

“Across the span of the years from toddlerhood to school age, most children get their first real taste of peer experiences. They make their first friends and learn the pleasure and sometimes harsh realities of life among a group of kids.”

-Kenneth H. Rubin, Ph.D (University of Maryland)

As Their World Turns: Young Children and Friendship

Jennifer Gonzalez and Janet Thompson

Upon arriving at school, four-year-old Valentina notices Sara and Mona playing together in the House Area. She excitedly approaches them and asks, “Can I play with you?” Sara replies, “Only Mona is my friend and we’re playing princesses. You can’t play!”

If you spend some time in one of our preschool classrooms, you might catch yourself wondering if you have stepped onto the set of a daytime television drama! And we certainly understand the comparison.

Interactions like the one above are common place amongst children and can be difficult for adults to witness. While we know that making friends is an important task of early childhood, the process often looks different, and frankly messier, than we might expect. Understanding this process can help us make peace with the “drama” and offer support to children as they work to establish relationships with their peers.



Why Are Children’s Early Friendships Important?

The acquisition of social and emotional skills is a major developmental task of the first five years of life. The early lessons children learn about how to act and interact with others are lasting and impact many aspects of their lives. Friendships play a significant role for children in helping them develop the skills that comprise social-emotional competence. When children are successful at making friends, they have opportunities to learn and practice these skills.

- Having the ability to **regulate** their **emotions** allows children to respond to experiences with an appropriate range of immediate or



delayed reactions. As they grow in their ability to communicate with language and hold mental images in mind, preschoolers are better able to delay gratification and be flexible in coming up with different goals for play and alternative solutions to conflict. This sets the stage for more positive interactions with others as illustrated by the following scenario where Jorge is able to regulate his emotions and engage in social problem-solving by suggesting a new idea for the game: While playing in the Block Area, Jorge says to Sally, “I want you to pretend to be my dog.” “No, I want her to pretend to be my dog!” says Dora. Jorge thinks for a minute and responds, “Well I can be a dog too, and you can be the owner for both dogs!”

- As children acquire **social knowledge** and **understanding**, they begin to recognize how their actions impact others. As they make the transition from thinking in terms of “me” to “us”, we see them engaging in behaviors that make things better for their friends. For example, while getting ready to go outside, one child might help another put on their shoes and comment, “Now we can all go outside quicker!”
- The development of **social skills**, or the range of appropriate strategies used for interacting positively with others, is enhanced as children develop the cognitive capacities of perspective taking and empathy. As children become aware of how they are the same as and different from others, positive peer relationships can help them learn to respect differences they encounter in race and ethnicity, gender, language(s), abilities, and other characteristics. Noticing that he is shorter than his friend Paul, Victor might ask, “How did you get so tall? What did you eat?”

- During Work Time, Youjin explains to her friends Michelle, Daniel, and Rosio, *"I am building a pet shop and you are my kittens. I give out free things."* She then gives each kitten a free "treat." There are some **social dispositions**, or enduring character traits, that are valued over others. Being generous (like Youjin was above), curious, and humorous make children more attractive to potential playmates.

What Does A "Friend" Look Like As Children Grow?

- **Infants** are primed to form relationships. Their relationships with parents and teachers establish the foundation for future friendships with peers. At eight months, we can observe them watching others with interest, noticing when another child is crying, reaching out to touch another baby, or smile or babble to get another's child's attention.
- As **toddlers** imitate each other, they are exploring the beginning stages of friendship. We might see them laughing together, playing close to each other, running and chasing together, briefly rolling a ball back and forth to each other, offering another child a toy, and hitting a friend who takes a toy (and here comes the beginning of the "drama!").
- Around three years of age, we really start to see children practice the social skills that enable them to build and sustain friendships. For a **young preschooler**, a "friend" is someone they are playing with in the moment. We often see two children engaging in simple, cooperative play, like digging in the sandbox together, stacking blocks to build a tower, or pretending to cook in a play kitchen. We might hear them ask, "Where is Andy? I want to play with him."
- **Older preschoolers** are working out the complexities of making



friends and sustaining these relationships. Friendships for four- and five-year-olds are more reciprocal, exclusive, and enduring. At this age, children have a more intense desire to interact with others and take part in collaborative play activities.



We also see them seek to share activities with a special friend who also seeks their company.

Friendship Skills: What Are They?

There are several distinct behaviors that young children engage in during play with others that seem to be directly related to having friends. These behaviors include:

- **Organizing Play** – Children who are able to organize play situations can create play opportunities for themselves and others. Play organizers might use strategies to get a friend's attention and invite them to play (*"Let's play firefighters!"*), give a friend a toy (*"Here, you use this hat and hose."*) or offer suggestions of what to do with the toys (*"You put out the fire on the stairs. I'll take care of the one over there."*).
- **Sharing** – Children who are able to share toys and materials often have more positive experiences interacting with peers. Children who have this ability might offer to share materials they are playing with (*"Here is a car for you."*), ask others to share what they are using (*"Can I have a turn with the purple cape?"*), and respond to requests from other children (*"Sure, you can use some of my paint."*).
- **Assisting Others** – Being helpful is another skill that makes it easier for children to play with and respond positively to others. We might see children assist others by helping another child get onto or off of an apparatus in the outdoor classroom (*"Hold onto this part and climb up"*), telling or showing a friend how to do something (*"I get the tape off like this. Pull hard."*), or assist someone in distress (*"Here is your family picture."*).
- **Giving Compliments** – while this skill is not yet common among preschoolers, when they do compliment another's accomplishment (*"Good job! You climbed up there!"*), work (*"I like the way you painted that picture of your house."*), or appearance (*"You have pretty brown eyes."*), it can have a powerful effect on the development of friendships.
- **Apologizing** – just like giving compliments, apologizing can have a positive effect on the formation of friendships. Knowing how and when to give an apology requires that children attend to peer cues and respond to their feelings (*"I'm sorry I hit you when you took my ball."*) as well as understand how their behavior affects others (*"I didn't meant to bump into you. Maybe some ice will help your head feel better."*)
- **Taking Turns** – in order to establish and maintain friendships it is necessary for children to engage in reciprocal interactions. At first, they need to be responsive to the social requests of others (*"Yes, I will ride on the bike with you."*), and then over time, they





need to initiate interactions as well (“Do you want to play dragons with me?”). Additionally, children need to gradually engage in longer play interactions with others (While playing a board game, “You take a turn, and then I take a turn.”).

Children who are well-liked by their peer group do more of these behaviors and are often referred to by others as a “friend.”

So What’s With All the Drama?

Even if children have some, or many, of these friendship skills, their peer relationships are surprisingly complex. As noted above, peer interactions do give children a chance to develop and practice many social skills but it is important to remember that these skills depend on the brain’s “executive functions,” including focus, self-control, and perspective taking, which, as we know, are still developing. So what challenges can we expect to see?

- Preschoolers are working out **power struggles**. Developmentally, they feel a strong need to assert their own initiative (“I have a wonderful idea!”). As such, they think that a good friendship involves the other person doing only what *they* want to do. This, of course, can lead to problems. If one child takes



the leadership role and the other child refuses to follow along, the interaction may fall apart. For instance, Ryan decides, “I am the pilot and

the plane is flying to San Francisco.” Not pleased with this idea, Jill tells him, “Well, I am going build a better plane and fly to Hawaii!” At this point, the children need to decide if they want to play alone or if they are willing to cooperate and play together.

- Engaging in more collaborative play requires a lot of practice and does not always go smoothly. While they are in the **process of learning to cooperate**, we often hear, “I don’t like your idea. I don’t want to be your friend anymore!” As they develop social competence, they are more able to engage in back and forth conversation, listen to each other’s ideas, and work together to make plans for play.
- As children **form stronger relationships and attachments** to special friends, often those of the same sex, we hear them make comments like, “Kelly is my friend,” and “Amy won’t play with me. She only plays with Lani.” When a child gets attached to a specific friend, it can be extremely difficult for them if that child is absent, moves, or decides they don’t want to play with them.



- As illustrated in the opening vignette, children struggle with the question, “Can I have more than one friend?” **Trios can be very challenging** (even for adults!). Moving from playing with one friend to playing with two friends at the same time is a huge step for preschoolers. When two close friends are engaging in pretend play, they generally have knowledge of how they like to pretend and how the plot should progress. It can be worrisome for a third child to join the game because they may think that third child won’t know how to play the “right way,” will change the rules, or will threaten a “special” friendship. One way we may hear them trying to sort this out by offering “Well, I am not your friend right now because I am playing with Andres. But later, I can be your friend and we can play.”
- Not surprisingly, young children are **not always able to see things from someone else’s perspective**. This is apparent when a preschooler isn’t able to continue playing with a friend because of something that is out of his or her control. For example, when Anika goes elsewhere to play, Vivian may fall apart and cry, “She doesn’t want to play this game anymore and I won’t ever get to play with her again!” In this case, we see that Vivian doesn’t understand that just because Anika wanted to play somewhere else, and possibly with someone else, that doesn’t mean that she has ended the friendship forever.

How can you help?

It is clear that children are generally interested in forming relationships with their peers, but they may not know or be able to use the appropriate strategies to initiate and sustain play with others. There are several tactics parents and caregivers can use to support children as they develop the skills necessary to build meaningful social relationships.

- First, it is important to develop **realistic expectations** based on your child’s age, temperament, and maturity level. For example, it’s important to keep in mind that *toddlers do not share*. It is helpful to spend time observing a child attentively to learn what elicits their best and most challenging social behaviors. For instance, you may discover your child does best in smaller groups, and so if there are eight children in the sandbox at the park, you might suggest she start at the swings instead.
 - **Actively teach** your *developmentally appropriate behavior expectations* by showing children what to do, not what *not* to do (“*You really want that shovel. You can ask, ‘Can I have a turn?’*”).
 - **Empathize** but still set the limit (“*You can have a turn when he is done. I know it’s so hard to wait for something you want.*”).
- **Minimize stress and fatigue.** Ensure that your child has enough rest, cut down on overstimulation, schedule activities to optimize your child’s functioning by planning around meals and snacks, balance active times with quieter ones, and spend time outdoors in “green spaces” every day if possible.
- **Model** social interactions and appropriate responses for your child. It is helpful to reflect aloud and “narrate” your own actions. Use emotion words and open-ended questions to help build perspective taking abilities (“*How would you feel if you were the one left out?*”). Discuss and demonstrate how to read the social cues of other children (“*When her lips are turned down like that, she is feeling sad.*”). Seek opportunities to draw attention to your own acts of care and compassion (“*I’m going to make Aunt Nina some chicken soup. I think it might help her feel better.*”). Decide on and model responses to aggression that are ac-



ceptable to you and that your child is capable of using (“*If someone pushes you, say, ‘Stop! I don’t like that!’ and then go find Teacher Jana.*”). Practice them together.

- As children appear to struggle with the “next step” in peer interaction, **coach** them by offering offer words of support and encouragement (“*It looks like you are watching Miranda playing with Kai. Would you like to play to? You can say, ‘Hi guys, can I play?’ with a big smile.*”). Suggest words and body language to use both before and during challenging situations (“*Lucas, I see you are grabbing for Zara’s shapes. Remember to ask first. Say, ‘Can I have the blue square please?’*”). Use social role-playing to rehearse for common situations that arise with young friends (“*If you want to join their game, ask, ‘Who can I pretend to be?’*”). Whenever possible, stay close and be available to coach when interactions become challenging and to provide feedback when children use a strategy that worked (“*You got it! Asking worked.*”).

Research has shown positive results from such intentional modeling and coaching. A nationwide project emphasizing this work was started at Vanderbilt University. At the ECL, we make use of several of their resources and activities in our classrooms as we strive to promote prosocial behavior and community. If you would like to learn more about assisting your child’s social skill development, you can visit the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) website (<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>). You will find many resources for community stakeholders, including families.

- We probably don’t have to remind you about the length of summer vacation at the ECL, but it is a long summer! To allow children to continue to practice their friendship skills

over the break, **plan playdates**. When possible, look for **good friendship possibilities**. At the end of the school year, take a look at the *What’s Next* posters in each of the preschool classrooms to learn who will be in your child’s class or new school next year and contact those parents to arrange some times to get together. It is also important to

avoid simply planning playdates with your child’s established friends. Children need a variety of experiences to

practice interacting with peers. Playing with new children who have different interests, temperaments and preferences can provide your child with opportunities to practice different skills.

- **Structure** social situations for success. For children who are introverted or sensitive, shorter play times are often more successful. Several hours can be a long time to be in a social situation. If sharing toys is an issue, playing in a neutral setting (e.g., at a playground) may work best. Or, if you are having a playdate at your home, consider allowing your child to select two or three “special” toys to be put away for the duration of the visit so they do not have to be shared. Be sure to balance social play times with individual play times. This allows children a chance to “regroup.” Also, for social skills practice, arrange some playdates with just one other child at a time.

Keep in mind, “We can work to equip all of our children with the skills to navigate the social world, but each child brings a unique blend of personality, temperament, culture, and experience to their relationships. Their friendship styles will reflect who they are.” –Source Unknown

References available upon request.



Picture books can be a great way to teach children about friendship.

As you read stories that deal with friendship, you can talk with your children about the experiences the characters have, any problems the characters face, and what they do to solve them. Here are some of our favorite titles from our ECL Library:

- How I Found a Friend (I. Hale)
- Hug (J. Alborough)
- My Friend Bear (J. Alborough)
- Hunter’s Best Friend at School (L. Elliot & L. Munsinger)
- Farfallina and Marcel (H. Keller)
- Help! A Story of Friendship (H. Keller)
- Friends (H. Heine)
- Best Friends for Frances (R. Hoban)
- The Rainbow Fish (M. Pfister)
- Moon Rabbit (N. Russel)
- Frog and Toad Are Friends (A. Lobel)
- Pearl Barley and Charlie Parsley (A. Blabey)
- Enemy Pie (D. Muson)
- How Do Dinosaurs Play with Their Friends? (J. Yolen & M. Teague)

