Everyone needs a friend

“Those kids at school are mean. I told them about this great game but they wouldn’t play it. They said I couldn’t play with them.” Rebecca, who is seven, plays happily at home with her four year-old sister Samantha. Samantha adores her big sister and will do anything she says. But with school friends it's not so easy.

Rebecca’s mother wonders whether the other children really are mean or whether Rebecca may be too pushy. When children come over to visit it seems to go well as long as they are doing what Rebecca wants. But if the other child wants to do something different, Rebecca often sulks or goes off in a huff.

Children’s friendships often have their ups and downs. When friendships are going well they support children’s emotional wellbeing and confidence, as well as providing someone to play with. Positive friendships help children have fun, and also help them cope during periods of stress and change. This is why having friends at school is so important for children.

(Click on the links below for further information)

Helping kids with the ups and downs of friendships

Friendship skills for children include

Solving friendship problems

See also

The need to belong

Getting help

Curiosity and confidence

Helping children learn positive friendship skills

Importance of children’s friendships

How friendships develop and change

Friendship patterns in the primary school years

Social skills that promote friendship

Key points for supporting children’s friendship skills
Friendship skills: Suggestions for families

Parents and carers are children’s first and most important teachers when it comes to relationships. The ways you relate to your children and the guidance you provide helps develop children’s social skills. You can help children develop friendship skills and strategies by modelling effective social skills, providing opportunities for children to practise relationship skills and offering support when they go through difficulties. Taking the role of a coach helps children learn the skills they need for themselves.

The following suggestions may be helpful:

**Make time to play too**

Parents and carers can improve their children’s social skills by playing with them regularly. Letting children choose and lead the play allows you to be playful with them and encourages them to practise skills for cooperation and negotiation. Making time for play helps strengthen your relationship with them as well as their skills. Avoid criticising and make it fun!

**Allow your child to try all sorts of different activities**

Children who have a wide range of interests are more likely to have something in common with others and so find it easier to make friends and get along.

**Invite children for play dates**

Having friends over to visit helps children to establish friendships and practise their social skills. It also provides an opportunity for you to provide on-the-spot coaching for children as they develop their friendship skills. Providing positive guidance and helping to structure activities (without taking over!) can be very important when establishing new friendships.

**Talk with children about what is happening for them with their friends**

Find a relaxed time, like the drive home from school or after dinner, to talk about what is happening in your children’s friendship group. By doing this, you let them know that you are interested in their wellbeing, and this can also be an opportunity to share some of your experiences and to help them solve any problems they might have.

**Encourage positive, relevant strategies**

Parents and carers can talk about, and encourage, friendly and cooperative strategies that can help their child to develop friendships. For example, encouraging children to negotiate or compromise when trying to solve conflicts with peers is a strategy that is more positively received than aggression or verbal threats.

**Take a problem solving approach**
Parents and carers don’t need to have the answers to all of their children’s problems. You can support your children to think through a problem for themselves by talking with them and asking some useful questions.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child says:</th>
<th>Parent asks:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“There’s this girl in my class who is really mean to everyone in class, and so we are all mean right back to her.”</td>
<td>“Why do you think she is being so mean?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Maybe she thinks we don’t like her, and so she’s being mean to us?”</td>
<td>“That could be one reason. Do you like her?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Well, I like her when she’s not being mean.”</td>
<td>“So how could you show her that you do like her, and that there’s no need for her to be mean?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Maybe I could invite her over to play after school?”</td>
<td>Affirms: “That sounds like a great idea to me.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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