

# Parenting Together

## Benefits of Early Childhood Friendships

From very young ages, many children start to make friends. Early friendships often start with those who children spend the most time with, whether that is family members (siblings, cousins), children in your community, or children your child meets through caregivers, early childhood program, or school. Early friendships may look different from adult friendships. Very young children (children aged 0-2) often play near one another alone or they may show interest in watching one another play. Many children start to engage in parallel play after age two where they play next to one another, but not necessarily together. Finally, around the preschool years (ages 3-4), children start to include one another in play, interacting with one another, slowly moving from basic interactions to cooperation. Each of these stages of play helps children build the skills they need to form friendships.

Friendships throughout a child's life have many social, emotional, and cognitive benefits. Early friendships can help children build skills, including taking turns, sharing, and cooperation and lay the foundation for later friendships.

### Developmental Benefits

Research shows that establishing friendships is an important developmental goal for children of all ages. Friendships developed



during the preschool and early school years give children valuable contexts in which to learn and practice skills related to social, cognitive, communicative, and emotional development.

For example, by learning how to navigate their early childhood friendships, children learn:

- How to be sensitive to the viewpoint and opinions of others
- How to navigate the rules of conversation
- What constitutes appropriate behavior

Additionally, the benefits of friendship for children are similar to the benefits of having friends as adults. Friendships benefit children by creating a sense of belonging and security and reducing stress. Child psychologists often find that early childhood friendships greatly contribute to children's overall quality of life and ability to adjust to changes within their environments.

Friendships also relate to positive school performance. When children develop strong friendships, they tend to have higher self-esteem and are better able to focus on doing well in school because they are not feeling sad or lonely. We cannot downplay the value and importance of social and emotional support provided by friends, either. Having someone to turn to who can help your children deal with stress and transitions is essential to develop healthy coping skills.



How can parents and caregivers help children establish strong friendships? While there's no one-size-fits-all solution formula for making friends and maintaining healthy friendships, we can help children develop relationships skills that will foster deep, meaningful connections with others. When it comes to friendship, it's about quality, not quantity!

## How to Help Children Develop Positive, Meaningful Friendships

1

**Model friendship skills.** Children learn from watching the adults in their lives. Whenever you interact with your own friends, you are showing children how to treat other people and how you like to be treated. Talk with your children about the friends in your life. When did you become friends? What makes someone a good friend? Why have your friends been important to you?

2

**Encourage friendships that are important to your child.** If your child establishes an important relationship that brings them joy, help them find ways to connect play dates, meet ups at the library or park, or look for other opportunities to build these relationships. Even infrequent playdates can help your child feel connected and learn what it means to build a relationship with a friend.

3

**Respect your child's personality.** When it comes to making friends, it's important to let your child be who they are. Try not to compare your child's friendship skills to their siblings' social personalities or that of other kids you know. While some kids are outgoing and love to have a lot of friends, others are happy having only a few close friendships. What's important is to celebrate your child's unique personality and specific needs.

Navigating early childhood friendships can be challenging. Children are not only learning skills they need to interact prosocially with others, they are developing the skills they need to express their words, emotions, and needs while also learning how to get along with others. There are likely to be challenges and missteps along the way. Support your child by helping them practice the skills they need and talking through difficult situations as they arise, brainstorming strategies with your child in ways they are able.

Children grow socially as they grow physically, emotionally, and cognitively through friendships. With the loving support of parents, caregivers, and other adults, children can learn to develop meaningful friendships although these friendships may look different for each child. The caring relationship you have with a child lays the foundation for caring friendships.



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### The Book Nook

How to Apologize  
by David LaRochelle

Maple & Willow Together / Arce y  
Sauce juntas  
by Lori Nichols

Meesha Makes Friends  
by Tom Percival

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### References

What Parents Can Do to Support Friendships

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/What-Parents-Can-Do-to-Support-Friendships.aspx>

Kids Who Need a Little Help to Make Friends

<https://childmind.org/article/kids-who-need-a-little-help-to-make-friends/>

What should I teach my elementary school aged child about healthy relationships?

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/elementary-school/what-should-i-teach-my-elementary-school-aged-child-about-health>