

## ***Building Friendship Skills***

[Parents] can play a significant role in helping children develop the ability to initiate and sustain friendships. As their conception of friendship changes over time, children can build on basic social skills to make lasting connections.

The following suggestions are designed to promote positive relationships... One of the simplest ways to assess children's social competence is to observe their interactions with others. The degree to which a child is liked or disliked can also serve as a barometer of social adjustment. Changes or lack of change in children's behavior will assist you in planning and modifying intervention strategies.

- Celebrate the importance of friendship in developmentally appropriate ways. For example:
  1. Read books, listen to music and view videos with friendship themes.
  2. Have children draw pictures of themselves playing with friends and label and display the artwork.
  3. Make a list of what friends do or what friendship means.
  4. Discuss how it feels when a playmate moves away, and create going-away friendship books for children who are moving.
  5. Prepare and present skits and role-plays in which friends and an emotional resource (e.g., offering hugs, sharing materials, having fun together).
- Intervene when discriminatory or exclusionary behavior is harmful, and provide positive models for forging friendships. For example:
  1. Set limits to gender segregation and provide opportunities for cross-gender friendships.
  2. Use puppets, stuffed animals, skits, and interviews to model inclusive behavior and appropriate actions children might take to stand up for themselves.
  3. Purchase toys, books and materials that encourage [taking turns], empathy and cooperation.

## ***Friendship Connections***

To have a friend and to be a friend are more than wishful expectations in early childhood--they are basic needs. Considerable evidence suggests that friendship supports young children's cognitive as well as emotional development. Children who relate to others in socially acceptable ways are usually well-liked and included in play and work

activities. Factors that hinder or disrupt the emerging bonds of friendship can have lasting negative effects on children's lives.

For most young children, school is the primary place to develop a sense of social belonging, to form ideas about keeping friends. A teacher's affection and respect toward all children provides not only a nurturing environment but also an important model of friendship.

Children's need for peer connection develops sequentially. Infants as young as six months crawl toward and "check" other babies for information or signals that might involve them in a social interchange. Toddlers often display a preference for certain partners in "parallel play." Intermittently, they may interact with each other and even create imitation games: One child picks up a block, and a few seconds later a peer copies her; or one says "Da" and another mimics the sound.

The word "friend" enters many children's vocabulary in the early months of speech, reinforced by frequent adult references. Pets, playmates and toy creatures may all receive the label. A 2-year-old may point to someone who shares his table or plays with him at school and exclaim, "That's my friend!" The designation reflects the pleasure and comfort of emerging social routines (Edwards, 1986).

For 3- and 4-year-olds, friendship takes on a more intentional aspect. Preschoolers and kindergartners confer and withdraw the status of "friend" at will according to a number of criteria, including general compatibility, variable moods and the nature of the present activity. At this stage, comments such as "Will you be my friend?" "You're not my friend!" or even "I hate you!" are not literal expressions of emotion by rather perceptions of the momentary prospects for play. Although children may experience disappointment and even anger at a rebuff during playtime, such feelings generally reverse at the next positive encounter.

Around ages 6 through 8, children's friendships acquire a more sophisticated and lasting content: Friends are people who are nice to each other; they exchange resources and services; and they maintain a relationship over time. Children at this stage begin to share secrets, toys and promises with their friends. They may also choose to terminate friendships if they perceive that a partner refuses to help or ignores their feelings or needs. These feelings and experiences provide the groundwork for the mutual respect and responsibility that characterize mature friendships.

At all developmental levels, children exhibit varying degrees of success at making and keeping friends. The skills required to positive social interaction come naturally to some children and prove more challenging for others. When a class member has difficulty establishing friendships, it is important for the teacher [and parent] to understand the situation at hand as well as other possible sources for the problem. There is a distinction between children who lack friends because they lack social skills and those who are targets of bias, prejudice and discrimination by their peers.

Healthy peer relationships empower children to develop social competence, embrace egalitarian attitudes and handle conflict effectively. Early childhood programs that incorporate friendship as a major curricular component prepare children for a respectful, responsible role in their expanding world.

## References

- Derman-Sparks, L. (1995). "Children and Diversity." *Early Childhood Today*, 10 (3) 42-45.
- Edwards, D. P. (1986). *Promoting Social and Moral Development in Young Children*. New York: Teachers College Press.