



Making Friends: Preschoolers and Social Development

Do preschool age children really need to have friends?

Learning to make friends with other children is an important part of developing social skills. Preschool is one of the best places for children to learn and practice these skills with each other. While mothers and fathers can help their children develop good manners, respect for others, and good communication skills children often learn the most about relationships like friendship from other children. For one thing, your family is always your family no matter what. Friends are less likely to put up with all the things that mothers and fathers do.

Early friendships are the building blocks for later adult relationships among neighbors and co-workers. Friends help us solve problems and let us know through their similar experiences that we are not alone. Friends provide emotional support and role models for coping.

What kinds of skills does my child need to make friends?

Children make friends when they have a variety of skills which take time and practice to develop. Children develop these social skills earlier or later within age ranges. Some children have different temperaments and/or different cultural or life experiences which may make some of these skills easier to gain and use.

Here are some examples of skills that children need to make friends:

- an ability to express ideas and accept the ideas of others
- an ability to ask others to join their activities or make them feel part of the group
- an ability to solve conflicts
- an ability to pay attention to other children
- an ability to offer praise and affection to other children

- an ability to understand how their own words and actions will make other children feel
- an ability to approach and greet other children (even if there is a lot of watching beforehand)
- an ability to tell other children things about themselves such as their favorite games
- an ability to ask other children questions about themselves
- an ability to extend invitations to play

It's not always easy to make friends even for children who have mastered some of these skills. Sometimes it takes real persistence and sometimes it just won't work out. Your child may be frustrated or disappointed. It's helpful to talk about these feelings and reassure your child that there are many special qualities about them that another child is sure to appreciate.

Why are some children friends and not others?

Children make friends with a particular child or group of children for different reasons. To grown-ups these friendships may seem unpredictable. Children usually make friends with other children who are like themselves in some way. For example, they may have a similar appearance, they may have the same likes and dislikes, or they may enjoy the same style of play. Other friendships develop when an attachment forms between two children because they are neighbors and see each other every day or because they have been in the same childcare, school or even classroom since they were babies. Still other friendships develop when one child is the teacher or mentor of another child, showing them the ropes if they are new to the school or guiding them through the best ways to join in a game. Some children will have a small group of close friends, one best friend, or an array of loose associations. We all know adults who form these different kinds of bonds. Like adults, children form different friendships based on their temperament, their needs, or their culture.



Should grown-ups help children with their friendships?

There are many ways that mothers, fathers, teachers, and others can be helpful whether kids are having difficulty making friends. But, it's also important to give kids the space they need to try out these ideas on their own. Once you have practiced these suggestions with your children, take a step back and let the children make their own way.

- You and your child can learn and play games together. You can model some of the friendship abilities that were suggested above. This will give children ideas and practice for doing this on their own with new people too.
- Talk to your child about hurt feelings, their own and those of others. This is the first step toward learning how their own words and actions may "put off" other children.
- Make sure your child has time and opportunity to play with other children.
- Help children feel good about themselves.
- Talk to your child's teacher. Find out if there is a child that might make a good friend for your child and arrange a play date. Sometimes, a little nudge in the right direction is all it takes. Or, the teacher may have other ideas about how to get your child into the mix such as pairing your child with another who could use some help with schoolwork.
- Talk to your children about friendships. Your interest in their feelings and experiences can provide opportunities to brainstorm when there are bumps in the friendship road.
- Role-play ways that your children might be able to join a group. This practice is helpful in getting kids thinking about things they haven't tried before such as being more direct or learning to be subtle in their approach to others.
- Give children time and space to solve conflicts on their own before you intervene. If you do need to step in, help all the children involved understand that they can compromise to get some of their needs met while the other children get some things that they want as well.

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