

## ON MAKING FRIENDS

By Renee Crevelli-Gross

With the start of a new school year children face a myriad of changes - a new classroom, a new teacher, a new routine, new academic expectations and new friends. While old friends help to bridge the transition between school years, the opportunity for new friends is never more real to a child than at the start of a new year.

Beginning in the first grade, children's friends play an increasingly important role in their lives. While many times these relationships are fairly fleeting, they do play a big part in a child's social development. It is through interacting with friends that children develop inter-personal skills...trust, conflict resolution, assertiveness, negotiation and compromise. Successful friendships contribute significantly to a child's social and emotional development.

Instinctively, parents know the importance of their children's friendships. Parents can help encourage healthy friendships for their children in a number of ways.

1. Ask your children what kinds of activities their classmates are involved in. Help your child understand the rules of certain games and help them practice mastering certain skills (dancing, basketball, kickball, hop-scotch, tether ball). Also, by playing games and sports with your children you have the opportunity to model the behaviors that facilitate friendships (encouragement, good sportsmanship, etc.).
2. Parents can also help by encouraging children to look for similarities between themselves and others and to use these similarities to initiate conversations ("We both have a brother in the first grade." or "How long have you worn glasses?" or "Aren't you on my soccer team?")
3. Point out to your children that their attitude and actions have a direct impact on their friendships. Some children don't readily make connections between their behavior and how others respond to them.
4. Provide your child with opportunities to play with other children. Sometimes a shy child will be much more comfortable getting to know someone in their own home and/or on a one-to-one basis.
5. Share your own childhood experiences with your children. This will show your child that you can really empathize with them. And it might also offer some perspective for a child who feels alone.
6. Practicing interpersonal skills by using role-playing can be an effective learning tool. For example, children who try to "bull-doze" their way into a group, or even *ask* if they can be included, are not as successful at making a group entree as those who use a more subtle strategy. For example, a child who listens to a group conversation for a while and then volunteers a contribution usually will have more success in breaking into a group. You can help your child role-play such strategies at home.
7. Helping children learn how to control their anger and how to control their anger and how to respond appropriately to teasing can be a great benefit in establishing interpersonal relationships. Again, role-playing can be an important learning tool.
8. For children in elementary school, their image of themselves in relation to their peers is very important. Children with a realistic self-image

are more likely to make friends than those who have an overly inflated **or** deflated ego.

9. Keep the lines of communication open by learning to empathize with your child and by trying to remain neutral. Try to keep your feelings in check so that you can be more objective in helping your child better understand the give-and-take of friendships. If your child has been hurt by another, empathize with the hurt, don't try to minimize it. But refrain from making negative comments about your children's friends. Children's friendships are fairly dynamic. Someone who caused tears this week may be considered a close friend next week! Parents must remember that conflicts with friends are almost inevitable. Learning how to resolve their own conflicts is an important part of growing up.
10. Model appropriate social behavior for your child. Respond to your own friends with warmth, sensitivity and reciprocity. If you speak critically of friends or use labels or become overly sensitive or exclusive, your children will most likely integrate these behaviors into their own relationships. You teach by modeling.
11. One of the most important factors in helping children develop friendships is nurturing your own child's self-esteem. Children who feel good about themselves project confidence and a positive attitude. They are also better equipped to handle the inevitable "hurts" experienced between children. Point out what is special about your children... compliment them...praise them. Try to provide them opportunities to participate in positive peer-group activities (sports, extracurricular classes and activities, clubs, etc.). This affords children more "practice" at initiating and nurturing friendships and, in turn, can boost their confidence. Show your child that you have confidence in their ability to make the right choices and decisions when it comes to their friends and their peers.
12. If your child has found it consistently difficult to make friends, don't hesitate to talk to their teacher and/or to seek some professional advice.

Many times the objectivity and input of a third party can shed new light on a situation.

Remember, an important element in learning how to make friends is a secure parental relationship. Children who trust and respect their parents have a solid foundation for establishing friendships.

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Renee Crevelli-Gross, a certified childbirth educator, has served on the city of Davis Child Care Commission and on various committees at Pioneer Elementary School. She lives in Davis with her husband and two children and believes that "parenting is the most important job we'll ever do!"

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