

Did You Know?

How Preschoolers Build Friendships

Your child is building friendships at school, but it may look really different than what you'd expect. From infancy on, young children are primed to form relationships, from making eye contact to flashing a bright smile to invite interaction.

EARLY PRESCHOOLERS

Toddlers learn from others through imitation and parallel play. They are experimenting with the “beginnings of friendship.”

Toddlers understand much more than they can express in words. They need “emotional coaching.” It helps if you comment on their play, using simple, clear language. Point out their cooperative play, too: “*Julia really likes to play in the sand with you.*” This helps toddlers become more aware of their own feelings and actions, as well as learning to be sensitive to their friends' feelings.

At first, young toddlers don't understand any point of view but their own. However, by the time they enter Early Preschool, toddlers have new cognitive skills that help them start building friendships. They are becoming more aware of themselves and others. They use the words “me” and “mine” a lot. This stronger sense of self helps them become more aware of how other people feel. Early Preschoolers will feel some empathy if another child is crying, and they may try to comfort him with hugs. Their emerging sense of cause and effect helps them to know that grabbing their friend's toy will make him cry. Also, their new understanding of sequence and order gives them the tools to begin taking turns.

Toddlers need help learning “give and take,” since their emotional life is a struggle with urgent and volatile feelings. The two-year old's push toward independence might mean that she grabs her friend's doll, even though she knows her teacher won't approve and her friend will cry. It's just that her need for control becomes focused on possessing that doll, no matter what.

Developing friendships depends on a toddler's ability to regulate or control herself. This is an important aspect of learning at this age. How parents intervene in conflicts can make a difference in how toddlers learn to navigate the give and take of friendship. Giving children language to express what they are feeling helps them, since they often don't have the words they need. Sometimes, two's can work things out themselves, if the adults give them a minute before moving in.

Helpful Hints:

- ★ **Give your child the words he doesn't yet have to help him label and express his own needs:**
“*You really want that shovel but Jeremy is using it now.*”
- ★ **Empathize but set a limit at the same time:**
“*You can use it when he's finished. It's so hard to wait for something you want.*”
- ★ **Coach your toddler when he's with a friend to help him become aware of the other's feelings:**
“*Samantha is sad because you took her doll.*”
- ★ **After coaching, wait a minute before moving in to see if toddlers can work it out themselves.**
- ★ **Offer toddlers time and space to play by themselves so they can take a break from too much socializing.**

FRIENDSHIPS Stage by Stage

- **Baby's** secure relationship with parents and teachers lay the groundwork for later friendships with peers.
- After 18 months, **Toddlers** begin to develop more awareness of other people's feelings and begin to feel empathy for others.
- **Two year-olds** can make important friendships that last for years.
- As a result of limited communication skills, friendships among **Three-year olds** tend to be more fleeting.
- **Four-year olds** are beginning to form strong attachments to special friends.
- At this stage of development, **Fours** are just beginning to be able to see things from another's perspective, making their friendships more workable.

PRESCHOOLERS

This is the time young children really begin practicing the social skills and strategies necessary for making friendships.

In play,
Preschoolers
must decide...
is it "ME" or
"WE"?

Three-year old friendships are fleeting. But three-year olds still have some difficulty seeing things from another child's perspective, so their friendships are more fleeting. They still have limited communication skills, so they help with using their words.

Four-year olds are more cooperative and their friendships are longer-lasting. You will notice that fours have a more intense desire to interact with others and engage in collaborative play activities. This involves a lot of practice and a lot of trial and error. It is common to hear, *"I don't want to be your friend anymore."* Cooperation is one way to maintain a friendship. But how well preschoolers relate to other children is due to their emerging social competence. When they are able to talk back and forth, listen to each other's ideas, and cooperate in making plans for play together, preschoolers' friendships are more successful. This is where learning turn-taking and the "give-and-take" of play is so important.

Children at this age are working out power struggles. Fours are apt to feel that a good friendship involves the other person doing what *they* want them to do. When one child takes a leadership role and expects another child to follow along, problems can arise. If the other child refuses, the friendship may fall apart. For instance, Jacob decides, *"I am the captain."* Not pleased with his decision, Marcus tells him, *"I'm flying to a better galaxy."* After such a conflict, four-year olds need to decide whether they want their independence or whether they are willing to cooperate with another to maintain the friendship. They have to wrestle with what's more important: *"Me"* or *"We"*? Other problems may arise when one child becomes overwhelmed by the demands of mutual play and wants to go off and play alone. Introverts and extraverts differ in how much energy they can expend interacting. Sometimes, a more introverted child needs coaching to tell a disappointed extravert: *"I want to play by myself right now. Later, we can play again."*

Four-year olds are beginning to form deeper attachments to special friends and buddies, especially those of the same sex. They start to talk about "who is my friend" and "who won't play with me." They are working out the intricacies of making friends and keeping friendships. When they get attached to someone, they feel a loss if that friend moves or leaves their class. They feel the same sense of loss when a friend doesn't want to play with them.

Although fours are beginning to be able to look at things from another's perspective, it doesn't always work. They can still be very egocentric at this age. You see this when a preschooler isn't able to continue playing with a special friend because of something she can't control. For instance, Jessica may fall apart and melt down, saying *"She left and I won't ever get to play with her again."* She has difficulty understanding that her friend who has gone home or has temporarily gone elsewhere to play has not ended the friendship forever. Four-year old Benjamin is very sad because his friend Todd moved away, and he tells his mom, *"I'll never get to see him again."*

Helpful Hints:

- ★ **Coach your preschooler, too.** It can be difficult for preschoolers to understand how their behavior affects friendships, so they need your help. For instance, when you see your child grab a toy, you might coach her to use her words: *"Say, 'I want to play with the doll, too!'"*
- ★ **Children need to have a variety of experiences to practice interacting with their peers to practice their social skills.** Keep play simple. Encourage pairs to play and work together.
- ★ **Parents of Introverts can remember to make play dates with just one friend, and not overwhelm their child.** Lots of group activities exhaust the coping skills of an introvert. Respect a child's needs for "space" when he goes away to play by himself for a while.
- ★ **Parents of Extraverts need to know that their child may be happier when playing with friends and may become bored without the stimulation of contact with others.** Socializing energizes Extraverts.
- ★ **Read books that deal with friendship.** Talk about the problems the characters face and what they do about them. Some of our favorite books in the box do a beautiful job of teaching kids about friendship.

FRIENDSHIP BOOKS for KIDS

- **Tobin Learns to Make Friends** (D.Murrell)—a new class favorite!
- **That's What a Friend Is** (P. Hallinan)
- **Frog and Toad Are Friends** (A. Lobel)
- **Nobody Likes Me** (R. Krischanitz)
- **Snail Started It** (Reidera & A. Von Roehl)
- **And To Think That We Thought That We'd Never Be Friends** (M. Hoberman)
- **Annie Bananie** (L. Komaiiko)
- **Chester's Way** (K. Henkes)
- **Wanted: Best Friend** (A. M. Monson)
- **Laura's Star** (K. Baumgart)
- **Do You Want to Be My Friend?** (E. Carle)

Building Friendship Skills

(From our Parent Workshop)

Keep this in mind about your child's friendships:

- ♦ Your child's friendship style may be different than your friendship style.
 - ♦ Your child's friendship needs may be different than what you feel their needs should be.
 - ♦ What friendship means to your child changes as he or she develops.
 - ♦ Friendship needs are largely determined by a child's temperament.
- Is your child:
- Feisty, Flexible, or Fearful?
 - Introverted or Extraverted?
- ♦ Just as you respect differences in temperament, you will want to respect differences in friendship styles.
 - ♦ You DO have the power to influence who your children play with now!
 - ♦ The friendships your child is forming now can have a lasting impact.

Think of yourself as a "FRIENDSHIP COACH."

Here are the three parts to being your child's "FRIENDSHIP COACH":

- ♦ Set up the play
- ♦ Step out and stand by (while the children play together)
- ♦ Step in (when the children need your help)

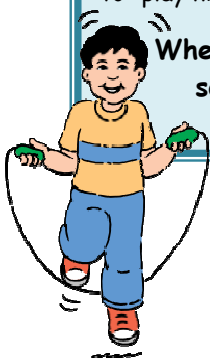
BOYS

Boys don't focus much on tuning into the feelings of others when they play together. Instead, they spend a lot of time in physical play and a lot of toy talk is about planning activities. For example, they might talk about how they will build a fort or play a game or do something they're not supposed to do.

Boys take turns being the leader, but there is also a lot of one-upmanship going on when boys play together. Challenges such as "I can run faster than you" are common. In a boy's world, it's natural for friends to boss each other around and not give explanations. They don't feel a need to explain why they think they're the strongest, the fastest or the smartest. They just are.

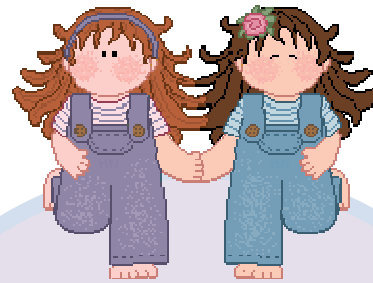
To win approval from his friends, a boy may say a rude word or do something mischievous. Good manners aren't that important to most preschool boys. When they want something, they often push or shove to get it. When boys play with girls, however, they tend to be more willing to "play nice."

When boys play together, be prepared for some bragging and some rude words.



Boy Play/Girl Play

Research shows that little girls and little boys often play and talk in different ways. Your child can learn things from each group, so it's a good idea to give your child practice playing with children of both sexes.



GIRLS

Girls, on the other hand, tend to be more interested in sharing their thoughts and feelings. They spend a lot of time talking about who they like and who likes them. Often, a favorite conversation topic is the things they've done together, such as play dates and birthday parties.

Girls like to talk about things they've done in the past.

How Children of Different Ages Socialize

<p style="text-align: center;">TWO-YEAR-OLDS</p> <p>Two year olds can spend up to half their time just watching one another. They often play side by side (“parallel play”) rather than directly interacting with one another. Expect conflicts when two-to-three-year-olds are playing together. Although these flare-ups can be frequent, they are usually also short-lived, like the children’s attentions spans. Generally, these kids are still very egocentric and don’t give in easily. They don’t pay much attention to each other’s needs or feelings and in fact are not very capable of understanding the concept of another person’s differing point of view, even when it is explained to them.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">TWO- TO THREE-YEAR-OLDS</p> <p>Two to three-year-olds often find that learning to share is a difficult process. Kids in this age group often think of their possessions as extensions of themselves. They have not yet learned that if they momentarily let go of a toy, it still belongs to them and it will be returned. With this in mind, parents can be more tolerant and realize that their kids are not “bad or selfish” but merely “acting their age.”</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">THREE and FOUR-YEAR-OLDS</p> <p>Three- and four-year-olds often build attachment by asking other kids their likes and dislikes and echoing the, (“You like pizza? Me, too!”) Their notion of mutual give-and-take is not yet well developed, and they often make statements of conditional friendship (“I’ll be your friend if you’ll invite me!”)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FOUR-YEAR-OLDS</p> <p>Four-year-olds usually socialize better because they are better at sharing and have longer attention spans. However, they sometimes are more competitive and will often try to outdo each other.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FIVE-YEAR-OLDS</p> <p>Five-year-olds are beginning to contrast themselves and their activities to others (“I’m building a different kind of castle. I’m making a moat around it.”) At this age, children can begin to cooperate with each other and understand that their differences can be used to help each other out (complementary roles). (“You get the buckets of sand and I’ll dig the moat.”)</p>

Help Kids Learn to Share

- ✓ Let your kids know you understand that it is not easy to share by verbally acknowledging it—many many times.
- ✓ Compliment even the smallest attempt to share.
- ✓ Consider getting together in a neutral place, like a playground or park. It’s often hard to share in your own house.
- ✓ When your child is going to play at a friend’s house, send her with one of her own toys from home that she would like to share with her friend. (Let the mother know you are doing this.)
- ✓ Before a play date, let your child select some toys he is willing to share with playmates and help him put away his most precious toys, so he doesn’t have to share everything.
- ✓ Supervise as needed to maintain the peace.
- ✓ Try offering choices. (“Which toy would you like him to use first...the airplane or the dump truck?”)
- ✓ Compliance often depends on your choice of words. Try asking your child to “show” or “teach him how to use” his toy, instead of telling him to “share it” or “give it to him.”
- ✓ Reassure your child that her friend will not take her toy home.
- ✓ Set time limits. Say, “First Kate will have the doll, and when the timer goes off, Janelle will have her turn.”
- ✓ Encourage four and five-year-olds to come up with their own ways to take turns. (Ideas> flip a coin/draw straws)
- ✓ Help choose toys and games that encourage cooperation, not conflict (Ex: Legos, art, dress up, pillows, etc.).
- ✓ Encourage activities that involve taking turns, like going down a slide or running through a sprinkler.

Sources

Talkability by Fern Sussman.Hanen Centre Publishers, 2006.

The Pocket Parent by Gail Reichlin and Caroline Winkler. Workman Publishing, 2001.