

POSITIVE FRIENDSHIPS

Friendships are a necessity for healthy psychological development. Children with friends have a greater sense of wellbeing, better self esteem and fewer social problems as adults. Children who have friends at a young age are more likely to have friendships at later ages.

ENCOURAGING FRIENDSHIPS

Have a loving relationship with your child

Kids who are close to their parents do better with their peers. A close relationship with a parent provides a child with a base of security and leads to confidence in developing and negotiating relationships outside the family.

Have children home to play and allow your child to go to other children's homes

- Children who are well adjusted socially have parents who are more involved in their children's social activities. Make time for your child to have a play with another child, or make concrete suggestions i.e. "You can invite someone to come to the pool with us on Saturday"
- Provide opportunities for your child to socialise, but don't push your child to interact
- Get to know your child's friends, be interested in their social activities.
- Get to know the parents
- If there doesn't seem to be anyone at school, help your child make friendships outside school.

Talk with children about social relationships and your values

Make time to chat to your child about their day. This communicates an interest in his or her wellbeing and allows for information exchange and problem solving.



Teach Social Skills

The building blocks of friendship:

- Introducing self
- Beginning / ending conversation
- Joining in a group activity
- Inviting someone to play
- Sharing and turn taking
- Accepting rules when playing a game
- Asking a favour
- Offering help
- Expressing your feelings
- Recognising others' feelings
- Tactfully saying 'no'
- Giving a compliment
- Accepting a compliment
- Keeping a confidence
- Taking responsibility for actions
- Apologising

Support your child to develop Social Skills

- Choose your time with your child, when things are calm and you have some privacy and time
- Determine which skills are lacking. This may be evident or your child may be able to tell you what they struggle with
- Problem solve about what might make a difference. You may want to do some role play with your child
- Give your child a 'homework' assignment, of a small change to attempt
- Evaluate the success or otherwise of the assignment.

About half of young children's attempts to play with their peers are unsuccessful. Their ability to keep trying is vital. Explain that feeling scared is a common experience when making new friends and dealing with issues with peers.

Support your child's social needs

Parents need to be sensitive to the needs of children to be accepted. Issues that are small to us can be very significant for a child. It can be helpful to respect a child's request not to be kissed in front of their friends, or to have the right school bag. If it is not easy or acceptable to you to fulfil the request, you can discuss this with the child and look for a solution that is acceptable to both of you.

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

Difficulties making friends

- If your child is finding it difficult to be with other children try to create easier situations for socialising. Just invite one child over to play and monitor the play and intervene when necessary to help things along.
- Controversial children, or children who stand out for a particular reason, i.e. class clown, rebel, can benefit from coaching about different ways of reacting to situations so they don't attract such strong feelings in others
- For the less popular child, having at least one friend can make the difference.

Aggression

A common reason for children to be rejected by other children is that they are aggressive. To assist children in learning anger management:

- Create a safe emotional environment where it is ok to express emotions (but not necessarily the behaviour)
- For younger children, encourage them to talk about things that make them angry, and use books and stories about anger
- For older children, assist them to recognise the early warning signs of anger - physical and emotional. Help them to come up with strategies to interrupt the anger cycle, and teach them how to use self-calming techniques.
- Model responsible anger management

How to support your child when they have problems with friends

- Listen to your child
- Problem solve. Help them reach their own solution
- Assist the child to view the situation in a positive way i.e. "sounds like your friend was having a bad day", rather than, "she is mean, you don't want to be friends with her"
- Help children to understand the feelings of others.
- Let children sort the problem out themselves, as much as possible.

What to do when you don't like your child's friends

- Many of the friendships parents worry about are short lived. Allowing a friendship to run its own course will work better than trying to stop it
- Address the need the friend satisfies; ask what the child likes about that friend. The answer may give you clues about the real reason he or she is attracted to that friend
- Discuss your own values with the child
- Allow the child to bring the friend home, so that at least they are under your supervision
- Distinguish between experimentation and danger. When the issues are potentially dangerous, parents have a responsibility to discourage the association.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is a type of social influence that produces conformity to a particular way of thinking or acting. The power of peer pressure is often in the allure of wanting to be part of the group.

A mistake made by parents is to think the power of the group is easy to resist. Research shows that even for adults, only one in three are able to actively speak out and resist the power of a group opinion.

Remember for children being part of a group is better than not being part of a group. Rather than telling them not to be part of a particular group, help them to develop the skills and confidence to manage the pressure and perhaps make new friends.

Helping children deal with pressure from friends is more important than protecting them from it.



Teasing and Bullying

Danger signs to look out for:

- Tears, fears, anxiety about going to school
- Asking to stay home, pretending to be sick (school avoidance behaviour)
- Worries that seem to be directly connected to the less-supervised parts of the day
- General signs that child is upset

If you think something is going on, you can ask your child about school in general. Discuss the subject of teasing and bullying, before it gets to be a problem. Discuss what it is and let a child know

- never tease or bully anybody else because teasing and bullying is mean
- if anybody teases or bullies him/her, that person is doing something wrong

Help the child plan good ways to respond to the teasing in the future

- Listen to the child about the issue, with empathy
- Find out what the child is being teased about. There may be something he/she can do to correct a situation that may be irritating to his/her peers
- Remind the child that ignoring teasing instead of responding emotionally, reduces the chances of it reoccurring
- If your child is being victimized by the same classmates repeatedly it may be worth having a talk to the teacher and putting some strategies in place.

Bullying is an ongoing pattern of physical or psychological aggression that is threatening and leaves the victim feeling powerless. Children should not be expected to handle bullying on their own. Kids need to be taught that bullying is unacceptable, and this needs to be reinforced at all levels, at home and in school.

What can be done at home

- Help your child feel successful. Praise and recognise your child's strengths and talents. Generally the more confident a child is, the less likely they are to be bullied or bully.
- Teach empathy. Help your child understand other people's feelings, especially how their behaviour can affect others.
- Set limits. Always giving in when a child becomes demanding teaches them that bullying works.

- Let your child stand up to you once in a while. Letting your child be angry with you and express their opinion makes it more likely that they will have the confidence to stand up to a bully.
- Encourage positive friendships. Loners are more vulnerable to bullying.
- Watch what you do. If you lead by example of aggression, threats and intimidation your child will likely use the same tactics with their peers.
- Teach mediation skills. Take every opportunity to teach your child how to resolve conflict peacefully and fairly. Teaching problem solving skills shows them there are other ways to handle conflict other than with force.
- Reduce exposure to violence. Studies have documented that children who are exposed to violence on TV, computers and in the home are at a higher risk of acting out those behaviours. (Pagewise, 2004)
- Increase supervision. Children who know the watchful eye and awareness of their parents (guardians, or teachers) are never far away are less likely to engage in inappropriate behaviour.

Model appropriate social behaviour

Be conscious about what you are modelling around issues such as loyalty, gossip, put downs and conflict resolution. The early relationship a child forms with his/her parents and the relationships they observe in the family lead to expectations about what relationships outside the home should be like.

SOURCES

Websites

www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles.html

Do Kids Need Friends? by Anita Gurian, Ph.D. and Alice Pope, Ph.D.

Bullies: More Than Sticks, Stones, and Name Calling by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.

www.headroom.net.au/family

Books

The Unwritten Rules of Friendship: Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Make Friends by Natalie Madorsky Elman, Ph.D. and Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D.

Quirky Kids : Understanding and Helping Your Child Who Doesn't Fit In- When to Worry and When Not to Worry by Perri Klass and Eileen Costello