

Helping Your Child to Develop Positive Friendships

'I've got no friends' – it's not something that a parent or carer ever wants to hear. It can be heartbreaking and frustrating to imagine your child sitting alone at playtime, or struggling to find their place in the classroom friendship groups. You can feel helpless to change a situation that is happening outside your control, and anxious about the effect on your child's emotional state. Moreover, learning social skills is just as important as learning to read and write, and personal/social education is part of the curriculum. However, there are steps you can take to support and develop your child's social skills, confidence and self-esteem.



First, know your child.

Some children are naturally more introverted than others, or prefer to play alone some of the time. Introverts enjoy the company of others, but need time alone to recharge their batteries, finding constant company exhausting. If this is your child, let them have this time and don't be anxious about it. Similarly, some people prefer the company of just one or two close friends, rather than being at the centre of a large group. If this is your child, talk about the joy of having a couple of really good friends, rather than lots of 'friends' that you perhaps don't know very well or don't feel particularly close to.

Then talk to your child about what is going on.

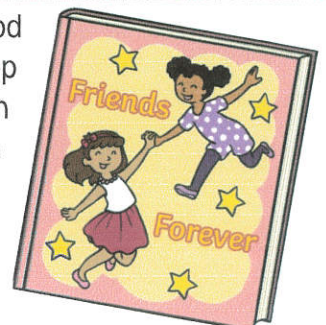
If you do feel there is a friendship issue going on, talk to your child about it. If they say, 'I've got no friends,' or 'No one would play with me today,' ask, 'What do you mean?' Sometimes a child has fallen out with a key member of their friendship group during the day, which has naturally upset them and perhaps made them feel a little alienated. However, young children frequently make up as quickly as they fall out. Reassure your child, talk through what happened and discuss positive steps they can take to make things better.

You may feel the problem is longer-term, and that your child is struggling regularly with friendships.

If so, keep talking to your child – but be careful not to give them a daily interrogation. Rather, be on hand to listen when they do want to open up about their day. The likelihood is that your child is struggling either because they themselves find social skills difficult to master, or because they are being treated unkindly, or even bullied, by other children.

If you suspect your child is being treated unkindly or bullied, approach the class teacher as soon as possible to talk through a plan to deal with this.

It may be that things are not as bad as you think. Most teachers have a pretty good idea of what is going on socially with the children in their class, and they can keep a closer eye on your child for a while. They can also suggest appropriate children who can 'buddy up' with your child and support them. Resist the urge to approach the parents of any child you feel is being unkind – this rarely works well, and it doesn't show your child the best way to deal with difficult situations.



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If you feel the problem may be more to do with your child's own social skills, there are things you can do.

Social skills don't come automatically to all children, especially younger ones. Some children are naturally quite impulsive or hyperactive, and whilst they have a strong desire for friendship, they can struggle to control their reactions to others, for example when they feel they have been unfairly treated or if they are losing control of the way a game is going. Shy children, on the other hand, can be unsure how to assert themselves and have their voice heard, so may stay on the margins of group play and social activities.

Nurture your child's confidence and social skills by practising at home.

Give opportunities for your child to practise taking turns, sharing and coping when things don't go their way, perhaps by playing a board game as a family. Model positive reactions to difficult situations, and talk about why, as a family, you expect people to treat each other fairly – it is because you care for each other and want everyone to feel happy. Then explain that our friends expect the same.

Try some role-play.

Role-play, with teddies, dolls, action figures, even toy cars, is a great way to explore different situations with young children. Act out some different responses to situations and their consequences, then discuss the outcome. For example, 'Teddy whacks Rabbit because Rabbit has a toy he wants. As a result, Rabbit is hurt and cries, running to tell the teacher. Teddy gets into trouble and also feels sad'. Talk about how Teddy can make amends for the situation by apologising, and about what he could do differently next time.

Play some social scripts.

Just as adults may rehearse what they are going to say when meeting a new person or having a job interview, for example, it can be helpful for children to practise how they will respond to different situations. This can also be helpful for shy children who can't think of what to say when approaching a group. Rehearse how to respond when things go well, and when they don't. Use the role-play approach described above to show how to enter group situations or respond to rejection. Model non-verbal skills, such as eye contact and smiling, as well as verbal skills.

Plan a play date.

Invite one of your child's friends over for a play date. This can be particularly good for shy children who need the opportunity to bond with a friend in a safe environment. If you are not sure who to invite, your child's teacher should be able to suggest someone. Beforehand, talk to your child about how to be a good host. What games should they play? Try to plan something such as baking cakes, building a den or constructing a train set. Talk to your child about what they should do if there is a disagreement, or their friend wants to change the game. How will they know their friend is having a good time? Then leave them to it. Children need to learn about the consequences of their actions, so resist the urge to interfere unless things are getting physically dangerous! If you do sense tension is building up too much, break it up by suggesting a snack or an activity change. Once the friend has gone home, talk about what went well.



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Model positive relationships yourself.

If your child sees you interacting positively with your family and friends, they will be more inclined to do the same. Make sure that you keep interactions with your child positive too – don't put your own social needs onto them. Showing disappointment that they are struggling with friendships will only increase their anxiety. Instead, boost self-esteem by reassuring them of your love, support and willingness to help.

If you still feel your child has real problems with social interactions, and/or you feel this is affecting their emotional well-being, seek professional support.

Speak to the class teacher, the school's SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) or your GP. Some children have problems with social interaction and communication due to conditions such as autism or Asperger's Syndrome. A diagnosis can enable steps to be taken to support your child more fully both within and outside school.

