

The Importance of Friendship for School-Age Children¹

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Friends are vital to school-age children's healthy development. Research has found that children who lack friends can suffer from emotional and mental difficulties later in life. Friendships provide children with more than just fun playmates. Friendships help children develop emotionally and morally. In interacting with friends, children learn many social skills, such as how to communicate, cooperate, and solve problems. They practice controlling their emotions and responding to the emotions of others. They develop the ability to think through and negotiate different situations that arise in their relationships. Having friends even affects children's school performance. Children tend to have better attitudes about school and learning when they have friends there. In short, children benefit greatly from having friends.

What parents can do to help child make friends

Parents play a crucial role in their child's social development. A child is not born with social skills. He needs parents who take an active role in preparing him to interact successfully with his peers. The most important thing parents can do for their child is to develop a loving, accepting, and respectful relationship with him. This warm relationship sets the stage for all future relationships, including friendships. It helps the child develop the basic trust and self-confidence necessary to go out and meet others. It provides a firm foundation on which the child can develop social skills.



Parents also teach their child various social skills by being a good role model. That is, a child learns from how his parents interact with him and other people. He learns how to meet people and talk to them, to tell stories and jokes, and to cooperate with others and ask for favors. He learns how to win or lose well, to apologize and accept apologies. He learns to accept compliments graciously and to show admiration and appreciation. Furthermore, he learns to be patient, respectful, and considerate. Parents help their child learn how to be a person others like to be around by showing him with their own actions.

You can do a great deal to prepare your child to make friends by maintaining a warm relationship with him and

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being a good role model. Below are some additional ways you can help prepare your child.

Provide your child with opportunities to spend time with other children. You can provide these opportunities in a number of ways. For example, you can invite other children to your house to play or let your child participate in clubs, classes, or teams. Older children may want to talk with their friends on the phone, in chat rooms on the internet, or through instant messaging. Set rules for using these methods of communication with your child and let him talk to his friends.



Help your child learn games and sports. Being able to play games and sports tends to be important for school-age children. Children do not have to be a superstar at a game or sport, but it is easier to join in and have fun if they know the rules and have the basic skills. Find out what game or sport your child is interested in and help her learn it. Do not pressure your child to play anything she does not want to. The pressure will only make her feel inferior. Make sure not to let the practice become a drill or drudgery. Be encouraging and focus on the fun of playing together.

Set clear rules for appropriate behavior. A child learns social skills in part through family rules about how to treat others. For example, a child might learn to ask before borrowing something or to solve a problem without hitting. Involve your child in setting family rules. If he is involved, he will not only be more likely to follow them, but he will

also better understand the reasons for the rules and the standards for appropriate behavior.

When you need to discipline your child, remember that he will imitate your actions. How you treat him when he breaks a rule will influence how he responds to others. Avoid being harsh and punitive. Instead, be firm, kind, and respectful when you express your expectations of him.

Teach your child how to handle different social situations. You began this process when your child was a toddler. For example, you began to teach your toddler how to share and how to say please and thank you. Continue coaching your child as she grows older and encounters more social situations. If your child will be encountering a new or difficult situation, talk to her about it beforehand. For example, your child has been invited to a birthday party, but she is not sure if she wants to go. First listen to her concerns. Acknowledge her feelings without judging them. For example, say, “It sounds like you feel scared about being around kids you don’t know.” Then help your child brainstorm ideas about how to handle the situation. She might want to practice what to say to the birthday child when she arrives or to invite another guest over to get to know her better before the party.



Talk with your child. Spend some time every day talking with your child. This time is not for giving instructions or lecturing, but just for talking about the day’s events or things that interest both of you. When your child is talking, make sure you are listening. For example, make eye contact, nod, and ask him questions to encourage him to elaborate on what he is saying. Talking with your child will not only

help you keep up with him, but it will also let him practice the very important social skill of holding a conversation.

Help your child learn to see others' points of view.

Around the age of six or seven, children are more able to understand others' feelings and points of view. Help your child develop this ability by talking about different situations. For example, when reading with your child, stop and ask how a character is feeling and why he does certain things. Or when your child tells you about situation at school, ask how she thinks the people felt and why they acted as they did.

Help your child learn to manage negative feelings and solve problems.

Being able to manage negative feelings and work out problems are important skills in getting along with others. When your child talks about how he is feeling, listen. Show you are listening by reflecting what he says. For example, say, "It sounds like you're mad at Jamie." Then, gently coach your child in problem solving. First, help your child identify the situation. For example, say, "It sounds like you're upset because Jamie didn't include you in the game." Then help him brainstorm solutions to the situation. Talk about the solutions he comes up with and have him pick one.

If you overhear your child and his friend having a conflict, let them work it out on their own. Only step in if it is really necessary: if, for example, an argument is getting physical.

Do not sweat the small stuff. Fitting in with friends is very important to school-age children (and becomes increasingly important as children near adolescence). Recognize how important it is to your child. She and her friends may do things that seem silly to you. For example, you may not like how children this age like to dress. However, if your child's behavior is not dangerous or offensive, do not sweat the small stuff.

Conclusion

If you are concerned about your child making enough friends, stop to consider whether he just has a different social style than you do. For example, your child may prefer one or two close friends rather than a wide circle of friends. One style is not better

than another. What matters is that your child is comfortable and happy with his friends. If it seems that your child has no friends, talk to your child's teacher, school or family counselor, or pediatrician for additional guidance and resources.

As a parent, you play a crucial role in your child's social development. You cannot make friends for your child, but your love, patience, and support make it possible for your child to meet new people and make friends on her own. Friendships are very important to a school-age child. They help a child grow. They help her develop the self-confidence and social skills she will need as an adult.

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