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Helping Children Make Friends

Steering Committee

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“Friendship,” said Christopher Robin, “is a very comforting thing to have.”

-- A. A. Milne

Helping children develop healthy, meaningful friendships can have an enormous impact on their mental and physical health as making friends is crucial for the holistic development of children, influencing their social, emotional, and cognitive well-being. Friendships provide a supportive environment for learning, growth, and the formation of critical life skills. Friendships increase overall happiness, mental well-being, and sense of belonging.¹

Interacting with peers helps children develop essential social skills such as communication, cooperation, sharing, and empathy. Positive interactions with friends also contribute to the development of a child's self-esteem and confidence because support and encouragement from friends can help children feel valued and accepted. Feeling connected to others helps children develop a positive self-identity and a sense of being part of a community leading to a sense of belonging and acceptance within a social group. Having friends allows children to express their feelings, share experiences, and receive comfort during challenging times.

Interacting with peers exposes children to different perspectives, ideas, and experiences. This exposure broadens their understanding of the world and promotes cognitive development. Friends often engage in play and creative activities together, fostering imagination and innovation. Play is a vital aspect of a child's cognitive and emotional development.

Through friendships, children learn to understand and share the feelings of others. This development of empathy is a crucial aspect of emotional intelligence. Friendships also inevitably involve conflicts and disagreements and learning to navigate these situations helps children develop important conflict resolution and problem-solving skills. Friends can serve as positive role models and influences, encouraging positive behaviors and attitudes. Children often learn from their peers to adopt positive habits through social interactions.

Engaging in physical activities and playing with friends promotes a healthy, active lifestyle. Friendships can encourage children to participate in sports, games, and other physical activities.

Friendships can change your cardiovascular and immune systems and they can also change how you sleep and improve your cognitive health.²

Friendships help children stay more engaged in school, leading children to participate more in the classroom, get better grades, and have better attendance. Children with friends are also less susceptible to peer pressure, are less likely to get involved with drugs, and are less likely to participate in unhealthy romantic relationships.³

Schools can play an important role in fostering social development and helping children make friends. Here are some strategies that schools can employ:

- Provide opportunities for connection.
 - Organize social mixers, especially at the beginning of the school year, to help students get to know each other in a relaxed setting.
 - Organize team-building activities and games that encourage collaboration, communication, and cooperation.
- School-wide initiatives
 - Implement social skills programs that teach children how to initiate and maintain conversations, listen actively, and resolve conflicts.
 - Implement buddy systems, especially in younger grades, where older students are paired with younger ones.
 - Establish peer mediation programs to empower students to resolve conflicts independently.
 - Implement anti-bullying campaigns to create a safe and respectful environment.
 - Provide access to counseling services for students who may be struggling with social anxiety or other challenges.
- Promote extra-curricular activities.
 - Encourage the creation of inclusive clubs and events that cater to various interests.
 - Encourage participation in existing clubs and sports teams.
- In the classroom
 - Get to know your students.
 - Be aware of social dynamics in the classroom.
 - Value friendship and help children establish and nurture relationships.
 - Seating arrangements should take into consideration the social aspects of learning.
 - Pairing friends with friends actually helps keep children on task, helps build connections, and strengthens friendships.
 - Finding reasons to seat children together – other than race and gender – can help children learn how to make friendships based on interests.

- Parent involvement
 - Involve parents in fostering a positive social environment. Provide workshops and informational sessions to help parents understand the importance of social development and how they can support their children in making friends.

It is important for schools to build a community because children learn best when they are part of a community where they feel accepted, encouraged, and valued.⁴

At home, caregivers and parents can help by understanding that some children struggle to make friends and there are many reasons why. The first step is to find out why – if you think your child is lonely or struggling to make friends, you need to ask! If your child is too young or has another reason as to why they would not be able to express that they are lonely – talk about what loneliness means to you – describe a time you were lonely and then ask them if they feel the same way. Caregivers and parents can help by taking the time to learn what their children’s interests are and help them find other children who have the same interests. This means finding groups in person and/or online and supporting your child to stay connected by scheduling playdates and/or other times to meet with other children they have connected with. It is important to also let your child be who they are and celebrate their unique personality.⁵

Recognize that children with mental health, behavioral, or learning challenges may struggle to make friends. For example, children with anxiety may feel overwhelmed or children with depression may not want to go out and be in social situations. Helping children break down how to be in a social situation into small steps might help. Role playing different scenarios could help your child practice the skills needed, what to say, manage expectations, and know what to do if things do not go as planned.¹

Friendships in childhood serve as a foundation for forming and maintaining relationships in adolescence and adulthood. The skills learned in early friendships are vital for building positive relationships throughout life.

References:

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3. <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/56979/what-the-research-says-about-the-academic-power-of-friendship>
4. https://ift.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1541-4329.12176?_gl=1*12xmmo8*_gcl_au*MjA3ODgyMzgZNi4xNzAwMTU4OTk3
5. <https://www.exchangefamilycenter.org/exchange-family-center-blog/2019/10/1/the-benefits-of-early-childhood-friendships-and-3-tips-for-helping-your-child-establish-meaningful-friendships>

Resources:

- <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/What-Parents-Can-Do-to-Support-Friendships.aspx>
- <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/helping-children-make-friends-what-parents-can-do-202303062899>
- <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/school-success/learning-toolkit-blog/5-tips-helping-children-develop-friendships.html>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/7-ways-to-help-your-students-make-friends>
- <https://www.crslearn.org/publication/the-friendship-issue/sowing-the-seeds-of-friendship-ten-ways-to-nurture-a-friendship-ready-classroom/>
- <https://studyinternational.com/news/lonely-no-more-how-parents-and-teachers-can-help-students-make-friends-in-school/>
- <https://integratedchildrens.com/the-importance-of-friendship-in-childhood/>