



by Karen Stephens

Social Skills Children Need to Make and Keep Friends

At age four Rachael became “fast friends forever” with her child care playmate, Dee Dee. At least, that’s how Rachel’s mom describes it. Back then, the girls had been casual playmates for a few months. But one day, a particular event cemented the friendship bond. You see, Rachael could get up into and climb an apple tree in the playyard all by herself. It was only about four feet off the ground, but to young kids, that’s a Mt. Everest moment. Rachel’s achievement impressed a lot of the kids, but no one more than Dee Dee.

Dee Dee longed to be up in the branches with Rachael. But she just couldn’t muster up the confidence. That is, until Rachel took her under her wing. Rachael, perched pleasantly in the tree, looked down to see Dee Dee standing nearby, gazing up at her. Rather than ignoring her, Rachel eagerly encouraged her to climb up, too. At first, Dee Dee was hesitant. Her self-doubt made her hang back. But Rachael persisted. She began to patiently *walk* Dee Dee through her first successful steps of tree climbing. She pointed out the lowest branch and the sturdiest branches from there. She helped Dee Dee analyze when and where to move a hand or foot “just so” to maintain her balance.

With Rachael as her personal coach, Dee Dee succeeded. She overcame her nervousness and gained a whole new perspective on her abilities. Rachel learned she could be a good teacher and friend to someone in need. For weeks, both girls beamed about the cooperative achievement, at home and child care.

But that was all years ago. The girls are now in sixth grade. And they still regularly hang out at each other’s houses, so mom’s prediction of “fast friends forever” held water.

That story reveals many of the social skills children need to possess in order to form rewarding, mutually enjoyable friendships. Below I highlight how Rachel and Dee Dee’s experience represents each one.

To make and keep friends, children must be able to:

- *Recognize shared interests:* Both girls recognized that they enjoyed outdoors.
- *Gracefully join into play:* Dee Dee was brave enough to show interest in tree climbing by watching Rachael. Rachael accepted Dee Dee’s wish (invitation) to engage in a mutual activity.
- *Pay attention to non-verbal communication cues:* Rachel “read” Dee Dee’s body-language well enough to know that Dee Dee envied Rachel being able to climb the tree. She picked up that Dee Dee was a bit anxious about it.
- *Identify common goals:* Both agreed the goal of climbing a tree was a good one.
- *Listen to and respect feelings:* Dee Dee *risked* telling Rachel she didn’t think she could climb a tree. Because Rachel listened to Dee Dee’s “I don’t think I can do it,” she responded with patient encouragement to support Dee Dee’s confidence. If she hadn’t listened to Dee Dee’s total communication, Rachel would have overwhelmed Dee Dee with rapid-fire, overwhelming directions. That probably would have led Dee Dee to failure rather than success.

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- *Empathize with another person's perspective:* Rachel didn't belittle or make fun of Dee Dee's insecurity or nervousness. Instead, she responded by offering to help Dee Dee figure out the fine art of tree climbing.
- *Practice compassion:* Rachel didn't tease Dee Dee or bombard her with too many directions at once. She responded to Dee Dee's emotions by coaching her slowly and simply.
- *Cooperate:* Rachel helped Dee Dee be independent. She didn't take control and try to *lift* Dee Dee into the tree. She also didn't refuse to cooperate by telling Dee Dee to go play somewhere else. They made the achievement together.
- *Accept others:* Rachel continued to play with Dee Dee, even though they weren't yet at the same level of physical coordination. She accepted Dee Dee where and as she was.
- *Include others:* Rachel included Dee Dee in spite of her hesitation to climb on her own. She didn't reject, isolate, or discount her.
- *Extend a trust-worthy, helping hand:* Rachel succeeded in offering Dee Dee the right kind of help, and Dee Dee was open and trusting enough to take it.

But of course, that's not all there is to making and keeping friends. Human's social relationships are much more complex than that. Like those of adults', children's friendships are full of ups and downs. Every child must learn how to navigate them with poise and a positive attitude. As you reflect on your own childhood friendships, I'm sure you'll agree that's easier said than done.

There are many more social skills children must develop. For instance, they must learn to tactfully stand up for their wishes and to express their own point of view during social play. And children must learn how to get their own play needs met without resorting to aggression, unethical manipulation, or name calling.

To function in the real world of social relationships, children must also be able to cope with rejection from time to time. It's hard to hear a child being told, "No, I don't want to play now." But it's a reality that some people want alone time when others don't. To face such rejection without taking it too hard, children must be able to de-personalize statements and learn that people's moods vary. If one child declines an invitation to play, children can learn to seek out another playmate.

Sharing, negotiation, and compromise are skills that come into play as children interact with others. Children will be left alone and isolated if they don't gradually learn to adjust and tweak ideas to keep play partners actively engaged and mutually satisfied.

During play, children must learn to express their ideas and reasons for them. But at the same time, they must be responsive to the ideas of others. Compromise and negotiation skills help children build upon each other's ideas for mutual enjoyment. Children who dictate play or only issue commands to others quickly become isolated or rejected as play partners.

The ability to form relationships begins during the earliest months of life. That means moms and dads lay the foundation for children's lifelong friendships. The *Parenting Exchange* column, "NEED TITLE" shares specific ways parents can do just that.

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*.