

GOOD FRIENDS ARE HARD TO FIND

"If ever there is tomorrow when we're not together, there is something you must always remember. you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. but the most important thing is, even if we're apart....I'll always be with you." Christopher Robin to Pooh

Childhood friendships are so much more than just having a playmate. It is through these early relationships that children learn social skills such as negotiation, problem solving, teamwork, and conflict resolution. Some children make friends easily and learn to navigate through various social groups of school, neighborhoods, sports teams, and playground groups with little or no assistance. Other children can't figure out why they don't have any friends or gravitate more toward unhealthy friends. One child who had experienced an extremely difficult transition from another school found that he didn't understand why he couldn't get along with his peer groups both in and outside of the classroom. He said the 'rules were different' and 'no one would tell him or explain the rules to him and he was left to figure it out on his own.'

As a parent, it is heartbreaking to watch your child sitting on the sidelines while other children are actively engaged and having fun. How difficult it is for a parent to find the right words to soothe the sobbing child who has been excluded from the neighborhood birthday party! What can you say to your child who has been 'labeled' as the playground "bully" that can help her/him change into the likeable kids that you know she/he can be?

The truth is that no one gets through childhood and the adolescent years without the inevitable emotional and social scars. It is during these times that families provide the emotional 'buffer' and have the opportunity to help kids learn valuable skills that will someday lead to satisfying and long-term relationships.

If you find that your child struggles in his/her attempts to make and maintain friendships, here are a few suggestions that you might find to be helpful.

1. Spend some time observing your child during play activities with other children. Are their behaviors that might annoy other children? Are there behaviors that would be pleasing to other children? Consider asking your child's teacher about how your child behaves toward others and how other children treat your child at school. Be willing to listen to what the teacher shares and work together to help your child develop new skills and practice in a safe environment. If your child reports something happening that is causing distress, please let the teacher know. Teachers try very hard to monitor the social behaviors of the students in the classroom but on the playground and during lunchtime some children can get quite crafty at staying below the teachers 'radar'.
2. Provide opportunities for your child to socialize with other children. Arranging play dates, swimming pool parties, sports or dance classes, or clubs, such as boy scouts or girls scouts.
3. Play dates provide great opportunities for one-on-one time for encouraging a developing friendship. Prior to the arranged play date, help your child plan activities that will be fun for both children and discuss how to be a host to the friend. A play date that includes only TV, movies, and/or video games does not help to develop friendship and social skills. Take advantage of the 10-minute snack time to have a conversation with your child and your child's friend. Don't be too nosy but ask about the friends' interest.
4. Many children need some assistance in learning social skills. Help your child by offering friendship skill tips. In the book, *Good Friends Are Hard To Find*, Fred Frankel suggests that some kids may need assistance in learning social skills, such as:
 - **Don't always wait for someone else to make the first move. A simple 'Hi', and smile go a long way. Let people know that you are interested in them.
 - **Don't just talk about yourself; ask questions.
 - **Be a good listener.
 - **Look at people when they are talking to you. Pay attention and be interested in what they say.
5. Teach your child that developing and maintaining a friendship takes work. "It's not that easy. Friendships need care every bit as much as that flower in the garden needs water. Even the best of friends now and again have problems."
6. Help your child understand that it's okay for friends to have other friends and it's okay for friends to have opinions that are different.
7. Be willing to intervene and discourage unhealthy friendships. This can be difficult if the unhealthy friendship is the child of your best friend or a family you have arranged a cooperative childcare or carpooling arrangement. Even more difficult is when your child wants so

- desperately to fit into a group that you know is unwilling to accept another friend into the circle. This child needs your help to identify others who would benefit from a mutual friendship opportunity.
8. Help your child recognize the so-called friends that are not really friends. When children are desperate for friendship or are too shy or uncomfortable in social situations they may not be willing to stick-up for themselves or may go along with something that they know is not the right thing to do.
 9. Help your child to learn to identify qualities of friendship and the things that hurt friendships. One family worked together to make a list of “Friendship Boosters” and “Friendship Busters”. (Here is one to get you started: A good friend encourages you to do your best and doesn’t try to get you to do things you shouldn’t do.)
 10. Keeping the lines of communication open is critical to helping your child when friendships go through the inevitable bumps. The most important thing you can do for your child is to be sensitive to your child’s emotional needs and to be ready and willing to listen as your child shares feelings and events that are happening. Resist the temptation to jump in and ‘fix things’, rather, discuss possible options and help your child decide which one to try. Then check in to see how the strategy worked. Having done this, you have helped to strengthen him/ on the inside – her emotions and belief in herself.

The importance of social development of the elementary school aged child cannot be ignored or diminished. Long-term research has demonstrated the notion that peer relationships of nine – ten year olds have a profound impact on academic progress, psychological development and self-esteem. Social skills must be learned. Some learn through trial-and-error method and others need more direct ‘coaching’. As your child’s ‘coach’, you can help your child best by teaching social skills, practicing, delivering the pep-talk, helping to review what happened when things go wrong, assist in exploring options to try and practice, and then host the celebrations with milk and cookies!

***Good Friends Are Hard To Find: Help your child find, make and keep friends and also deal with: teasing, bullying, meanness and stormy relationships* by Fred Frankel, Ph.D.

***The Bully Free Classroom* by Allan L. Beane, PhD

***Raising Confident Boys – 100 Tips for Parents and Teachers* by Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

***It’s So Much Work to Be Your Friend – Helping the child with Learning Disabilities Find Social Success* by Richard Lavoie

***A Smart girl’s guide to friendship troubles* by Patti Kelley Criswell, published by American Girl Publishing, Inc,

*Have a wonderful week.
Mary Warren*

2/27/08 Eagle Eye Counselor Corner