

Making Friends

Learning to make friends is one of the most significant tasks in a child's early social development.

A child usually begins this process during the second year of life playing alongside another toddler. Although there is not much interaction, children notice that they are not much different from others and they are not the center of the universe.

During the preschool years children develop social skills they'll need to establish and maintain friendships. Though they're still very self-centered, children of this age begin to initiate contact with strangers.

Preschoolers negotiate roles and they learn to compromise. Somehow they manage rejection, claim their possessions, and learn ways to settle conflicts. Friends do things to reinforce each other's acceptable behavior and even model behavior for one another.

What can parents do to guide the social development of their young children?

One important thing is to help a child learn how to approach other children, how to make contact. Your child will be watching how you do it. How you manage social situations affects the way your child views social interaction.

Encourage your child to smile and make eye contact with others. It's okay to suggest some words to use when a child wants to join others in ongoing play, and some ways to be sure your child will be accepted, like "can I be the teacher?" instead of "I want to play school too."

Provide times when your child can interact with peers in a safe and appropriate environment. If you think your child is having a difficult time making friends, try to arrange special play activities with slightly older children. They'll provide examples of effective social skills.

If your child is anxious about using their social skills, give your child an opportunity to play with a younger child. Your child can take a lead role and this may give your child's self-esteem a needed boost.

As your child gets a little older and is entertaining a friend at home, try to stay out of the way so they can negotiate conflict and manage the give and take of friendship. Step in only when there is imminent danger or a squabble has gone out of control.

Don't categorize and don't allow others to label your child as "shy," "bossy," or "hard to get along with." Social skills sometimes take a lifetime to perfect. We all know adults who are not experts at social interactions.

Instead of referring to your child as "shy," say your child is "cautious in new situations." This describes the behavior in a positive way which is better for the child.

Encourage a child's positive efforts to get along with others, even when such attempts fail. Tell your child you know it's hard. Remind your child that making friends sometimes takes a long time, so it's important to keep trying.

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