

Making Friends

By Lillian G. Katz

Being able to make friends and get along with other children during childhood has important far-reaching consequences in later life. Many specialists studying the long-term development of social competence claim that if valuable peer-relations skills are not developed early, social-adjustment problems may arise later during adolescence and adulthood.

These dire warnings do not suggest that all young children must become social butterflies. It is important for all children to be able to work, play, or just be alone contentedly some of the time. But a child who is alone because she cannot engage in satisfying interaction with other children should be helped to learn how to do so.

The art of making friends. Though making friends seems to come naturally to most children, it requires a good deal of experience and usually involves lots of trial and error. Observations of children successful in making friends indicate that they use such skills as giving appropriate responses to their own actions or the actions of others, like "Excuse me" or "Thanks a lot." They also make positive suggestions to others, offer to help and to contribute to others' activities, use phrases that encourage an exchange of information, like "You know what?" and readily respond in turn with "No! What?" They are likely to express their desires clearly, to request information from others about their intentions and wishes, to refrain from calling attention to themselves, and to enter ongoing conversations on, rather than off, the current topic. They also seem to know how to es-



Two for the road: Activities that require more than one encourage a youngster to develop social skills. A pony ride, for instance, is more fun (and less scary) with two aboard.

tablish mutual interests by exploring ways in which they are similar to other children: likes, experiences, or characteristics they and their peers have in common.

The parents' role. Recent research suggests that parents have an important role in helping develop and refine their children's friendship-making skills. As it is in many other aspects of children's development, having warm, supportive, and encouraging parents to which the child feels deeply, securely, and affectionately attached seems to be basic to the development of social competence. Not surprisingly, there is ample reason to believe that parents' own interactions with their friends provide the young child with models and cues about the skills involved. Parents' behavior indicates to their children the value the parents place on friendships. It also lets children know that their parents are concerned with the feelings of others. Parents can help children by asking from time to time about the feelings of their children's close friends—simple questions like "How does Sally feel about... [a favorite game or a school outing]?" Parents also play a role when they help their children interpret their

friends' feelings, and when they teach them to resist jumping to premature conclusions in interpreting their friends' behavior. Parents can also provide a model that shows children how to respect someone with whom they disagree. Respecting someone we agree with is easy by contrast.

Provide lots of opportunities. Some activities are more conducive to the development of social skills than others—a youngster is far more likely to be in a position to test his social skills at the neighborhood playground than at home with a boxful of toys. Opportunities for spontaneous, unstructured play among young children under the supervision of a knowledgeable adult are essential. Many children having difficulty making friends become excluded from social activities, and thus have less experience and fewer opportunities to develop, learn, practice, and refine the skills they lack. It takes probably about seven or eight years to develop and refine the wide range of skills required for friendship making and keeping. Thus it is a good idea to start early in providing a child with lots of warmth and support, and with frequent opportunities to make and keep friends.

ROY ROBER/GAMMA LIAISON



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In the Company of Friends

By Lilian G. Katz



Cheering section: Making friends is a social skill that takes time to polish. Youngsters are able to learn the basics, such as cooperation and compromise, through play.

Enjoying the company of friends is not merely one of the good things of life. Contemporary research indicates that the failure to acquire friendship-making skills during the early years is associated with a variety of social difficulties in adolescence and adulthood. Furthermore, research shows that having friendships contributes to the capacity to cope with the inevitable crises that arise throughout life. It appears that the groundwork for the ability to make and sustain friendships is laid very early in life.

Although the ability to make friends seems to come naturally to most children, not all of them learn to do so without help. A close look at peer interaction in the early years shows that it involves many complex skills that take time and practice to learn and experience to polish.



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Playing with others requires essential social skills such as initiating contact with unfamiliar peers, negotiating who will play what role, who will take the lead, whose turn it is, for example, to hold the doll or be the driver. Peer play frequently calls upon the need to be assertive about one's rights and possessions, the need to back down in a dispute, the capacity to handle being rebuffed, and many other social competencies. Given the importance of successful peer play and its complexity, it is not surprising that early on most children benefit from the support, suggestions, and supervision of adults.

Family matters. It is a good idea to remember that children's peer interactive styles are, in large part, modeled upon what they have observed at home. Even young children pick up on such basic qualities as warmth and hostility, trust and mistrust, friendliness, and give-and-take.

Children can also be helped when they are encouraged to ponder the behavior of other children. Instead of simply letting a child describe another as "mean" or "weird," encourage her to think of other interpretations of the events that led to her use of those adjectives. This strategy

should ultimately lead to the child's becoming more tolerant, more accepting of and open to others and to their points of view.

Learning to negotiate. When difficulties arise in your child's friendships, resist the temptation to interfere too quickly. It is known that friends squabble more than non-friends, and renegotiating the relationship following the squabble is a very important skill to develop. When your child seems unable to solve the problem without help, intervene by making suggestions in experimental form. For example, you might say to her, "Try *x*, and see if that helps. If not, come back and we'll think of something else to try."

When difficulties arise, either because a friendship is volatile and rocky or because it fails to develop, resist the temptation to be overly sympathetic. If your commiseration is too great, it may signal to your child that there is a real tragedy in the making. Rather, take a matter-of-fact approach, suggesting either that perhaps this particular child or group of children may have different interests or that it would be a good idea to try alternative approaches or other activities.

Positive interaction. For some preschoolers whose social skills are fragile, time spent with somewhat younger children may have positive effects. While older, more competent children may be impatient with a preschooler and thus weaken her confidence, younger ones with less sophisticated social skills may be more accepting, strengthen her confidence, and thereby provide needed opportunities to improve on the skills she has and to learn new ones.

Most children benefit from having peers invited to their home for relaxed visits, when play can be encouraged and closely supervised. It is also a good idea to know your child's playmates well so that you can minimize problems and provide the kinds of play situations most likely to maximize interest and cooperation. ●

CLIFF GARDNER, JR.