

Does your child have *friends?* Does it matter?

by Alison Barber



My First
Five Years®

being a friend - what does this mean?

Most of us can remember a friend or two from our childhood. Maybe we can remember playing games in the playground with them or which animals or colours they liked. But we might not be able to remember how we made those first friendships. So, how do children become friends?

Friends are people who understand each other or try hard to understand what each other thinks and feels. They are always there for each other, and many stay in each other's lives for a long time. Friendships should be enjoyable, for the most part, and are built on sharing ideas, listening to each other, and having a good old giggle.

A friend doesn't have to be present. As your child grows, they may see less of a particular friend, but when they see each other again, it is like they were never apart.

As your child develops and masters social, emotional and cognitive skills, they will build relationships with those around them. As your child begins to develop friendships, you may question what qualities of friendship are important; this will undoubtedly change as your child learns about themselves and their growing world.



Children are born with a curiosity about life, and friendships may change as their interests grow and develop

Many friendships come and go. Your child may be a friend to someone for a short time, yet in that time, they will have left part of themselves with that friend. They may still think about each other and reflect on the positive imprint of that friendship.

As children grow and mature, the things they do with their friends change. Early friendships provide fun, while older children's friendships support them to develop their sense of self and explore their identity.[1]

Being a friend isn't always easy

Being a friend involves social and emotional skills, including understanding other people, and cognitive skills such as being able to control responses. It can take time and may need some practice.

Children who are taught how to be good friends will be more likely to build lifetime friendships. The more time and effort you spend on cultivating strong relationships with your child, the more they will benefit from having friends to play with, laugh with, and create precious memories.



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The only way
to have a *friend*
is to be one.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

how do we help our babies and children to become friends?



Babies

Babies have an intrinsic desire to be social. They rely on adult interactions and a combination of nature and nurture to help create social, cultural and personal potential in their lives.[2]

Babies respond to lots of different emotions. If you smile, they will smile back, and if an adult talks to them they may express excitement or interest. These very early interactions teach your baby how to become a friend. [2]

If you are spending time with friends, try to plan for your baby to be awake for some of the time you are together. Your baby seeing interactions is important for learning how people react and respond to each other. You might bump into a family member, friend, or a neighbour when you are on a walk, or at the shop. If your baby is awake, include them in the conversation.

Toddlers

Older babies and toddlers usually have a lot of love for people. Toddlers continue to learn about relationships through their relationship with you, the people closest to them, and those who look after your toddler.

When you are out, or if someone comes to visit, show your toddler how to greet people. Model saying “Hello”, and if you are a hugging person, give the person a big hug. Toddlers benefit from seeing friendship in action and they usually like to imitate behaviours they have seen when playing and when meeting people for themselves.

Toddlers have a desire to help others. You can support your toddler to help a family member or friend if they are stuck or have dropped or lost something. Toddlers have a super ability to do this for no reward.

When you read stories, comment on how kind some of the characters are. Say things like, “Brown Bear was really helpful in that story, he helped Rabbit cross the road.” Commenting on how helpful and kind story characters are helps build a picture of what a friend can be.





Children

Set a good example by being a wonderful friend. This is one of the most effective strategies to educate children on how to be a good friend. Discuss your friendships positively with your children. Make time for your friends and look for ways to help them, and bring your children along so they can participate as well.

Encourage your child to recognise their positive, thoughtful, kind, or insightful qualities. Teach them how to spot similar social abilities in others so they can surround themselves with capable friends who share their values.

When they have been a good friend, make a comment. Letting them know when they are demonstrating good friendship skills supports them in learning how to be a good friend. Recent studies show that young children are capable of being prosocial, caring and loving. They will require adult support to achieve their full potential to become a good friend.[3]

Share with your child how actions can affect others. Your child may share with you something that has happened during the day, or they have seen on television about friendships.

Talk with them and help them to better understand what they have been involved in or seen. It is great life experience to give children opportunities to discuss their thoughts while being supported with their growing understanding of how actions affect others.

For everyone

Friendships are usually based on common interests. Your baby, toddler, or child may find a connection with a friend through the love of cars, the colour red, or the birth of a sibling. Having connections can strengthen friendships and provide a sense of security.

Babies and young children might not form sophisticated friendships yet. They often play with others who share their interests. Friendships are known to shift and vary depending on the day and/or activity.

Look at their expressions when they see others. If there are children they see regularly, they might respond with excitement or pleasure when they spot familiar faces.[4]

Practising social skills such as turn-taking can help your child develop relationships. Read more about turn-taking in our blog!



New friends are like
new adventures. **You**
never know what lessons
they will *teach you.*

– Unknown

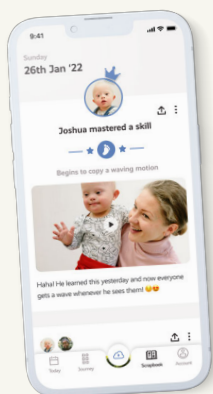
which aspects of development support my child to become a friend?

Theory of mind

Theory of mind is the understanding of people's thoughts, emotions, ideas and perspectives. [3] This develops in early childhood and your child will start to understand that other people have different points of view.

Their understanding of people will progress as they grow, giving them opportunities to step out of their thinking and connect that others have different feelings and beliefs. [2] Talking about other individuals is one way you can help your child. It might be Grandma's birthday, and you want to bake her a cake. You could say "I think we should bake a birthday cake. What type of cake do you think Grandma would like?" Your child might tell you about their favourite cake. You can support this by saying "I think I saw Grandma eating chocolate cake, ooh, and carrot cake. I wonder if you remember which one she prefers?"

It is thought that children with a well-developed theory of mind, that is children who can think about other people's ideas, form friendships more successfully.[5]



Find out more about supporting your child's social and emotional development in our app.



Attachment

When babies have secure attachments as they grow, it helps them regulate their emotions. A child's ability to self-regulate makes it easier for them to demonstrate sympathy, empathy, and compassion. These are all the characteristics of a good friend.

Your child's relationship and attachment with you and others who care for them provides a foundation for their social and emotional development. Children who have secure bonds in early childhood become interested in other people and demonstrate trust, care, and openness.[2]

Empathy

Empathy allows us to understand how others are feeling and encourages us to help them. When your child has empathy, they will be a fantastic friend. Empathy for others builds connections and understanding, which will go a long way towards developing friendships.

The development of empathy is linked to brain development, and when your child is approached with empathy this supports them to make the connections in their brain needed to be empathetic themselves.[6]

Empathy develops gradually. It is a complex skill that takes time to acquire and children must be treated with empathy to behave empathetically.



Self-respect

Confidence and self-respect are the foundations of healthy friendship skills. Children with high self-esteem are more likely to be friendly, share, and involve others in their friendships.

Read more about supporting your child's self-confidence and self-awareness in our blog!



Popularity? Friendship? Too many friends?

Psychologists have considered the difference between being popular and having friends. Friendship involves a mutual relationship, so both children know they are friends. Popularity in a group is different from friendship, and research suggests that it is friendship that supports development and well-being rather than popularity.

As your child develops their social skills, they might have one or two close friends or be part of a larger group of friends. In terms of their development, it is the quality of friendship rather than the quantity that will be supportive.[7]

Should my child play with more than one friend?

It's fine to have more than one friend. One friend can never take the place of another. Children can play with their closest friends at times, and at other times they might play with different friends. We need to teach children that just because they aren't with their favourite friend, doesn't mean their friendship has ended.

The most important thing about becoming a friend is remembering that friends have fun!

Many babies, toddlers, and children share experiences with others based on humour and silliness. Having fun and laughter can truly support a lifetime friendship.

**“Love, friendship, laughter...
Some of the best things in
life really are free.”**

— Bob Marley

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