



### **Making Friends – Assisting Children’s Early Relationships**

In 1935 the U.S. Congress proclaimed the first Sunday in August as National Friendship Day. This year it falls on Sunday, Aug. 5 and it will be celebrated and observed in many countries and cultures. As adults we understand the value of friendship. It’s not only important to us but is also very important to young children. Relationships and social interactions play an important part in a young child’s life. The experiences from these early years lay the foundation and form a template for future relationships. Children need friends. Companionship provides fun and laughter, as well as solace and warmth in times of personal difficulties. Friends can help us develop a sense of who we are and help us learn to get along with other people. Friendships clearly play a vital role in a child’s emotional health and well-being and also help strengthen one’s interpersonal skills.

Peek inside a preschool classroom and you will often find children altering their games so that their friends can play along. At circle time, they encourage and help their friends participate. In short, friendships are forming.

In very young children, as with older children, friendship is defined as a positive relationship between two children. Young children who are friends are interested in being near one another, have fun together, will choose to play with one another over others in a group, and challenge themselves and the friend to try new and more complicated tasks.

Some interactions between children of this age may appear to the casual observer to be meaningless or without structure, yet many involve back and forth turn-taking, and a clear awareness of how the actions fit together. These early “games” can help solidify a growing friendship. Often young children interact by copying one another. One child will perform an action, and then look at the other child, using body language to ask them to repeat the same action. This creates a similarity between the children. When children cannot yet speak, this seems to say, “Look, I like to do the same things you do!” Mimicking behavior shows cooperation and the desire to keep the interaction going. These games can have their own set of rules that the two children make up, and can be played once, or repeatedly, often across days. These are among the most complex interactions for toddlers, both requiring and encouraging the child and the friend to develop socially and cognitively.

Friendships among very young children provide more than just entertainment. In a 1994

study by Whaley and Rubenstein, very young children assisted their friends, willingly gave up a toy to a friend, and supported a friend in a conflict he/she had with a peer. These acts of sharing, helping and loyalty were done spontaneously, without prompting by an adult. Very young children also can develop a strong sense of empathy for their friends. A 1981 study by Musatti and Panni notes that the observed children (all younger than 18 months) were three times more likely to respond to a crying friend than a crying child they did not know. Many times the toddler would try to console the distressed friend by coming close to the friend's face and smiling, talking or singing, or even offering a toy in an attempt to cheer the friend up. Sometimes, the toddler would ask for help by getting an adult's attention and motioning towards the crying child.

Parents and educators can take measures to foster and deepen friendships among very young children. Below are 6 suggestions provided by researchers at the FPG Child Development Institute at UNC Chapel Hill:

Group play is important but sometimes allow two children some privacy so they can concentrate on their relationship and play together. This may mean allowing them to exclude other children at times. Parents can arrange play dates between their child and another friend.

Specific environments also can help support friendships as well as encourage new ones. Small, cozy spaces just big enough for two encourage closeness. Toys, materials and playground equipment that need two partners to function well promote working together and communication.

Adults can provide more than one version of similar toys and materials. This allows friends to perform the same action at the same time, an important part of very young children's friendships.

Adults can allow noisy, silly, active play in the group or pair, so that the children can experience the closeness created by shared laughter.

For younger children with disabilities, parents and educators can act as matchmakers. Children who have shown an interest in one another, or in similar activities, can be encouraged to play together or at least be near one another, both in a group and separately.

Though adults are often in the background for children's friendships, they can be more involved when the children are just learning to communicate. They can carefully join the children in play in order to keep the interaction going, or to explain a child's actions that the friend might not understand.

Friendship among very young children is not only possible, but beneficial. With support and encouragement from adults, young children can form connections that not only provide enjoyment, but help promote their growth and development in many areas.

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