

Helping Your Child Learn to Make Friends

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Why: It's easy to think that making friends is something kids *just do*, not something they need to learn to do well. And it's true that all things can be learned with lots of trial and error. But, like most things, social skills are easier to learn if someone more experienced and wiser helps give you tips along the way. And role-modelling, rehearsal, and lots of practice time will also help.

Friendship Skills: There are many skills for *making* and *maintaining* social connections, such as:

- Body Language: Eye contact, open posture, facial expressions. Speaking clearly, not too quiet or too loud. Respecting other people's personal space.
- Conversation Skills: Initiating, asking questions, listening, staying on topic, sharing air time.
- Inviting Connection: Greetings, introductions, learning names. Asking to join in, inviting others in.
- Manners: Saying please, thank you, excuse me. Apologizing. Asking, not demanding.
- Being Kind: Encouraging, complimenting, helping, sharing. Doing nice things for others.
- Playing Well: Leading (suggesting ideas), following (trying other's ideas). Finding common ground and negotiating a mutually enjoyable option.
- Emotional IQ: Identifying emotions. Expressing emotions. Understanding impact of actions.
- Self-control: Taking turns. Being able to wait. Staying calm.
- Problem solving. Resolving conflicts. Sticking up for yourself, but not dominating.
- Coping: Accepting criticism, moving on from rejection to try again elsewhere, bouncing back.

To decide where to focus first, observe your child at play with other kids, and ask other adults (e.g. your child's teacher) for their thoughts: What are your child's social strengths? What skills are they lacking? Pick a few simple ideas to start teaching and practicing.

Methods for Teaching Skills

We can teach these skills in many different ways:

- Role model: Act how you would like your child to act.
- Watch for it: Watch people out in public – observe and comment when you see other people using a skill. Watch for examples in books you read together and shows you watch – comment on them. When another child uses the skill well, praise them so your child hears that praise.
- Pretend play: Whether playing house, or dress-up, or playing with puppets or dolls, incorporate examples of good social skills.
- Family games night or coached play: When playing with your child, praise the things they are doing well, make suggestions for how to improve. Help them learn to be good winners / losers.
- Script: Some children benefit from having "scripts" for starting conversations.
- Role play: Make up scenarios. Practice them with your child. After each session, talk about what went well and what could be better, then role play another scenario. Have them do this with other family members, such as on a Skype call with grandma.
- Ask your child to teach another child.

Some Specific Skills to Teach

- Learning Names: Help your child learn the names of kids they know. Keep a class list at home, or have photos – run through the names with your child. Use names when talking about their day.
- Meeting: Teach how to make eye contact, smile warmly, and introduce themselves.
- Greeting: Once they know someone, encourage them to say hi, use the other person's name, ask them about something specific – "how was your trip?" "what book did you bring today?"
- Use Kindness to Connect: Share a snack, make a drawing for a friend, or write a note.

- Finding common ground: Ask your child what they know about what another child likes to play or talk about, that your child is *also interested in*, so they know how to connect to them.
- Joining into play: Teach how to approach a group with a smile, and ask "Can I play?" Or, play nearby, with friendly body language, and they may invite you in. Make a suggestion for how you could participate: "That looks like a fun town you're building – can I add a house?"
- Keeping a conversation going: Teach your child some standard conversation starters: "do you have any pets / brothers / sisters" or "what is your favorite food / book / movie / video game?" Teach them how to ask follow-up questions. Teach how to stay on topic, by teaching the analogy of a conversation as a Lego tower. Your friend says something. You say something related that connects. Then they ask something related that connects. You're building a tower of connection.

When Challenges Inevitably Arise

Coping with Rejection: No matter how good a job your child does of approaching another child nicely, and asking to play together, there's always a chance the other child will say no. Help your child think what they could do in that situation, such as finding someone else to play with.

Conflict Resolution: Encourage your child to use words, especially I statements: Say how they feel, and what they want to have happen. Ask the other child what they would like to have happen. Compromise.

Managing aggressive behavior: If your child has a hard time managing frustration, help them practice taking deep breaths before reacting, noticing when they're getting too revved up and taking a break, help them think of other solutions, talk about problems, and seek support.

Create Opportunities:

Playdates. Set up playdates with other children. The one-on-one practice is the best skill builder, and also the best way to build closer friendships. Tips for success:

- Timing: Pick a time of day when both kids tend to be in good moods. Keep the playdate short.
- Have some plans: Work with your child to plan and set out possible activities that they think their friend would particularly enjoy. Sharing a fun experience builds connections.
- Minimize conflict triggers: If there are toys your child has a hard time sharing, or games your child has a hard time losing, put them away for the playdate.
- Supervise, but try to step back and let them play without a lot of interference from you.
- Snacks: If things aren't going smoothly, offering a tasty snack is often a good intervention.
- 2 person or 4 person playdates are best. If there's 3 kids, one often gets left out.

Free Play Opportunities: Take your child to the park, or other free play locations, often. If your child wears a t-shirt or carries a backpack with a favorite character, or brings a favorite book, that can end up as a conversation starter with someone who shares the same interests.

Extracurriculars: Enrolling your child in activities with a focus means that they'll find kids there that they have something in common with. However, within the structure of something like music class or soccer practice, they don't have a lot of time for free, unstructured interaction, which is what really helps to build friendships. So, try planning some playdates or free play opportunities with those kids after the lesson is over.

Extra Help:

There are some kids who have an especially hard time with friendship skills. A very introverted, shy, or timid child, or an anxious child, may need a lot of extra encouragement and hand-holding to get up the courage to connect. A child with ADHD struggles with impulsivity, and may need extra help focusing on social play and learning to take turns and share toys. An autistic child may struggle with reading emotions, interpreting social cues, and regulating their emotions.

If your child is 6 or older, and having challenges with building relationships, they might benefit from a social skills group. Ask a teacher, counselor, or occupational therapist for more information.