

How Parents can Help Children and Teens to Build Friendships

Friendships are important to all of us. Our friends share experiences and can be a helpful sounding board. Our common memories of events bind us together and can support us through difficult times and find the courage to try new directions. Friendships are equally important for children.

Developing and nurturing friendships helps children:

- Learn to get along with other children
- Recognize their own emotions and become sensitive to the feelings of others
- Improve their communication and negotiation skills
- Develop their physical skills through games and sports
- Develop self confidence and a sense of self worth

Children and youth with disabilities also benefit from having and keeping friendships. School is a place where many people make life-long friends. However, many children with disabilities need extra help in making and keeping friends. The following are ideas for you on how to support and nurture your child's friendships.

Play with your Child

In order to play with other children, your child may need to develop the skills for playing such as sharing, taking turns, and listening. Your child will develop these skills while playing with other children, but when you play with your child, you have the opportunity to model and talk about the skills. If there are skills your child is having difficulty with, you can play games and provide opportunities to practise the skill.

Selecting Activities

When you are hosting another child, you can set up activities that your child is familiar with or ones that your child likes. If they are feeling confident at the activity they are more likely to take part and play with the other child or children. Some ideas include:

- Art and crafts, adapted for your child's skills if necessary
- Building or construction activities
- Musical games or instruments
- Dress up or imaginary play

Setting Up the Play Area

You know your child and what they like to do. Set up a play area that will be comfortable for the child. For example, if mobility is a challenge, setting up activities at a table will make your child feel more comfortable.

Helping when Needed

Children can find themselves in tricky situations and they may not have the words or skills to solve the problem. You can step in and identify the situation and how your child may be feeling. Your recognition of the children's feelings and modelling how to resolve the situation will help build your child's skills. If necessary, you can change the activity or provide a snack break.

Older Children and Teenagers

For older children you are less likely to be setting up a play date but may still need to support your child to develop friendships. Supporting your child to join a club or community activity will lead them to connect with others who share their interests. Common interests and experiences can lay the foundation for friendships. Volunteering or part time

employment will also lead to new experiences and people.

Teens can start to take the lead in planning activities for their friends. They may still require your support but organizing a movie night or outing with their friends will increase their self confidence. You may also need to be a sounding board when they have arguments or a falling out with a friend. It is not your job to fix the situation but listen to the concerns and maybe ask a few questions as the teen analyses the situation, recognizes their feelings and identifies possible solutions.

If you think your child lacks specific skills or is having a lot of difficulty relating to other children, you may want to seek professional help. Social skill groups or individual counselling may be helpful.

For more ideas and information check out the website [Raising Children](#) and their articles on Friendships.

[Play and Friendships for Children with Disabilities](#)

[Teenage Friends and Friendships](#)

[Friends and Friendships: 10 Frequently Asked Questions](#)