

Making Friends Made Easy

Some kids seem to have a knack for making friends. Some kids seem not to want to try. And, still others try and try, but seem to scare friends away. Making friends is a skill that can be taught and learned and role played. As parents we need to understand how children play and connect with each other and how that process varies according to their age and social experiences.

Early interactions with friends are critical. According to one long-term study, the ability of a preschooler to get along with others was indicative of how they would handle social situations as adults. Intuitively, we understand that having friends makes a child feel special, likeable and appreciated--boosting their confidence through their close relationships.

In this article, I'll quickly set some expectations for play and friendship behaviors by age group and then give you some tips for managing your child's unique temperament.

Toddlers

At this age, children recognize their friend as part of their lives, but do not necessarily interact meaningfully with them. With toddlers, playing tends to involve what is called "parallel play." The toddlers are aware the others are in the room, but they are not interacting. Toddlers are intent on their own agenda which will frequently and regularly change depending on the activity and toy being played with by the playmate.

As a parent, you'll want to begin channeling your toddler's frustration into appropriate behaviors when they grab, pull, yank, yell or cry. There are several good books for toddlers through first grade including *When Sophie Gets Angry, Very, Very Angry* by Molly Garrett Bang and Jamie Lee Curtis' book *I'm Feeling Silly* that help explain life's different moods and how to channel them.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers can still engage in parallel play with their friends. However, as preschoolers, they really begin to truly enjoy each other's company, interact more and engage in physical and pretend play of all types. Their attention spans have become slightly longer and there is a general understanding of the meaning of sharing and taking turns. Additionally, preschoolers' language skills are improving rapidly making it much easier for them to make new friends.

Kindergarteners And First Graders

Kindergarteners and First Graders are truly making lasting friends and interacting with them and participating in pretend play with their action figures, dolls or dress up activities. At this grade level, scouting and team sport activities are typically started.

At about the age of 5, children begin to understand, if not embrace, the concept of "best friend" and liberally toss that phrase around both affectionately and defensively as in "you're not my best friend anymore." They understand sharing and turn taking and start frowning on behavior that doesn't meet social norms-"It's not nice to (activity here)"

How can you help develop a friendship friendly kid?

First of all, start young. Depending on the inherent nature of your child's personality, different parenting strategies will be more appropriate than others. I provided some hints and tips for friendship building by kid personality type below.

For Everyone

- Even young people love to hear their names. Teach them to ask a possible new friend for their name. Have them repeat the name, "Hi Sammy." When you have a chance, reinforce the name to your child. Make sure your child knows it is important to remember people's names.
- Teach conversation openers like "Hi, I'm (name)." "Can I play?" "I like your doll." Look for shared aspects, "I have those shoes too." Practice and role play with your child.
- Develop their sense of humor by doing and explaining little jokes yourself.
- Develop their ability to laugh at themselves. Do some silly self-deprecating things and laugh at yourself...
- Teach them to respect the rights of others.
- Let your child take responsibility. As much as possible, let the kids find their own solution even if it isn't perfect. Afterwards you can bring up the situation, praise the solution your child came up with and talk about alternative ways of handling it.
- Be ready to apply gentle pressure. Sometimes kids turn to you to make the introductions or provide the play solution. Gently turn them back with a suggestion that can get them started doing it themselves.
- Help them develop thick skin. Have you ever heard of the "You're not a Horse" game? It goes like this. When you child is called a name and comes running to you crying, give them a hug and say

You: "Are you a horse?"

Child: "No."

You: "Yes, you are a horse."

Child: "No, I'm not!"

You: "Yes, I think you're a horse."

Child: "I am not a horse!"

You: "Well you're not (bad word goes here) either, no matter how many times someone says it!"

It only takes a couple times before all you have to do is say "are you a horse" to turn them back to playing again and finding the "getting along" solution themselves.

Highly Assertive or Temperamental Children

- Teach them to walk away and come back. Frequently things will happen that make your child angry or frustrated or sad. Teach them to go away for a while and then come back and join back in play. Kids should be taught early to put things behind them quickly.
- Teach them to count to three when they are angry. This is an alternative to walking away when your child is angry. Teach him or her to count to 3 slowly taking deep breath giving them time to come up with a positive comment like "Can it be my turn to play in 3 minutes?"
- You can't say you can't play and other mean phrases: Teach your child that there are certain things they will hear that they shouldn't say. Of course, bad words are included in that, but there are other even more hurtful phrases like "you're not my friend," "I'm not going to invite you to my birthday party," that they should be taught are big no-no's.
- Teach the 5 second countdown for turn taking-i.e., "You get 5 minutes and I get 5." The beauty of this is that children don't truly understand time increments until they are in the first or second grade, so you can make the 5 minutes as long or short as needed to help the situation along.
- If your child is one of those that continually pushes their boundaries and timeouts don't work, talk with your pediatrician or other behavioral consultant about other disciplinary approaches.
- Be quick with the praise whenever you see positive behavior. Continue praising the behavior even when it appears well entrenched ..
- Schedule one-on-one time. Many assertive children just find it easier to interact appropriately when other children aren't around vying for attention.
- Take to a non-confined neutral location. Sometimes children will become territorial in their own home or neighborhood. Try attending a park that neither child is familiar with. They can then explore it together and find common ground.
- Be a good role model - Be kind and soft spoken and patient yourself. If you do find yourself raising your voice or not being a good role model, point it out. "There I go again. I guess I am just frustrated today, I'll have to try harder."
- Match your child's interests with group activities whether it is dance or team sports, "crazy" science or painting. Keep searching for the things your child likes to do and for opportunities to participate in them in a group situation.

Shy children

- Try pairing your shy child with younger and/or less assertive kids. This will allow them to build up their own confidence given their more advanced physical and mental capabilities.
- Take small steps that lead to positive social interactions. Reward your child for tiny social advances so she'll look forward to more interactions.
- Pay attention to your child's cues. Don't overlook a real problem. If eye contact is minimal, your child is withdrawn regularly, reacts strongly and physically when other kids are around, talk with your pediatrician.
- Watch videos on friends and friendship with your child as a non-threatening way to reinforce the benefits of socializing. Use them as a starting point for talking with your child about making friends and hopefully encouraging them to talk about their feelings.
- Don't tell them their feelings are wrong. Their feelings are their feelings. Try to repeat what they've just said and maybe add to it. You'll be amazed at what you can uncover

(i.e., "You don't want to play with Jenny right now. If you did want to play with Jenny, what would you play?")

- Keep play dates small. It's frequently much easier for shy children to initiate interaction with just one friend.
- Keep play dates short. If it's short, it is more likely to end on a positive note.
- Keep play dates regular - both in terms of timing and in terms of the friend involved. Children love routine. If a play date is a regular activity on Tuesday with Tom and on Thursday with Tim, your child will more likely take it in stride than if play dates and playmates aren't built into the routine. This also can be the stepping stone to initiating multi-kid play dates wherein Tim and Tom come over at the same time.
- Try not to expect too much. A successful short play date is something to be proud of where a shy child is concerned.
- Plan ahead. Have plenty of available activities so the kids don't have to share right away.
- Be a play date yourself. Schedule a regular time to play with your child on her level, with his or her dolls or action figures. Allow your child to pick the activities.
- Have your own play date come over as role model for your child. Invite your friend over for a play date and your child can learn from your behavior.
- Embrace the fads in order to ensure some common denominators. You might not like video games, but if every kid in school is playing Pokemon, then you might want to encourage playing it so your child has a conversation starter in certain circumstances.
- Investigate the school situation. Talk with the teacher. Is there something or someone in the environment that is making your child feel withdrawn or intimidated?

If your child continues to be shy or overly assertive with playmates, keep trying. It's worth it as research shows that children with friendship difficulties are prone to having poor self esteem and become low achievers later in life.

Good luck. Here's to happy, healthy kids.

John Burstein