



By Karen Stephens

# Ways to Nurture Children's Friendship Skills

It's no news to anyone that children who don't learn to form meaningful friendships end up feeling mighty lonely. It takes a toll on their self esteem. And it's excruciating for a parent to watch. So this column suggests ways to brighten your child's world with friends. Like all good things, the process starts at home.

**FACT:** *Children successful in making friendships experience a secure attachment with parents and/or consistent daily caregivers during infancy. As a result, they develop greater confidence and self esteem.*

**Getting There:** Consistently, and in a timely way, attend to your baby's needs. Respond sensitively to non-verbal cues, such as smiles, cries, raised eyebrows, stiffened arms, averted gaze, grimaces, or drowsy expressions. Dependable, reliable adults build children's trust. Infants who experience warm, caring, and gentle responses learn to respect themselves and to feel loved.

Adopt developmentally appropriate expectations for children during each stage of growth. Gently coach them onto mastery, based on individual pace and ability. Applaud, with smiles, hugs, and clapping as children challenge themselves to master new skills, from rolling over to first words.

Use an authoritative style of discipline. That involves setting clear and understandable expectations and limits according to a child's age and experiences, giving understandable reasons for expectations and limits, communicating consequences for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and consistently enforcing or following through with consequences. When establishing home rules or making simple family decisions like where to eat out or what movie to rent, involve children in the process as appropriate. This teaches children to consider other's views. It helps set standards for fairness and compromise, too.

**FACT:** *Preferred playmates most often have socially skilled parents.*

**Getting There:** Set a good example. Let children see you interact with your own friends. They will pick up on culturally-accepted social skills related to eye contact, expression of physical affection, and tolerated language use, including acts of kindness, courtesy, doing things together, thoughtfulness, shared laughter, cooperation, patience, compassion, and empathy.

Include children in your friendships, such as wrapping a present or preparing a meal you'll all have together. Let children play nearby as you converse. Hearing balanced conversations illustrates the value of listening to friends and sharing ideas.

**FACT:** *Children who experience a variety of social contacts — with adults first and then peers — learn to make friends more easily.*

**Getting There:** Regularly involve children with trusted relatives, friends, and neighbors. Casually (and tactfully!) role model and coach adults and older children on ways your baby or child likes to interact. For instance, some children adore rough and tumble play; others don't. Helping relatives and friends understand your child's personal cues will pave the way to pleasant, rewarding social experiences for all.

Enrollment in a *good* child care or preschool builds children's social skills. Staff should be educated to skillfully nurture children's social development. Discuss your child's social development with them on a regular basis.

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Research tells us that friendship skills grow quite a lot when children regularly experience informal pastimes. For instance, children learn to initiate play with others at parks and playgrounds, play-based children's museums, children's libraries, and play groups parents create.

Don't overlook the value of taking your child on errands with you. Seeing you greet and interact with shopkeepers and fellow customers helps children pick up the ways of the social world, from being courteous in crowded aisles to politely asking for help.

**FACT:** *Children successful in making friends respond to conflict in positive ways. They are inclusive and more often express empathy and compassion. They often prevent conflict so everyone has a better time playing.*

**Getting There:** A parent's style teaches children how to handle conflict. Common sense, and research tells us that children exposed to aggression and violence at home, (whether verbal or physical), are prone to react the same way with peers. Discipline that humiliates or inflicts hurtful physical punishment, rather than verbal problem-solving, contributes to children with poorer social skills. Parents who refuse to tolerate children name calling, taunting, bullying, or hurting others help children avoid peer rejection.

Parents and other significant adults can role model and coach children in positive social skills. Reinforce these skills when children use them. When children patiently compromise, share, take turns, hold their temper, negotiate, apologize, or make amends for a wrong-doing, or otherwise control their behavior, tell them you admire them for it. Don't be stingy with recognition and encouragement for skills achieved!

Parents can model positive conflict resolution by taking time to play with children. When building with blocks together you can model behaviors you want your child to adopt. Also give honest feedback when children behave in ways that will lead to rejection. If your child roughly grabs a block from you, respond: "It hurts my feelings when you grab the block without asking first. Find another way to get me to share." If your child doesn't have a clue, suggest strategies, such as: "Try asking me with words. Offer me one of your blocks and I might trade for the one you want."

**FACT:** *Children make friends when they gracefully enter and build upon peers' play. This includes being sensitive, alert, and responsive to other's interests. Children need to figure out how to contribute to play in a meaningful and relevant way. Socially skilled children introduce play ideas to peers without being overly bossy or inflexible. They build on other children's ideas, rather than ignoring or dictating to them.*

**Getting There:** Children need social experiences found in good early childhood programs. Regular, consistent participation leads to deeper, more reliable friendships. Programs with a stable staff contribute to children's abilities to make friends by promoting secure attachment and self esteem.

Parents and teachers who are familiar with and sensitive to a child's unique development do a better job of nurturing social development. They can help children interpret each other's intentions and behaviors. Children who ignore established play themes can be guided to *go with the flow*. For instance, if a group of children are playing *fire fighter*, an additional child can more easily enter play if he offers to call for help rather than announcing that everyone has to stop and play house now.

At home and child care, children need extended times to play with limited adult intervention. Adults do play a role in facilitating play and coaching hesitant children. But overall, children develop friendship skills best when they direct much of their own play. Given that freedom and hands-on experiences, children gradually learn what behaviors help, or hinder, their friendships.

Adults also set the stage for children's social life by offering opportunities to play with peers using open-ended materials that allow creative expression. That includes cooperative play with play dough, dress up clothes and puppets, building blocks and construction toys, active movement such as dance or sand box play, and toys such as wagons and balls.

### Valuable Resources

Rubin, K. H. (2002). *The Friendship Factor: Helping Our Children Navigate Their Social World — and Why It Matters for Their Success and Happiness*. New York: Skylight Press.

Goleman, D. (2000). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Miller, K. (May/June 2000). "Caring for the Little Ones: Friendships in the Baby Room." Redmond, WA: *Child Care Information Exchange*.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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