

# How Children Make Friends (part 1)

by Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D. in Growing Friendships

If you've ever heard your child complain, "Nobody likes me!" or "They won't let me play!", you know how painful it is for a child to feel friendless.

As parents, we can't make friends for our children, but we can help them understand the key ingredients that underlie friendship formation at all ages.

## **Ingredient 1: Openness**

Every friendship begins with some sign that two people are interested in becoming friends. So, the first ingredient for making friends involves showing that we like someone and expressing openness to friendship with them. Preschoolers will sometimes ask directly, "Wanna be my friend?" but older children signal liking less directly.

## **Greetings**

A very basic way to show openness is to greet potential friends. Shy children often have trouble with this. If another child says "Hi!" to them, they tend to look away and say nothing, or just mumble in response. This happens because they feel awkward and self-conscious, but the message that they're sending to the other child is "I don't like you, and I don't want anything to do with you!" That's not how they feel, but that's what they're communicating.

If this sounds like your child, you may want to help your child use role play to practice greeting people. Break it down: Explain to your child that a friendly greeting involves making eye contact, smiling warmly, and speaking loudly enough to be heard. Saying the other person's name also makes the greeting more personal. After you've practiced, help your child figure out some people to greet in real life.

## **Compliments**

Compliments are another easy way to signal openness to friendship. It feels good to receive a sincere compliment, and we tend to like people who are discerning enough to appreciate our finer qualities!

Brainstorm with your child some ways to compliment classmates. Keep it simple: "Nice shot!" for a kid playing basketball, "I like the way you drew the sky!" about a peer's artwork, or "Your sweater is pretty!" for a child wearing a new outfit are some possibilities.

## **Kindness**

Small kindnesses can be another way to signal liking. This could mean lending a pencil to a classmate, saving them a seat, helping them carry something, or sharing a lunch treat. Kindness tends to elicit kindness, and it's one of the best ways to begin a friendship.

Research tells us that kind children are usually well liked by their peers, but sometimes children try to *buy* friends by giving away money or valued possessions. This definitely doesn't work. The other children will probably take whatever's offered, but they won't reciprocate, and they could lose respect for your child. Going overboard with gifts can come across as desperation rather than openness.

Another caution: Kindness is defined by impact not intent. Sometimes young children get carried away with hugging and kissing a classmate, or they insist that another child has to play only with them. If the other child feels uncomfortable with this behavior, it doesn't count as kindness. You may need to help your child find less intrusive ways to express liking.

Expressing openness is the first ingredient of friendship formation, because it casts wide the metaphorical door to friendship. But it doesn't guarantee that anyone will walk through that door. To increase the odds that a friendship will grow, children need to extend their friendship invitations to kids who are likely to want to come on in. That's where the second ingredient of friendship formation comes into play.

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# How Children Make Friends (part 2)

by Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D. in [Growing Friendships](#)

Just because two children live in the same neighborhood or share the same classroom doesn't mean they'll become friends. Children as young as one-and-a-half or two years of age show preferences for some peers over others.

One of the most common findings in research on children's friendships is that children tend to be friends with other children whom they perceive as somehow similar to them. Kids are most likely to befriend other children who are the same age, sex, and ethnicity as they are. Friends also tend to be more similar than non-friends in terms of interests, social skills, popularity, and academic achievement.

## **Ingredient 2: Similarity**

So, the second ingredient of friendship formation is similarity. Similarity attracts because it's satisfying to children at both a practical and an emotional level. At a practical level, it's handy to have a friend who enjoy the same activities they do! At an emotional level, similarity provides a sense of comfort and validation.

## **Refuting the Magnet Theory of Friendships**

Many children don't understand the importance of similarity for starting friendships because they have what I call *The Magnet Theory* of friendships. They believe they need to be somehow so wonderful that they draw friends to them the same way a magnet attracts steel.

This is often what's behind bragging: A child says, "I can do this! I know that!", hoping that peers will be impressed and want to be friends. The child is trying to communicate, "I want you to like me!" but the message that other children receive is "I think I'm better than you!" That's no way to start a friendship.

Fundamentally, friendship is a relationship between equals, so the magnet theory is completely wrong. Instead of trying to get other kids to admire them, children need to find common ground with potential friends.

## Explaining the Concept of Common Ground



Friendship grows on common ground.

Here's a way to the concept of common ground to your child: Draw two overlapping circles and say, "This circle is you. The other circle is the other kid. The part in the middle -- the overlap -- is where friendships grow. If you're talking about something that's outside the overlap, that's true only of you and not the other kid, that has nothing to do with friendship."

Ask your child, "How can you figure out what you have in common with someone?" Answers could include observing the other child, asking questions, or doing things together to create shared experiences.

Finding common ground doesn't mean that your child has to be a clone of everyone else. It also doesn't mean that your child can never become friends with someone who has a different background or different interests. It just means recognizing that friendships start with connection. To make friends, children need to develop or discover those "me, too!" areas.

If expressing openness unlocks the door to friendship, and similarity predicts who's most likely to walk through that door, the third ingredient of friendship formation is what encourages people to sit down and stay awhile, so friendship can grow.

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## **How Children Make Friends (part 3)** by Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D. in Growing Friendships

A young, elementary school girl once told me, “I know how to make friends!”

“How?” I asked.

“You just go off by yourself and look very, very sad, and then people come over to you!” she explained.

Well, that strategy might get the attention of the other girls once or twice, but it’s unlikely to be a path towards friendship. What this little girl didn’t understand is that kids want to be around kids who are happy and having fun.

### **Ingredient 3: Shared fun**

The third ingredient of friendship formation is shared fun. A classic study by psychologist John Gottman looked at the emergence of friendship between unacquainted children. Eighteen pairs of children, aged three to nine years, got together at one of their homes for three play dates. The researchers found that a key predictor of whether the children “hit it off” was the extent to which they were able to sustain shared activity during the play dates.

This is trickier than it might seem at first glance. To have fun with a peer, a child needs to behave in ways that the other child enjoys, communicate about likes and dislikes, and avoid or resolve any disagreements. There are a lot of ways this could go wrong: ignoring or walking away from the other child, refusing to share or snatching toys away from the other child, bossing the other child around, yelling at or hitting the other child...all of these interfere with shared fun.

### **Planning play dates**

Once your child has made an initial, friendly connection with a peer, either inside or outside of school, the best thing you can do to fan the flames of that budding friendship is to help your child arrange a one-on-one, activity-based play date. Planning ahead to prevent trouble spots can help ensure that the play date involves shared fun.

Before the playdate, you may need to talk with your child about how to be a good host. Good hosts make sure that their guest has a good time. They go along with what the guest wants and try not to argue. They also stay with the guest, rather than playing with someone else or wandering away and leaving the guest alone. If your child has special

toys that seem too precious to share, it's a good idea to put those away before the guest arrives.

At the beginning of a play date, there's often an awkward moment when one child asks, "So... what d'you wanna do?" and the other child replies, "I dunno. What d'you wanna do?" Try to prevent this by helping your child figure out what to do beforehand. Your child could plan to start out by offering two choices of activities shortly after the guest arrives.

Another possibility is to make the activity could be part of the invitation when your child sets up the play date. For instance, your child could ask the other child to come over and bake cookies, ride bikes, practice basketball, go bowling, or go see a movie together. If the shared activity is fun, the other child will associate your child with fun, which moves them toward friendship.

During the play date, don't hover, but do keep an ear out for conflicts that aren't quickly settled. If your child seems to be getting upset, you may want to pull him or her aside quietly and, while out of earshot of the guest, help your child figure out how to move forward. Or you may want to step in to offer both children a timely snack. Having a short break can help the children regroup and get back to having fun together.

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