



MACARTHUR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL CLINIC

Importance of children's friendships

At any age, having friends provides support and promotes mental health and wellbeing. Children's friendships are also very important for their social and emotional development. Through friendships children learn how to relate with others. They develop social skills as they teach each other how to be good friends.

Most children want to have friends. Children who have friends are more likely to be self-confident and perform better academically at school than those without friends. When children have difficulty in making friends or in keeping them, it often leads to feeling lonely and unhappy with themselves. Feeling rejected by others may lead to significant distress. Learning positive friendship skills can help children socially so they feel happier and more confident.

What are social skills?

Social skills are a group of skills which people need to interact and communicate with others. They involve giving, receiving and interpreting messages. Social skills are both verbal and non-verbal in nature.

Verbal Skills: include being able to determine the appropriate things to say at the appropriate time, being able to communicate in ways that are engaging, having a range of vocal tone and quality, and being able to speak in an understandable manner. In a sense, social skills are judged by what we say, when we say it and how we say it.

Non Verbal Skills: Are the other aspect of social skills, which includes body language, standing up straight, making eye contact, making appropriate gestures, leaning toward the person we are speaking to, smiling appropriately, and keeping the body open. These can all define good non – verbal social skills.

Aside from this, social skills also require additional abilities in order to get along with others. This includes:

- Communicating
- How to be part of a group
- Expressing feelings
- Caring about yourself and others
- Problem solving
- Listening
- Assertiveness
- Managing and resolving conflict



How friendships develop and change and the basic functional skills required

Friendships require give and take. By sharing toys, time, games, experiences and feelings, children learn that they can have their social needs met and can meet the needs of others. Since friendships develop through this kind of mutual exchange, close friendships are usually based on well-matched needs.

Children's friendship needs and skills change as they grow. Similarly, children's ideas about friendship change as they develop. This is reflected in the different kinds of activities that children like to spend time doing with their friends at different ages. The table below indicates the ways children tend to describe close friends and the kinds of functional skills that support positive friendships as they develop.

Approximate age	A friend is someone who...	Friendship skills include...
Up to 1 year		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> looking, smiling, touching, imitating
1–2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> plays with you has good toys can do fun things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying friend by name
3–5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> does something that pleases you you know better than other people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> playing well in a twosome approaching others to join in
5–7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> helps and looks after you you help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> taking others' feelings into account seeing others' viewpoint
8–10 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> plays fair – follows the rules talks and shares interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talking and listening to each other forming groups with similar interests
10–12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> trusts you and is trustworthy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sharing confidences negotiating respecting one another
12–18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understands you and who you understand you can talk to about feelings or problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talking about personal and social issues supporting one another

Friendship patterns in the primary school years

Children choose friends who have similar interests and enjoy similar activities. During primary school close friendships are most often with a child of the same sex. This is related to children's preferences in play.

Boys tend to prefer active kinds of play in groups, whereas girls typically prefer gentler games in pairs or threes and use talk more than action. Such preferences may be especially strong around the ages of eight and nine when many children become more aware of social expectations regarding girls' and boys' behaviour.

These expectations can create difficulties for boys who are interested in gentler kinds of play and for girls who prefer the kind of active play that is usually associated with boys.

Friends cooperate and communicate more with each other than with other children. They also have conflicts more often, but usually manage to settle them without upsetting the friendship. Friends influence each other's behaviour. Over time they may take on similar mannerisms, language and preferences. Although friendships usually have positive effects, friends who have behavioural problems may encourage problem behaviour in one another.

As children's interests and developmental needs change, their friendship patterns may also change. By the middle of primary school it is common for children to form small friendship groups based around similar interests. These groups often establish their own rules about who can join them. Setting rules and learning to negotiate them is important for helping children to develop their understanding of social relationships. However, when children lack cooperative relationship skills it can lead to friendship groups being dominated by some children and excluding others.

Social skills that promote friendship

Children who are good at making and keeping friends use positive social skills. Parents, carers and school staff help children learn positive social skills by guiding them as young children, being positive examples for children to follow, and providing opportunities for play where children can practise their skills. Key social skills that help with friendships include cooperation, communication, empathy, emotional control and responsibility.

All children go through friendship conflicts. Even usually popular children experience rejection sometimes. When this happens children's confidence may be affected. They may blame themselves or others. Beliefs about the reasons for the friendship conflicts they experience affect the ways that children react.

Some kinds of thinking are more helpful than others for managing the conflicts children have with friends. The following example shows different possible reactions to being refused when a child has asked to join in a game with others.

Positive social skills are shown in these behaviours:		Poor social skills are shown in these behaviours:	
Starting conversations	Sharing	Physical aggression (kicking, hitting, etc)	Being a poor loser
Taking turns	Asking for what one wants/ needs	Arguing	Getting into others' space
Expressing feelings	Apologising to others	Interrupting	Talking too much
Asking questions	Following rules of play	Name calling	Breaking rules of play
Complimenting others	Playing fair	Bossing others	Being too rough in play
Accepting others	Listening to others	Whining, complaining	Taking others' possessions
Refusing to join others' negative behaviours	Being a good loser	Showing off	

	Helping others		
	Cooperating		

Social skills can be natural for some children while other children may find social interaction overwhelming, confusing or anxiety provoking. As a result, these children may frequently experience peer rejection or teasing. Some children may not have the basic functional social skills required for successful peer interaction and thus require support from others such as parents, carers, school staff and in some cases professionals.

Helping children develop friendships can come in many forms such as: setting examples for children to follow through the ways they manage relationships, acting as coaches for children, teaching them helpful social skills and talking through friendship issues to help with solving problems.

