



making friends

By Rose Stanley*

Going back to school or preschool after the long summer holidays, with the prospect of not knowing all the kids in their class or no longer having their special friend with them, can be daunting for even the most confident child. Here are some ways you can equip your child to enable them to not only make friends, but be a good friend.

Friendship – arguably the most elusive concept we grapple with over our lifetime. The magical connection we have with a certain person, at a particular stage of our life, cannot be logically explained or justified – for most of us, it's either there or it's not. The English Dictionary might give us words like 'affection' and 'loyalty' in defining the term friendship. However, if we ask a primary-aged child what a friend is, it might come down to one thing, "I like them. They play with me." End of story. And if we then asked the same primary-aged child what was their biggest worry or problem at school it could easily be the same – friendship. Not so simple.

Even the most no-nonsense parent can turn to jelly when they see their otherwise 'together' child go to pieces over a rejected offer to play or a broken friendship. It's not for the faint-hearted. So what can we, as parents, do to encourage our children to make friends?

The best place to start is to teach your child to be interested in the person they are with and what they have to say. Asking questions about the other person and reflecting back to them is a skill that many adults still have not mastered. Reflecting back what the other person has said means teaching them to listen to what is being said and show they have heard. You as parents should lead by example when your children are with you and you are in the presence of others.

Explain to your child the difference between open-ended questions (such as, "What do you like to do?" or "Tell me about your favourite

things" or "How do you do that?") which are great conversation starters, as opposed to closed questions that simply require a yes or no answer.

Teaching your child the 'zip it up' rule, to be used while waiting for someone to answer a question, is another good habit to instill in your child – practice on each other and pick up on anyone interrupting mid-sentence.

Basic body language, like looking the person in the eye, nodding to show you are listening, facing them while you are talking to them and putting down whatever you are doing so that you can concentrate on what they are saying, are all good things to role-play in a fun way at home so that your child can practice and get into good habits.

Encourage them to be happy for others when they succeed. By telling someone, "Wow, that was great! You're really good at that!" your child will become known as a positive and secure character to be around. Kids are drawn to others who make them feel good about themselves and who don't have that "it's all about me" attitude.

Humour can never be over-rated with friendship. A child who learns early on in life not to take friendships and fallings out too seriously and to see the funny side of some things will fare much better than those who take things too personally. Don't let your child over-analyse things too much. Listening to their concerns is the biggest thing, and an "Oh well, who else could you try to get to know?" along with a big hug is best. Resilience and the art of shrugging things off is a very valuable skill.

Inclusion should be encouraged – when a child only has one close friend, things can go pear-shaped when that particular friend is absent from school or if there is a falling-out. This means encouraging your child at an early age to enjoy getting to know and mixing with lots of different people (both in and outside school/preschool) and being open to others joining in.

The society we live in is fast-paced and high-tech, but the elements of a good friendship have not changed. Friendship should not be treated as a disposable commodity. It needs time, opportunity and a positive 'can-do' approach. To value our friends, and to face the hurts and misunderstandings that will inevitably occur, is to learn to face life.

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Teach your child to:

- be interested in the other person
- reflect back what the other person has said
- be a good listener
- not interrupt
- ask open-ended questions
- be happy for others when they succeed
- show they are listening through their body language
- not take things too personally
- have a sense of humour
- have a wide circle of friends, both inside and outside of school/preschool

ages and stages

Under-5s

In conversation you can say things like, "We are going to see if Rachel is okay after her sickness, because we look after our friends" or "Let's offer some muffins to Mark because it's nice to share with our friends" to give the strong message that friends are special people in our lives. Ask your child, "I wonder if that little boy would like to play too?" to encourage an outgoing and thoughtful nature.

8- to 12-years

Discussion points: What do I value in a friend? Therefore what would be valuable traits for me to have? What am I looking for in a friend (funny, popular, kind, etc.)? What really

annoys me about some people at school? (E.g., they always come up with one better than me, they shove it in my face if they do well at something and I don't, or they show off when there are older kids around.)

Tween girls Ages 10- to 12-years

Encourage your daughter not to get involved in secrets with friends, as this is one of the big problems that comes up time after time. They get hurt when confidentiality is not honoured, and it can be very destructive and embarrassing. There is a lot of peer pressure associated with 'Dare, truth or promise' and it is a game that is best left well alone.

