

# A parent's guide to... friendships

Having friends is important in life. *Penny Tassoni* explains how children form friendships and ways to help them do so

Most parents want their children to grow up and have friends. This is because having a friend or two in life can see you through the good as well as the bad times. For young children, learning how to make friends and play with others is a journey that really gets going from around three years old. By the time most children start Reception, friendships are a serious matter.

## **FIVE INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIPS**

### **1. Age**

The age of your child is likely to affect their ability to form and maintain friendships. This is because there are several skills that children have to master which are developmental. This means that while babies do not really have friends as such, children between three and four years start to have clear preferences for playmates.

### **2. Social communication**

To have reciprocal friendships, children need to be able to recognise what others might be thinking or feeling and adjust their own responses accordingly. A child who has a large piece of dough may offer to share it with another child because he is able to recognise that the other child wants to play too.

### **3. Self-regulation**

Learning how to control the impulse to grab, be first or not to have a tantrum if you lose is important if

children are to have friends. Being patient, waiting for your turn and being able to cope if your idea for a game is not accepted by others is all about the development of what is called self-regulation.

### **4. Language**

Many of the skills associated with children's ability to develop friendships are partly linked to language levels. As children develop strong language, they can use it to organise their thoughts and control their emotions. Talk also becomes a feature of play as children grow older – for example, deciding on the rules of a game or organising who will be who in imaginative play.

### **5. Temperament**

How quickly children make friends and how many children they want



to play with can depend on a child's temperament. Some children are very happy in the company of just one other child, while other children like to play with several children.

## **WAYS TO BOOST YOUR CHILD'S CHANCES OF HAVING FRIENDS**

While reciprocal friendships are linked in part to children's development, there are plenty of things that parents can do to support their children. There is good evidence that children can learn some of the skills that they need from parents and other adults.

### **Encourage your child to be a collaborator**

As one of the skills that children need is to collaborate with others, they can practise this in small ways at home. Rather than being a 'passenger' who is constantly waited on, encourage your child to help out





in small ways whenever possible – for example, to take the plate to the sink after a meal or to pass you an item of shopping to put away into the cupboard. Give plenty of positive feedback so that your child learns to associate helping out with feeling good about him or herself.

### **Help your child to understand others' responses and feelings**

While even babies are quick to pick up on others' anger or happiness, it can be helpful as your child grows to give explanations as to what others are feeling and why. Use everyday occurrences for this – for example, if you see another child crying after a parent leaves, you might say to your child, 'Jayden is missing his mother. He must be feeling sad and perhaps a little scared.'

You can also use stories to discuss and question the responses and emotions of others – for example, 'I

wonder why the bear doesn't want to play by himself.'

### **Be a good role model**

Children's responses to others are also learnt by watching how their parents behave. While few of us can be saints all the time, when children see kindness modelled regularly, they are more likely to be collaborative with others and so attract friends.

Try to show small acts of thoughtfulness towards others and see if you can explain why they may be important – for example, 'Shall we call your grandmother later? I think that she will enjoy talking to you'; or, 'We will just wait to one side for a minute as this lady has a pushchair and will find it hard to get through the door otherwise.'

It is important also to show a positive response when your child shows any spontaneous act of pro-social behaviour towards you or

anyone else – even if this means that your child has picked flowers from the local park to give to you!

### **Help your child to be a play partner**

One of the hardest lessons that children have to learn if they are to have friendship is that they cannot have it all their own way. They cannot always win every board game or expect that their idea for what to play with will be taken up by their friend. While it is great for parents to play with their children, do not let your child win every game or always be in charge. Instead, before playing, talk to your child about how it is good to take turns so that everyone has a good time.

### **WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE CONCERNED**

The early years of friendships can be very buoyant. It takes until the end of the Reception year for many children's friendships to be stable. Even then, it is likely that there will be fallings out, cross words and some jealousies as all the children are learning about relationships at the same time.

Few early friendships made in nursery and in Reception actually survive over the long term as children's interests and play preferences continue to develop. This is all worth bearing in mind if your child comes home complaining that no-one played with them or that they don't have any friends.

On the other hand, if your child seems to be genuinely upset and unsettled, it is always worth having a word with the early years practitioner or teacher. It might be that they can observe the pattern of friendships during play or organise some structured opportunities for your child to be 'introduced' to another child. ■