

FRIENDS

Making Them and Keeping Them

As a parent of three and a teacher, I have witnessed celebrations and heartaches when it comes to friendships. Whether you're a teacher or a parent, we all want our children to have friends, to feel confident and to feel like they "belong" or "count" to their peer group. Making friends is not always easy for some children and maintaining friendships can be a challenge for them all. There are many factors affecting the way and the frequency in which kids make friends. The first is the geography.

GEOGRAPHY affects friendships. I grew up in a neighborhood with just a handful of kids and had little in common with them other than geographic location, but they were kids and they were told to go outside and come home when hungry. Today, some children in urban cities spend their free time sitting in high rises or attending organized after school classes. Whether you have siblings or not, it is not uncommon for kids to spend lots of time in front of a screen, instead of running around the neighborhood. In this case, it helps for parents to foster friendships by planning playdates or visiting nearby parks where kids can enjoy the interaction of making friends and building relationships.

PERSONALITY affects friendships. Some children make friends easily and without hesitation. We know the type of child whose inhibition allows them to talk to nearly anyone and strike up a play date. There are also those who are a little shy or "slow to warm" to new situations or people. Parents can do kids a favor by not forcing their kids to play with others, but instead seeking out like kids with like personalities or with similar interests and presenting situations for safe introductions and play. It doesn't help to force kids to talk or to not be shy. We can allow children to move at their own pace and use their judgement when making friends. After all, it's a skill they'll need to use for the rest of their lives.

COMMON INTERESTS immediately bring kids together. If your child loves spending time drawing, dancing or climbing a wall, look for those opportunities to get them involved with others who do. With fingers crossed, friendships can be formed and can bloom, even if it's once or twice a week.

WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH in friendships the learning begins. Unfortunately, some of the most valuable learning experiences happen through being disappointed, feeling sad, angry or rejected by friends. We can talk with our children and support them in sharing their feelings openly and directly with friends, looking for solutions and deciding when it's time to move on to other friends. Peer pressure is real and it can be as simple as feeling the need to play a game every day at recess, or sitting with a certain group at lunch as to feel included. Teach your child to listen to their "inside voice" and to trust their intuitions about how they feel in friendships. Know that often squabbles and spats are a normal part of childhood, but when those negative situations are happening daily or interfering with the emotional well-being of a child, it's time to seek help from adults. If you are unsure about how your child interacts with friends, set up a playdate and pay close attention to the exchanges between the two. Look for signs of extreme bossiness or aggression from either side that may be affecting the friendship and then support the children in finding solutions.

I'm here to help as much as I can. Contact me if I can help your child with friendship woes:
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