



Helping Children Develop Friendships

Parents and professionals often struggle with helping children learn to be good friends or to understand the complexities of social interactions. Below are a number of strategies that can help children develop friendships.

1. Get Involved – Participate in community sports teams, art programs, and special events. These are wonderful opportunities for children to engage in structured activities with peers. For children with special needs, communities increasingly are offering camps and activities geared towards their specific needs. Ask professionals and support groups for information on these programs or check your community newspapers, centers, and websites. Another great activity, for children who benefit from very direct instruction, is social skills groups. These groups, which are offered in many communities, are a great way for children to develop their social skills in a fun yet structured environment.



Making Friends

2. Leverage the Child's Interests – If the goal of enrolling a child in a program is to provide opportunities for making friends, look for activities the child enjoys. Some children like the arts while others enjoy sports. If a child is particularly shy, look for activities that initially have less direct contact. Tumbling and swimming are examples of individual sports while soccer and basketball involve more contact with peers. If children start in activities they enjoy, they are more likely to join other programs.

3. Role Play Difficult Skills – Practicing social skills is a way to work on specific aspects of social interactions. For example, if you notice your child stands too close to peers or repeatedly asks the same questions, help them learn about personal space or conversational skills through role play. By practicing these skills in the home, children can learn to improve their social skills and apply them outside the home.

4. Provide Examples – While reading books or watching television, explain social situations to children. Point out how helping others, using kind words, and listening when friends talk are ways to be a good friend. When characters are being hurtful or invading someone's personal space, point these actions out and ask the child what the character could do differently to be a better friend.

5. Model Being Good to Others – Part of being well liked and being a good friend is being kind. Demonstrate kindness by saying nice things about and to others whether they are the grocery store employee or your neighbor. Point out when a co-worker does something thoughtful and how this makes you feel about them. If your child is sympathetic or says something complimentary, tell them their actions made you happy.

6. Do Not Force Friendships – Just like adults, children get along better with some peers than others. Teaching children to be kind and to include everyone in activities is important, but they do not have to be best friends with everyone.

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