

# Information

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## Children and Friends

Human beings are social beings. Responsiveness is built in; we come into the world programmed to respond and relate to others. Even infants turn their heads in response to the sound of a human voice. Early in life children begin to interact with children outside the family - in child care settings, play groups, and preschool programs. The friendships children have with each other are different than those they have with parents and relatives. Family relationships provide an ease, a closeness, a deep sense of intimacy. But they don't substitute for other relationships.



Starting young and continuing through adulthood, friendships are among the most important activities of life.

### What are friends for?

Friendships are important in helping children develop emotionally and socially. They provide a training ground for trying out different ways of relating to others. Through interacting with friends, children learn the give and take of social behavior in general.

They learn how to set up rules, how to weigh alternatives and make decisions when faced with dilemmas. They experience fear, anger, aggression and rejection. They learn how to win, how to lose, what's appropriate, what's not. They learn about social standing and power - who's in, who's out, how to lead and how to follow, what's fair and what's not.

They learn that different people and different situations call for different behaviors and they come to understand the viewpoints of other people. Friends provide companionship and stimulation for each other, and they find out who they are by comparing themselves to other children - who's bigger, faster, who can add better, who can catch better. They learn that they're both similar to and different from others. Through friendships and belonging to a group children improve their sense of self-esteem.



The solace and support of friends help children cope with troubling times and through transition times - moving up to a new school, entering adolescence, dealing with family stresses, facing disappointments. Friendships are not just a luxury; they are a necessity for healthy psychological development.

Research shows that children with friends have a greater sense of well-being, better self-esteem and fewer social problems as adults than individuals without friends. On the other hand, children with friendship problems are more likely than other children to feel lonely, to be victimized by peers, to have problems adjusting to school, and to engage in deviant behaviors.

### **Friendship through the ages**

In the toddler years children begin to establish contact with peers, develop the rudiments of play behavior and show preferences for certain playmates. Preschoolers identify specific children as friends and interact differently with friends than non-friends. With toddlers friendship is not reflected in language, but in the time they spend together engaged in a common activity.

During the elementary school years children generally choose friends who are similar to themselves and who share their interests. At this age children become increasingly group-oriented; the most well-liked children are those who can manage social relations within a group and think of activities that are fun.

Groups reflect most of the problems that exist in all social relationships - inclusion/exclusion; conformity, independence, fear of rejection. They also reflect sex differences. Groups become more single-gender; girls usually have more intimate and supportive relationships with their friends than boys do. Their play groups reflect this difference; boys tend to associate with peers in large groups centered on sports while girls are more likely to be involved in small groups and spend more time in personal conversation. Girls' friendship groups are usually smaller and more exclusive than boys' during childhood, and then in adolescence the situation reverses.

Groups are a naturally occurring phenomenon. Belonging to a group, whether a sports team, fraternity or political party, provides a sense of belonging and is not just a means for exclusion. Between the ages of 10 to 12 cliques form; as children mature and rely less on their parents for guidance, they turn to their peers. Cliques can be based on appearance, athletic ability, academic achievement, social or economic status, talent, ability to attract the opposite sex, or seeming sophistication - the jocks, the nerds, the brains, the cool kids, etc.

Some kids care about belonging to a certain group, suffer from feelings of rejection if they are not included and can become victims of teasing and bullying. When cliques turn aggressive they may become gangs. Cliques peak in middle school as peer relationships and acceptance augment family relationships and then decrease in high school.



By kindergarten and grade-school, children are socializing more with each other, are developing preferences, and are increasingly picking friends of their own.

But while you may have less of a say in who your grade-schooler plays with than you did when they was younger, you can still help guide them towards developing healthy and happy friendships. Here are some tips on how you can help your child make new friends.

It's a heartbreaker. Your child comes home from school one day and says he doesn't have any friends and that nobody likes him - the dreaded words no parent wants to hear. You've been there; you know how cruel it can be on the playground and how quickly friendships seem to come and go throughout life. You want to wrap up your little guy and protect him from the world and most of all, you want to ensure that he has plenty of friends.

As much as you'd like to step in, you simply can't make friends for him. You can, however, give him the tools he needs to be social and to be a good friend. Every child is born with an innate need to attach or be in a relationship, but how he goes about forming those relationships depends largely on his temperament. Children can start to develop real friendships around the age of four or five. Learning to build friendships is one of the ways children develop into well-rounded, emotionally healthy human beings.



By giving your child the skills he needs to be confident and compassionate, you increase the likelihood that friends will eagerly come into his life. And friends will give his life a richness and happiness he will always treasure.

**Be a good role model.** Show her how much you value your friends, and what you give and get from each other. Play games with your child that emphasize sharing, patience and other important skills for making friends.

**Encourage -- but don't push.** If your child is shy, especially in new situations, give him some time to socialize at his pace

**Get him into a sport or favorite activity.** Doing things outside of school -- like playing soccer or taking a pottery class -- is another great opportunity for your child to make friends. Ask him which children he might like to play with and encourage her to invite them over for a playdate.

**Coax him into new relationships.** Having a best friend is great, but explain to him that while it's nice to have a best friend, that doesn't mean he can't also hang out with other kids, too.

**Respect his style.** You may be a social butterfly who needs people around constantly to feel energized. But if your child does better in one-on-one settings or likes to be alone occasionally, give him what he needs.

**Watch him interact with other kids.** You can learn a lot about your child by observing him as he socializes with peers. This can be particularly helpful if your young child seems to be having trouble making friends. Watch his behavior. Provide support to your child. This may seem easy, but how often do you really listen to your child? Pick up on her social cues by listening to what he says happened on the playground. Support your child's choice of friends and welcome them to your home. Try getting to know his friends and their parents.



This newsletter has been issued by:

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