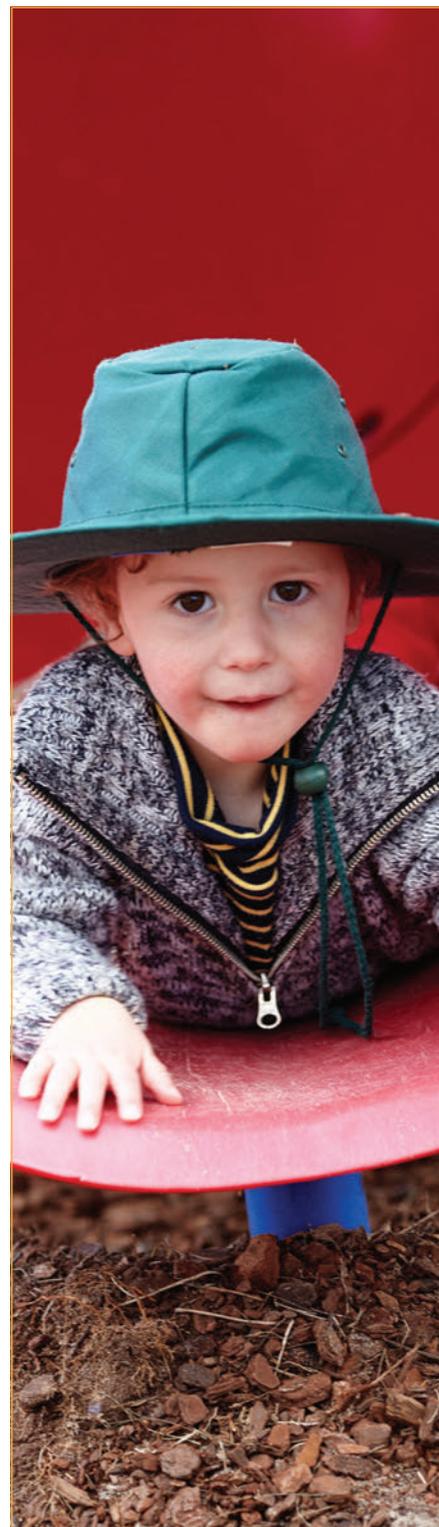
- ▶ confidence about what they can do
- ▶ positive feelings about themselves, such as feeling likeable and that other children will like them
- ▶ trust that other children will be friendly
- ▶ optimism and enthusiasm to do things so other children want to be with them
- ▶ their capacity to understand and respond to other children's feelings (empathy)
- ▶ some of the skills it takes to be a friend
- ▶ their knowledge about the social rules of their own society and culture in how to relate to other people
- ▶ their skills in joining in and playing in groups with others.



## Tips for parents and carers

Parents and carers can help children develop their friendship and empathy skills by:

- ▶ Modelling good communication skills such as listening, responding and showing interest in what a child has to say. Children learn much more from what adults do than what they say so this helps them to develop the skills they need to interact successfully with others.
- ▶ Talking about everyday friendship experiences with a child. What went well? What did not go so well? How did your child feel about it? How do they think the other child might be feeling? Reading and talking about stories involving friendships and understanding other people's feelings helps children develop these skills.
- ▶ Providing children with opportunities to practise their skills, such as arranging playdates for children and exposing them to lots of different social situations. Stay close enough to support children in their interactions but try to also give them space to work out their own problems and offer help when this is not working. In this way children will develop confidence in their skills within a supportive environment.
- ▶ Giving children encouragement and acknowledging their behaviour when you see them using friendship skills such as sharing, being responsible and caring about others.
- ▶ Talking with children about their progress and how they feel about the friendship skills they have been practising.



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



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