

## Making Friends

Most adults need and value friendships in their own lives, and therefore parents are likely to value them for their young children. Friendships sometimes just happen, at other times they happen as a result of being actively encouraged. However, they cannot be forced. Think about your own friendships. Someone can provide the introduction and a setting that encourages exploring shared interests. At other time you stumble into a friendship with someone because of common circumstances or interests. However, no one else can *make* a friendship happen. So it is with young children.

A friendship is a sustained close positive relationship over time and sometimes over distance. It does not necessarily last forever, but it is not fleeting. It requires time and opportunities to be together (or at least communicate together) to find out about one another and to share common interests. It is characterised by special regard and delight in each other's presence, a kind of compatibility and comfort, and missing the other person when they aren't present.

It used to be thought that children didn't develop true friendships until they were over three years of age, but this probably had more to do with the lack of opportunities for children under three to be in sustained contact with other children than with reality. There are numerous accounts of friendships developing between babies and toddlers who spend time together, in child care for example; however, friendships at this young age may not be as long lasting as ones between older children and of course, communication and sharing are limited.

Just as is true with adults, some young children are much more outgoing and social than others. Some who have the skills to interact successfully with other children seem to enjoy their own company much of the time and just aren't very interested. As long as adults are confident that a child is actually making a choice to not spend lots of time with other children and be part of the group -- that is, that it isn't because he or she lacks confidence or skills or because other children are excluding the child, then to a certain extent this individual difference should be respected.

It isn't a case of the more children that children are around, or the more time they spend with others the more friends they will make. Neither is it the case that the more friends a young child has the healthier and happier that child will be. The younger the child, the less the need to be around lots of other children. The younger the child, the more appropriate are small groups, or just being with one other child at a time.

Constructive friendships are healthy ones, where each child is able to be him- or herself and through the friendship is allowed to grow and flourish. Some friendships are not constructive, for example, where one person is always dominant and domineering. This does not mean that healthy friendships always consist of two people who are similar. Just as with adults, it is true sometimes with children that opposites attract. However, what the adult needs to do is to ensure that the friendship is life enhancing for both.

Another issue is that very strong exclusive friendships between children can create a situation where one or both children is overly dependent on the other, to the point that they function less well when the other is not there.

Parents can support constructive interactions and relationships between children, which lay the foundation for friendships. For example, they can help children who have limited language to communicate effectively, provide materials, equipment and opportunities that encourage working together, avoid pressuring children to co-operate and work together beyond their abilities, and give children a choice about being part of a group.

Let friendships happen when they do, don't force them, and monitor them to be sure that they are constructive.

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