

How to Help Your Child Make Friends

by Joanne Barker

Where you stand in relation to your child's friendships is one of the more awkward questions of parenthood. There's no doubt that friendship is a critical childhood passage. Kids learn how to share, compromise, and work through misunderstandings with their friends. Yet the ups and downs of friendships can be hard for parents to watch.

"Most children will have hurt feelings at some time," says Mary Dobbins, MD, assistant professor of psychology at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. "Parents who overreact may make things worse."

How do you know when your child needs you, and when you need to back off? Here are seven tips from experts in child development:

1. Teach Friendship Skills

Kids want to play with kids who can have fun without taking over and bossing everyone around. Seeing you reach out to friends is your child's first lesson in how to do that. "As parents, we're role models," says social psychologist Susan Newman, PhD.

You can teach empathy by having your children help you do things like bringing food to a sick neighbor, or making a birthday card for a grandparent, suggests Newman, who is author of *The Case for the Only Child: Your Essential Guide*. Children's experience at home tends to extend out into the wider world.

2. Tune in to Your Child's Friendship Style

Involving your child and forcing your child are two different things. "Parents oftentimes imprint their socialization, or lack thereof, onto their children," says Mason Turner, MD, chief of psychiatry at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco Medical Center.

You could unknowingly limit your child if you assume he relates to friends the same way you do. Let your child show you what kind of social interactions work best for him. If your child loves group situations, great. But if groups upset your child, see if he does better playing with one or two children at a time.

3. Open Your Home to Your Child's Friends

If your child is young, invite her friends over for a play date. Be sure to have a couple of activities in mind. "Younger kids need direction," says Newman. Activities might include a box of dress-up clothes or a plan to make cookies, depending on your child's interests.

Even when your child is old enough to plan her own activities, encourage her to have friends over. Make your home a welcoming place for your child's friends. This can make things easier as she, and her friendships, mature. It will also give you the chance to get to know your child's friends.

4. Help Your Child Work Through Friendship Troubles

Misunderstandings are common to friendships. Your child may need help working through emotions from time to time. In a study of 267 kids between 9 and 11 years old, the way a child perceived his friends' behavior determined whether he got angry, sad, or felt OK about the situation. Kids who felt angry were more likely to want to end the friendship. This isn't to say you should step in and work everything out for your child. You might, however, point out that there are two sides to every story. Or you could say, "Why don't you wait a day or two and invite your friend back over?" suggests Newman.

5. Let Your Child Choose Friends That Fit

Friendships can expand your child's view of the world. That might mean, for instance, that he hangs out with a child from a family whose religion is different from your own. Unless your child is in danger, it's a good idea to give your children room to make their own friends. "Our goal in educating our children is helping them make their own choices," says Turner.

If you feel a friendship is putting your child at risk, however, step in. You may talk with the school to find out more about your child's friend. You may share your concerns with your child and tell him you need to be around any time he's together with this friend. Or you may tell him not to spend time with that kid, period. Just be aware that ultimatums are hard to enforce, so say this only if you really mean it.

6. Keep an Eye Out for Teasing or Bullying

Teasing is often a part of childhood play, but as kids go from toddlerhood to the tweens, it can become more harmful. "My tolerance for teasing goes down as kids reach the ages of 6, 7, or 8," says Turner. "More negative self-esteem can come out of it."

Teasing can easily cross the line into bullying. It's normal for very young children to occasionally hit or shove each other. You can help your child understand how her words or actions might hurt another child's feelings. Let your child know that in your family, people don't treat others like that. Nor do they let themselves be treated badly by others.

Of course, it's difficult to know how and when to intervene. You might want to first talk to your child and ask how he's feeling, just be careful what words you use. "Avoid saying, 'was anybody mean to you today?'" advises Newman. "What you're doing is causing your child to focus on his attacks and people not liking him."

If your child was hit or threatened, however, it's fine to contact the other child's parents. Be nice and try to get them on your side. Together, you may be able to help the children resolve their differences and remain friends.

7. Offer Alternatives to Popularity

Not being part of the popular crowd can feel like rejection on a grand scale. Starting around age 9 or 10, kids become sensitive to what others think of them. Unfortunately, you can't change your child's popularity status. You can, however, listen to her concerns and talk about your childhood misadventures. "As a parent, this is where your own stories of rejection might be helpful," says Newman. It might help to point out unpopular kids who grew up to have the last laugh. For instance, Christian Bale of Batman fame and Kristen Stewart, the female lead in the Twilight movies, have reported growing up under the cloud of other kids' insults. And Lady Gaga is taking a stand for unpopular kids by launching the Born This Way Foundation along with Harvard University.

A good group of friends can make problems like teasing and not being "in" less painful. As a parent, helping your child make friends, without trying *too* hard is a difficult balancing act, and well worth the effort.

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