Growing Friendships: Understanding and Supporting Young Children's Social Development

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Key Changes in Typical Social Development

- Parallel play (3ish) → associative play → cooperative play (5ish)
- Parent/situation led → child led
- Big group/anyone → preferred playmates (5ish)

Components of all Friendships (Young & Old)

PROXIMITY

FREQUENCY

COMMON GOALS, INTERESTS, ACTIVITIES

In general, most of the time, you - at least somewhat - *enjoy that person's company*.



What is it that makes us enjoy a person's company?



People who can “read the room” and adjust their behavior to fit the needs (and reads) of the group will have more success making and keeping friends.

Qualities & Skills to Make and Keep Friends

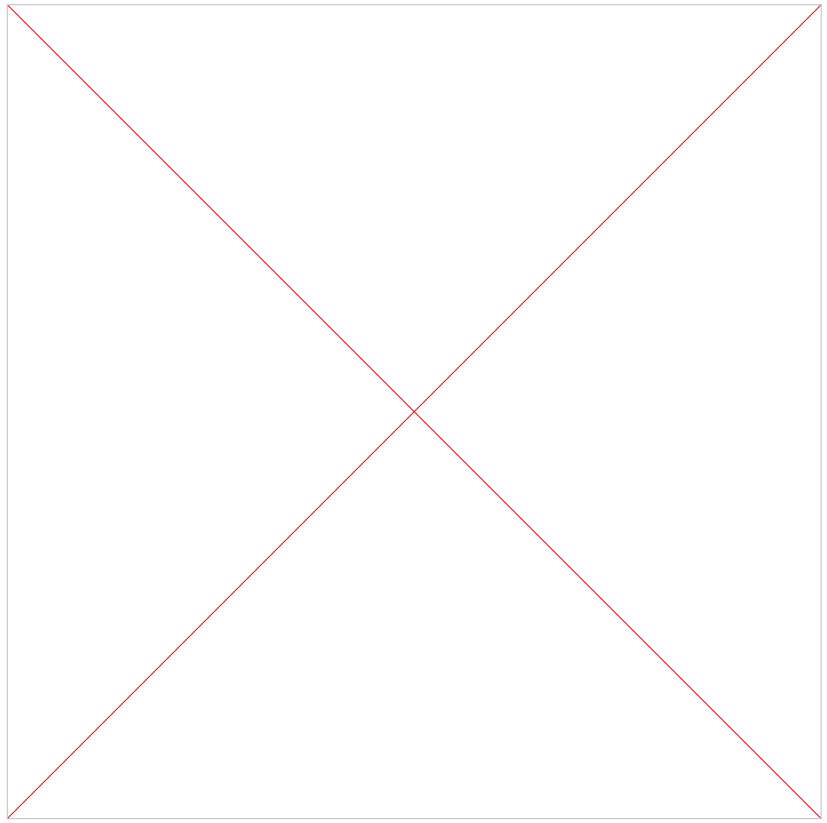
Empathy

- 18 months – attempts to comfort, share
- 3ish – 5ish – recognition of others' experiences, directed attempts to comfort, understand, consider or help

Self-Regulation

- Frustration tolerance
- Impulse control
- "Matching vibes"
- Sensory

Qualities & Skills to Make and Keep Friends



Communication

- Can this child express themselves verbally/nonverbally in a way that peers can understand?
- Do they understand what their verbal/nonverbal behavior communicates to others?
- Can this child understand their peers' attempts to communicate verbally/nonverbally?

Kids Who Make Friends But Don't Keep Them

- Tend to be likable
- Tend to be able to join in, get along, be exciting, be fun
- Might not have situational factors working for them
- Might have strengths that set them apart and make it harder to fit in with peers
- Might have trouble regulating their emotions/behavior when upset occurs
- Might be a "what's right in front of me" kid

Qualities & Skills to Make and Keep Friends

- Sharing, taking turns
  - Requires empathy, self-regulation, and communication
  - “Others also want a turn. I still want to use it. I’m not the only one who matters I guess. I can broker a deal with this kid.”
- Conflict resolution and negotiation skills
  - Requires empathy, self-regulation, and communication
  - “I want one thing. They want one thing. I want to agree on something and go our separate ways.”
  - “I want one thing. They want one thing. I want to try to get what I want while also keeping them content and happy enough to keep playing with me.”

Common Conflicts and Social Challenges

- Self and Others
  - “I won’t be your best friend anymore” (Bossy or controlling friend)
  - Clingy friends
  - How do I take care of myself/stand up for myself while also considering other people’s feelings?

Coaching Through Self and Others

~ Help identify, label, and reflect the conflict: “oh, so Sally loves to play tag everyday at recess and you like to play tag sometimes, too. You also love to play on the swings and sometimes you want to take a break from tag and swing?”

~ Help think through options and goals, always checking to be sure you’re getting it right: “hmmm. That’s tricky. You really like to play with Sally and you care about being her friend. You like to play tag but sometimes you like to do other things like swing. Would you be ok taking a break from playing tag and playing on the swings by yourself or with other friends if Sally decided to play tag still?” (“What if…?” “Do you think you could…?”)

~ Role play and give feedback if needed

Conflict Resolution Go-Tos

- Take turns (half of the time; today/tomorrow; your pick then my pick)
- Find a way to do both
- Bubblegum bubblegum in a dish, rock-paper-scissors or some other game of chance
- Agree it’s ok to separate and do our own things; no hard feelings

Common Conflicts and Social Challenges

Hurt feelings

- Being left out
- Being teased

Coaching Through Hurt Feelings

~ Take a breath, stay calm, *play it cool*

~ *Casually* gather a little more info. Try simply repeating your child. “Oh, George was mean to you today?”

~ Remind yourself there may be more to the story. Truly helping your child means recognizing their role and how their interpretation or skills/challenges may have impacted the situation.

~ Offer possibilities/other perspectives for consideration; wonder

~ Suggest solutions and role play if applicable

~ Not trying to distract from sadness or hurt feelings, shift focus to healing/coping and help “measure” the sadness (it’s a bummer; it’s not devastating)

Coaching Through Hurt Feelings

- “Hmm. Well, maybe Lyla was only allowed to invite 3 friends to go to Sky Zone for her birthday. I know that the girls she invited live in her neighborhood so maybe her mom thought she should include all of those girls since they are used to playing together in the neighborhood? That happens sometimes.”
- Option: “I bet we can think of something fun to do.” Or, “If you like to play with those girls and want to get to know them better, maybe we can see if they’d like to come apple picking with us when we go…” or “I wonder if there are other friends who also might feel a little left out? Maybe we can see if any of them can play on Saturday?”

Coaching Through Hurt Feelings

- “Oh, he said Lego Ninjago is dumb. That hurt your feelings because you love it! I wonder if he was just saying what he thinks without realizing or thinking about how much you love it.”
- Who is this person to your kid? Classmate? Friend? Frenemy? How much does it matter? Help think through – say something, let it go, future responses?
  - The shrug (or double shrug)
  - “I like it.”
  - “What!? Dude, that show is awesome!”

Other Common Social Conflicts

Enemies!

Not fair!

Don’t want to be mean but don’t like

What Else Can Parents Do

- Balance structured and unstructured time with peers
- Bring focus to others' experiences
- Normalize conflicts and challenges – expected events, not crises
- Shift towards coaching rather than refereeing
- Notice, normalize and accept what helps your child be at their social best and help them own it
- Seek additional help – speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, social skills groups, individual therapy, school-based interventions

What Schools/Communities Can Do

- Include those who might need more support and consider what helps them be at their social best
- Avoid putting a spotlight on “bad kids”
- Normalize that some people are working on _____
- Offer messages of acceptance and empathy without excusing the behavior
  - “Well, some kids take more time to learn that it’s ok to be angry but it’s not ok to hit. They need a little more help figuring out how to calm down and stop themselves from hitting the teacher when they’re frustrated."

Questions
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