

## Helping children with friendship skills

One of the most important things we can help children with when they start school is to be a good friend. We do this through play. Children often have issues with friendships when they start school and throughout their schooling years. It is important that we give them the skills to cope with these issues. We do this best by sitting back and letting them learn by experience. Young children are not deliberately mean. They spend a lot of time setting rules within games and testing these rules. Providing children with the skills to negotiate play and speak up when they are not happy with a situation is something we can do. The best thing your child can do when faced with a friendship issue is speak up and if the problem is not resolved to move away from the situation. This also teaches the other child that the way they have behaved is unacceptable and if they want to continue or restore the friendship this behaviour needs to be modified. It is very normal for children to experience strong emotions such as upset and anger...experiencing and acknowledging these emotions is an important part of learning.

One of the worst things we can do for our children when learning about friendships is overreact or over talk the situation. Listen and then encourage your child to speak up for themselves in a kind way, next time they are unhappy with their friends, or simply go and play with others. Children take time to develop empathy and are best left to learn from experience (no matter how much it breaks our heart to see them upset.) It is hard for us to apply our very adult understandings to these situations and in doing so, we can make things worse. In the life of a child often all is forgotten within a short time and the friendship moves on positively. It is more common for girls to experience ongoing issues, boys tend to move on more quickly from disputes.

If you are very worried, please come and speak to your child's teacher. We can often do some social coaching in play-based situations to help them develop the skills and resilience they need.

# What kinds of friendship skills and qualities are children developing in early childhood?

## Older toddlers (three-year-olds)

Three-year-olds are very interested in playing with other children.

At this age they:

- Have started to learn about feeling safe and loved, being friendly and coping with hard feelings.
- Begin to share their toys and understand the reasons for taking turns.
- Look forward to playing with other children; friendships are usually based more on what they want to play or what toys there are than on seeing the other child as a friend.

## Preschool children (around three to five years)

Four-year-olds want to play with other children a lot of the time. This is a good time for lots of playdates and sometimes having more than one child over to play. Preschoolers are able to think about other children's feelings and are learning the qualities and skills of being a good friend, including:

- taking turns
- including other children's ideas in play
- doing what other children want to
- sharing their toys
- understanding how other children may be feeling
- using words to describe their feelings and thoughts
- playing group games, acting out family or superheroes with friends and copying the behaviour of the adults they know
- spending time making up rules for their play as they start to learn about the social rules in their society. When someone gets tired of the rules and breaks them the friendship may temporarily end.

## Imaginary friends

Some three-and four-year-olds have imaginary friends. This is a creative way for children to practise being with others. You might see a child who has been in trouble scold their imaginary friend, or tell their imaginary friend about what has happened. With the imaginary friend they can try out different ways of

relating to others. Imaginary friends will gradually disappear as the child gets older.

### Friendship skills children are learning

To develop good friendships, now and later, it is important children begin developing the following skills:

- **Self-control:** being able to wait for what they want, using words to express their feelings rather than acting disruptively or misbehaving, giving others a turn with toys.
- **Welcoming:** being able to approach and respond to others positively (eg with a smile and greeting such as 'hello').
- **Assertiveness:** being able to say what they would like.
- **Consideration:** being able to say 'please' and 'thank you', taking turns, being able to lead and follow what others want to do, being able to cooperate and share.
- **Play skills:** being willing to take part in games and make suggestions for play.
- **Communicating:** talking and listening to others in a friendly way, saying something to start a conversation.
- **Helping:** being willing to help others.
- **Prediction:** being able to understand how others might be feeling based on their behaviour, being able to predict how their behaviour might affect others.
- **Thinking:** such as about alternatives when things go wrong (eg if other children want to play something different, thinking of whether to join them or find someone else to play with).
- **Coping:** being able to respond to rejection, disappointment or disapproval without experiencing too much distress or winning without gloating.
- **Empathy:** being able to respond to others' feelings with understanding.
- **Flexibility:** being open to hearing or learning about other points of view or ways of doing things.

It takes a long time to learn these skills and we continue to develop them well into adulthood. We can help children develop these skills by being aware of what friendship and empathy skills they are developing, playing with them and giving some gentle coaching when children are really struggling with something.

Children develop these skills through daily experiences; however, if you are aware of them you can give a hand at moments when some help is needed. You can do this by playing puppet games with children to help them practise these skills (eg "What will the puppet do if we push him? If we smile at him? If we say we like what he is doing?").

## Helping children cope with conflict and disagreements

Children learn a lot about the give and take of relationships just from playing together, and they need lots of opportunities to learn to work things out for themselves. It is during play in the early years some children find they can get what they want through aggression, while others allow themselves to be pushed around or not get a turn. Due to this, sometimes children need adult help to work things out.

Watchful adults can help with problems between children by helping each child to see how others feel and to say what they want. It is important to help all children express their feelings and learn the skills to work things out.

Sometimes, adults might be tempted to step in, take over and tell children what to do or not to do. This may make children feel that they are not capable of working it out for themselves and keeps them reliant on adults. Children need to learn why conflict arises and how to work it out among themselves.

Parents and carers can help children manage conflict by:

- Making a connection with each of the children involved in the conflict (eg by making eye contact and making sure that each child knows that you are there to care for and help them).
- Teaching children to use words rather than actions.
- Helping each child to say how they feel.
- Helping children to understand some words are hurtful.
- Encouraging each child to say what they would like to happen.
- Supporting children to think of things they could do to try and solve the problem.
- Acknowledging children doing well. This can be shown with a smile, a friendly glance, a comment (eg telling them what they are doing well and asking them to tell you how they did it).

- Following up and making sure children understand their problem solving worked well or talking to them about other solutions if things did not go so well.

It is important to consider what else may be going on for a child. If children are stressed or troubled by something that is happening in their lives, they have less resources to deal with life's everyday challenges and will be less able to learn new ways of doing things.

## Helping children cope with rejection, teasing and aggression

Young children are just beginning to learn about empathy and to think about how others feel, so they may not realise when they tease another child or leave a child out of a game it can be very hurtful. Sometimes they tease because of what they hear adults say, sometimes it is because of competition for friends and sometimes just because they are commenting on what they see (eg they might comment on a disability, call a child who cries a baby).

Parents and carers can help preschool children cope with rejection or teasing by:

- Helping children to address their unhelpful thinking (eg help them to remember when they have had a good time with friends and change their thinking from 'no-one ever wants to play with me' to 'Sam does not want to play with me today but yesterday we had fun together').
- Guiding your child through relaxation techniques (eg helping your child to take a couple of deep breaths when things go wrong and giving them time to think).
- Helping your child to think of something else they could do right now rather than playing with children that are being unkind (eg find someone else to play with).
- Helping your child think of what they could do to feel safe (eg tell an adult, stay close to other children).
- Help children find words to use in response (eg "When you do that, I feel upset").
- Talking to staff about what is happening for your child and working together to address the issue.

Older preschoolers who tease another child may say the other child did something first. It is important to hear what children say but help them to see this does not make teasing behaviour acceptable. Younger children (eg toddlers) are not usually able to manage the suggestions listed above. It is helpful for

name-calling or aggression to be managed at the time (eg by telling children it is not ok to say something hurtful, telling them how the other child feels, helping them to re-direct the behaviour, and checking that all children feel heard).

## **When children are aggressive to others**

Young children may be aggressive from time to time because they are learning and developing their understanding about boundaries, sharing, and playing together. Many children have 'grown out of this' by about three years of age, however some children go on being aggressive, and this can turn into bullying as they get older. Bullying is damaging both to the victim and to the bully, and children who bully often go on to bully in adulthood. It is important to help children manage aggressive behaviour when they are young.

Positive communication, positive methods of discipline and being aware of where children are and what they are doing are all good ways to help prevent aggression. Children who go on being aggressive sometimes need help in understanding how other children feel. It is often negative experiences in their own lives that are influencing this behaviour, and it is important that this is identified and addressed.

Children who are aggressive toward others benefit from help in developing their social and emotional skills. Children need to know their aggressive behaviour is not acceptable, and they also need understanding and support from adults to learn new ways of interacting with others and feeling good about themselves.

Parents and carers can help children manage aggressive behaviour by:

- exploring what is happening in their lives
- letting them know you like them and want to help them
- listening to how they feel
- helping them to think about how other children feel
- helping them to practise taking deep breaths before reacting
- helping them to have positive thoughts about themselves
- talking about other ways to get what they want, or express their feelings
- giving praise for successes and acknowledging them when they do something kind
- providing adult supervision and supporting them in their play.

## Group-joining skills

As children grow older, friendships with other children become increasingly important and children need to be able to join into groups. This starts with four-year-olds who are at the beginning stages of making real friendships. As you watch children play you may find many children do this well and have no problems. Others have more difficulty being accepted by others and joining in. These children benefit from support and guidance in learning the skills they need to be accepted by others and to approach groups in a way that increases their chances of joining in.

What does 'joining in' look like?

When children want to join a group they first watch what the group is doing as they decide whether they want to join, to get a feel of what the group is like and whether new players would be welcome.

Then the child may come up to the group, with a smile or friendly look, and make an offer to join. Sometimes children just ask: "Can I play?"; and sometimes they are invited in. Sometimes the answer might be: "No".

Children who have more developed friendship and play skills are more likely to be invited in by the group.

Children who come with an idea or a suggestion that interests the group are more likely to be able to join. For example, the child might say something like: "That looks like a good game about trains, I could be the driver". Here the child is not just asking to play but adding to the game and is more likely to be successful in being accepted by the other children. The child is building on the other children's ideas and is not trying to change or take over the game.

## Helping children who are experiencing difficulty joining in

When children are unable to join a group it may be because they haven't yet learned the things they need to do to join in. Some children are just ignored by the group. They might watch and perhaps smile, but not ask to join or offer an idea or suggestion. This may be because the child is unsure about being welcomed and just stands near and hopes to be invited.

[Full article here](#)