

INSIGHTS

Helping children make and keep friends



Enjoying healthy relationships has a tremendous impact on your child's wellbeing and their overall success at school. Many children who experience behavioural problems at school have difficulty interacting with their peers.

Coach your child in positive social skills

Children who develop healthy friendships generally have a definite set of social skills that help make them easy to like, easy to relate to and easy to play with. If your child is struggling to make friends consider coaching them using this three-pronged approach:

Be open

Some children close themselves off to forming new friendships, preferring to stick to one or two friends. Encourage your child to be open to forming friendships with a wide variety of children in and outside school and in doing so encircling themselves with many friendship groups

Be inclusive

Encourage your child to include a wide number of children in their games and activities rather than restricting the possibility of joining in to certain children. Healthy friendship groups are open and inclusive of others, while unhealthy relationships, such as cliques are restrictive, one-sided and full of gossip and criticism

Be aware

Encourage social awareness in your child. For instance, a socially-aware child would be discrete when giving out birthday party invitations at school, being protective and sensitive to the feeling of those not invited. This level of social awareness doesn't necessarily come naturally to all children, but it can be reinforced by parents and teachers

Encourage friendships with both genders

The primary school age is an ideal time for children to form friendships with both genders. This is particularly valid if your child has siblings of their own gender, or don't have siblings. It's through these early relationships that we gain the confidence to mix with different genders in later life. Forming friends helps to break down the mystique that can form, when a child has little contact with the 'other' gender.

Understand the impact of gender on friendships

Research shows that boys' friendships groups are more inclusive and less changeable than friendships enjoyed by girls, particularly those in the eight to twelve year age group. Be prepared to support your daughter through the hurt of friendship breakdowns and remind her that new friendships are just around the corner. Help her reflect on her own place in a friendship breakdown, and be open to restoring a relationship once emotions are in check.

Remember, friends of a feather flock together

If you think that your child doesn't have as many friends as a sibling or other children their own age, don't be too alarmed. On average, children usually have only two or three significant friendships at any one time. It's the quality rather than the quantity of friendships that counts. If you are concerned that your child lacks friends at school encourage him to take up a variety of extra-curricular activities. It's easier to strike up a friendship with someone when you have something in common.

Above all else encourage your child to be friendly by talking to others, showing an interest in what other children do, offering help when needed and being willing to enter a new game or social situation. Consider teaching your child, if necessary, alternatives to fighting and arguing when there is disagreement and conflict within groups.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.