

Taken from [www.aboutourkids.org](http://www.aboutourkids.org) on January 3, 2009

# Do Kids Need Friends?

by [Anita Gurian, Ph.D.](#) and Alice Pope, Ph.D.



## RELATED CONTENT

- [Back to School for Kids With Special Needs](#)
- [Bullies: More Than Sticks, Stones, and Name Calling](#)
- [Stress in Children: What It Is, How Parents Can Help](#)

## Introduction

Human beings are social beings. Responsiveness is built in; we come into the world programmed to respond and relate to others. Even infants turn their heads in response to the sound of a human voice. Early in life children begin to interact with children outside the family - in child care settings, play groups, and preschool programs. The friendships children have with each other are different than those they have with parents and relatives. Family relationships provide an ease, a closeness, a deep sense of intimacy. But they don't substitute for other relationships. Starting young and continuing through adulthood, friendships are among the most important activities of life.

## What are friends for?

Friendships are important in helping children develop emotionally and socially. They provide a training ground for trying out different ways of relating to others. Through interacting with friends, children learn the give and take of social behavior in general. They learn how to set up rules, how to weigh alternatives and make decisions when faced with dilemmas. They experience fear, anger, aggression and rejection. They learn how to win, how to lose, what's appropriate, what's not. They learn about social standing and power - who's in, who's out, how to lead and how to follow, what's fair and what's not. They learn that different people and different situations call for different behaviors and they come to understand the viewpoints of other people. Friends provide companionship and stimulation for each other, and they find out who they are by comparing themselves to other children - who's bigger, faster, who can add better, who can catch better. They learn that they're both similar to and different from others. Through friendships and belonging to a group children improve their sense of self-esteem. The solace and support of friends help children cope with troubling times and through transition times - moving up to a new school, entering adolescence, dealing with family stresses, facing disappointments.

Friendships are not just a luxury; they are a necessity for healthy psychological development. Research shows that children with friends have a greater sense of well-being, better self-esteem and fewer social problems as adults than individuals without friends. On the other hand, children with friendship problems are more likely than other children to feel lonely, to be victimized by peers, to have problems adjusting to school, and to engage in deviant behaviors. <sup>1</sup>

## **Having friends**

Most kids have friends, and children who have friends at a young age are more likely to have friendships at later ages. About 75% of preschoolers are involved in friendships, and by adolescence 80 to 90% report having mutual friends, usually including one or two best friends and several good friends. Children and adolescents of all ages think of friendship in terms of reciprocity - what they do for each other - but what actually happens between friends changes with age. <sup>2</sup>The toddler may help a friend rebuild his block tower; the school age child may help a friend with homework; the adolescent may offer advice to a friend on issues they can't discuss with parents. Although the issue of reciprocity remains constant, concepts of friendship and the behaviors associated with friendship change as children develop.

## **Friendship through the ages**

In the toddler years children begin to establish contact with peers, develop the rudiments of play behavior and show preferences for certain playmates. Preschoolers identify specific children as friends and interact differently with friends than non-friends. With toddlers friendship is not reflected in language, but in the time they spend together engaged in a common activity.

During the elementary school years children generally choose friends who are similar to themselves and who share their interests. At this age children become increasingly group-oriented; the most well-liked children are those who can manage social relations within a group and think of activities that are fun.

Groups reflect most of the problems that exist in all social relationships - inclusion/exclusion; conformity, independence, fear of rejection. They also reflect sex differences. Groups become more single-gender; girls usually have more intimate and supportive relationships with their friends than boys do. Their play groups reflect this difference; boys tend to associate with peers in large groups centered on sports while girls are more likely to be involved in small groups and spend more time in personal conversation. Girls' friendship groups are usually smaller and more exclusive than boys' during childhood, and then in adolescence the situation reverses. <sup>1</sup>

Groups are a naturally occurring phenomenon. Belonging to a group, whether a sports team, fraternity or political party, provides a sense of belonging and is not just a means for exclusion. Between the ages of 10 to 12 cliques form; as children mature and rely less on their parents for guidance, they turn to their peers. Cliques can be based on

appearance, athletic ability, academic achievement, social or economic status, talent, ability to attract the opposite sex, or seeming sophistication - the jocks, the nerds, the brains, the cool kids, etc. Some kids care about belonging to a certain group, suffer from feelings of rejection if they are not included and can become victims of [teasing and bullying](#). When cliques turn aggressive they may become gangs. Cliques peak in middle school as peer relationships and acceptance augment family relationships and then decrease in high school.

The amount of time spent with friends is greatest during middle childhood and adolescence. Teenagers spend almost a third of their waking time in the company of friends. Most adolescents move away from relying on family and parents and develop close ties with friends. While young children's friendships are based largely on companionship, older children report higher levels of self-disclosure or sharing personal thoughts and feelings in their friendships. The characteristics of preadolescent friendship, such as companionship, tangible aid, validation, caring and trust are still salient; but in addition adolescent friendships become significantly more intimate. Adolescents recognize and value the complexity of human relationships; they view friendship as a strong and stable bond built up and lasting over time.

## **Friends and school achievement**

It seems logical that having friends at school would enhance a child's academic progress. Schools can provide a network of rewarding experiences and represent natural communities of reinforcement. Friends can help each other with class assignments and homework; they can fill in what's missed during absences, and most importantly, friends make school more fun. Research confirms these impressions. Longitudinal studies show that children entering first grade have better school attitudes if they already have friends and are successful in keeping the old friends as well as in making new ones. <sup>3</sup>Similarly teens who have friends experience fewer psychological problems than friendless teens when school changes or transitions occur. <sup>4</sup>

## **When friendships are not helpful - the downside of friendship**

The quality of friendship is important. The well known "peer pressure" effect which starts in early adolescence, although positive for many, can also have negative consequences. Children who align themselves with friends who engage in antisocial behavior are at risk for also engaging in this type of behavior. Antisocial friends are not good role models. Especially during adolescence, teenagers who have a history of difficult behavior and poor peer relationships can engage in delinquent behavior. In contrast, adolescents who have a history of positive peer relationships and are socially mature are more resilient and better able to deal with life changes and stress. <sup>5</sup>Learning to deal with peer pressure, competition and difference is a necessary part of development. Helping children deal with pressure from friends is more important than protecting them from it.

# Encouraging children's friendships

## What Schools Can Do

For children who require individual help several different formats are presently in use:

- Children are taught social skills individually by an adult coach or counselor and then they practice the new strategies.
- Peer pairing therapy; two children with difficulties interact while they receive feedback from an adult coach. In some instances a shy child is matched with a more outgoing child.

For group interventions in the classroom:

- Conflict resolution programs teach children alternate ways of handling problems through peer counselors or adult-supervised techniques.
- Collaborative learning, cooperative assignments and games or "buddy systems" may foster alliances and encourage positive peer interactions.
- Reinforcement of appropriate social skills may enhance a socially reluctant child's social interaction.

## What Parents Can Do

- Let your child know that you feel friendships are important and worth the effort.
- Respect your child's social style; some children do best with a host of friends, and some do best with a few close friends. Some make friends quickly, and some warm up to friends slowly.
- Find practical ways you can help your child make room in his/her life for being with other children. This is especially important if your child is shy or reluctant about peer interactions. For example, be flexible about family schedules so that your child can find time to be with friends. Offer your home or offer to accompany children on outings. You might also make arrangements for your family to spend time with another family that has a similar-age child. Or, you could make concrete suggestions, such as "You can invite somebody to go to the pool with us on Saturday?"

Although some parents may sometimes feel as if they're being too pushy by adopting such strategies, recently completed research shows that children who were more well adjusted socially had parents who were more involved in their children's social activities.

If your child has a problem with a friend, encourage him/her to talk about it and think together about some possible ways to handle similar situations when they arise in the future. It is important to help the child handle the situation in a positive way, and too help her understand her own reactions and feelings. For example, if a friend was uncaring or made an insensitive remark you might say "Maybe your friend was having a bad day" rather than "She was mean to you on purpose because she really doesn't like you."

If your child was teased, help him plan good ways of responding in the future. Sympathize if the child is upset, but try to be matter-of-fact (even if you are upset yourself) and let him know that all kids get teased at one time or another. Find out exactly what he is being teased about; there may be something he can or should do to correct a situation that may be irritating to his peers. Remind him that ignoring teasing, instead of responding emotionally, reduces the chances of teasing recurring. Role play typical situations and develop adaptive ways of responding to teasing. In general, involving teachers can make the situation worse, unless the problem has snowballed and involves a consistent pattern in which your child is being victimized by the same classmates repeatedly.

If your child is finding it difficult to be with other children or to make friends, which may be the case with children having hearing, speech or other problems, or who are very shy, try to create easier situations for socializing. You might invite just one child over to play, since larger groups complicate social interaction. Monitor their play and intervene when necessary to help things along. It's best to help them reach their own solution to a difficulty rather than solving the problem for them.

Model appropriate social behavior; children learn a great deal from their parents. If your child seems increasingly anxious about socializing, shows no interest in peers or is consistently unable to get along with classmates, consider professional help.

Know your child's friends. With adolescents, parents have less opportunity to control their youngster's peer networks; nevertheless parents should remain involved and interested in their youngster's social life - should be knowledgeable about their child's friends, get to know them, ask questions about social activities and stay informed.

## **When parents don't like their child's friends**

Parents all want their kids to have friends who are polite, honest, and bright, who don't drink or smoke or use drugs. Parents want to protect their kids and at the same time encourage independence. Many of the friendships parents worry about are short-lived. Often children discover that a friend they admired at first is really not so terrific. Allowing an objectionable friendship to run its course, will work better than actively trying to stop it. Address the need that the friendship satisfies; ask the child what it is that he likes about that particular friend. The answer may give you some clues about the real reason he's attracted to that friend. However, parents have to distinguish between experimentation and danger. Children have to learn to deal with all kinds of people, and short of keeping them in the house day and night, there aren't many alternatives. When the issues are threatening and potentially dangerous, such as when the child aligns himself only with children who are belligerent or who engage in antisocial or delinquent acts, then parents have a responsibility to discourage the association. When behavior is unacceptable it must be stopped.

Parental support, trust, patience, common sense, and luck will help children acquire the ability to deal competently with social interactions. Children need knowledgeable and

sympathetic guides to help them get along with people, feel good about themselves, and be responsible for their actions.

## About the Authors

**Alice Pope, Ph.D.**, Associate Professor of Psychology, St. John's University, has authored numerous publications on peer relations.

## References

1. Rose, AJ & Asher, SR. (2000) Children's friendships. In [Close Relationships: A Sourcebook](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
2. Hartup, WW & Stevens, N (1999) Friendships and adaptation across the life span. *Current directions in psychological science*. 8, 3, 76-79.
3. Ladd, GW (1990) Having friends, keeping friends, making friends, and being liked by peers in the classroom: Predictors of children's early school adjustment? *Child Development*, 67,1081-1100.
4. Berndt,TJ & Keefe, K (1992) Friends' influence on adolescents' perceptions of themselves in school. In DH Schunk & JL Meece (Eds.) [Student Perceptions in the Classroom](#) (pp. 51-73). Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum
5. Dishion, TJ, Andrews, DW & Crosby, L (1995) Anti-social boys and their friends in early adolescence: Relationship characteristics, quality, and interactional process. *Child Development*, 66, 139-151.

## Related Books

### [Good Friends Are Hard to Find](#)

F. Frankel

Perspective Books 1996

### [Teaching Friendship Skills \(Primary Version and Intermediate Version\)](#)

P. Huggins

The Assist Program Sopris West

1140 Boston Avenue

Longmont, Colorado 80501

### [Bullies and Victims: Helping Your Child Through the Schoolyard Battlefield](#)

S. Fried & P. Fried

Evans Books 1996