

Teaching Your Child Friendship Skills

https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMC2-201205-02_friendships-supporting.pdf is a link to two KidsMatter pages (we are well on our way to becoming a recognised KidsMatter Primary School through our professional learning and adoption of mental health initiatives) and a great read for tips on developing children's friendship skills. As parents we sometimes rely on the skill development to happen organically through exposure to friends at playgroup, school, family friends and extra curricula activities. For most children, explicit teaching will help with greater understanding and skill development in friend making, friend keeping and conflict resolution.

We would all agree that friendships are good for children's self esteem. When your child has good friends, she/he feels like they belong, there are people to share in the fun and in their common interests. The important life skills that come with friendships revolve around getting along, maintaining some independence whilst being in relationships and inevitably learning how to sort out conflicts and problems. If your child finds it easy to make and maintain friendships they are possibly quite intuitive to the needs of others, have had excellent role models and teachers (you, their parents/carers) and are able to share, take turns and articulate what is fair and what is not. They are no doubt self aware in terms of understanding how they present to others. This leads to the development of the skills for being socially aware, developing healthy relationships and being able to resolve problems.

If your child finds it hard to make friends, you can be more active in assisting him/her. Reminders about how to introduce themselves (practise using the actual words they should use eg "Hi, my name is Isabel. What's your name?"), the body language to use such as eye contact, being aware of personal space and smiling is vitally important too. Children can be taught to use compliments - we all know how boosted we feel when complimented and your child's peers are no different. Key social skills which often need to be taught explicitly are cooperation, communication (particularly I statements), empathy, emotional control and responsibility.

Poor social skills which require remedying are physical aggression, arguing, interrupting, name calling, bossing others, whining, complaining, showing off, being a poor loser, getting into others' space, talking too much, breaking the rules of play, being too rough in play, and taking others' possessions. Working hard to develop positive social skills is incredibly important for making friends, developing a sense of belonging and for self esteem. The following are positive social skills you can teach your child to help them to manage relationships and in fact, thrive, in any context in which they find themselves:

- starting conversations
- taking turns
- expressing needs and feelings
- asking questions, complimenting others
- accepting others
- refusing to join others' negative behaviours
- taking others' feelings into account
- seeing the others' viewpoint
- sharing
- listening
- compromising
- asking for what one wants/needs
- apologising to others

- following rules of play
- playing fairly
- being a good loser
- helping others
- cooperating

Teach one behaviour or social skill at a time and make sure your child is able to do it before focussing on another skill. Little expressions like smiles, looking at the person, using the person's name and speaking in a confident, friendly voice can make all the difference when making friends. Model the behaviours/skills in context and also show your child through role play to consolidate the skills. Coach your child to practise positive social skills in everyday situations with the family and friends. Give positive feedback and praise commenting on the specific skill such as "I noticed you gave really good eye contact when you spoke to Issy," rather than saying, "Good job."

Tips for developing older children's friendship skills

- **Teach emotional and social skills**

Explicitly teach the skills your child has not fully developed, one by one from the list above.

- **Use positive language when managing behaviour**

Communicate expectations for behaviour clearly and respectfully. Beginning with "I need you to..." or "I would like to see..." is clear and respectful.

- **Talk about values**

Read stories that emphasise values with your children. Ask their opinions on moral issues/dilemmas that they see in television shows, stories, in situations you might describe.

- **Capitalise on 'teachable moments'**

When something happens that requires a response which draws on values, it represents a 'teachable moment'. For example, if Issy's feelings are hurt ask, "How could you find out what Issy is feeling upset about?" and "What do you think you could do to help?"

- **Supervise media use**

Children often imitate behaviour they see on television, movies or on the internet and when they are exposed to violent or inappropriate media images they can see these as normal as well as be very frightened of them when they cannot make sense of this so always ensure that what they are watching is age and level of understanding appropriate.

- **Promote a sense of identity**

Acknowledge the ways in which your children help and assist them to stand up for what they believe in so that they see their contributions as worthwhile and a sense of pride is engendered.

- **Involve children in family discussions and decision making**

Encouraging children to contribute to family discussions and decision making gives them practice in listening to others' views and seeing things from different angles.

The school holidays are not far away. This is an ideal time to create play opportunities with a friend and watch and listen to your child relating to their friend. The interactions will help to identify if there is a need to find some teachable moments for improved friendships skills. We hope the holidays bring with them some new as well as relaxing experiences for you and your family.

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