



# friendships

## 15 Making Friends

Story thanks to  
Jutta Dempsey

Parents play an important role in developing a child's social skills, writes Jutta Dempsey.

To see children struggling to make and keep friends is very difficult for parents. Knowing your child is alone and feeling rejected or anxious in social situations can be heartbreaking. Parents often feel helpless – and yet they can play a very powerful role in the social skilling of their child.

**Here are a few tips to consider when dealing with this situation:**

### [1] Temperament

Take a realistic look at your child's temperament. Are they reserved and shy, a social butterfly or perhaps somewhat competitive or driven in temperament? Depending on their temperament some children prefer just a few friends and independent play. Others enjoy lots of activity and people; some may prefer organised sports. And, just to make parenting a little more challenging, different siblings often have different temperaments!

### [2] Family and community involvement

Do your kids spend a lot of extended family time with grandparents and cousins during the week or only holidays? Do you have spiritual or community links or interest activities where your children will mix with other like-minded people? Children who have these social connections often have friendships within these circles

outside of school hours and can more easily mix with them as they are similar in some way.

### [3] Role modelling

Do you have social gatherings with your friends who also have children? Are you role modelling social connectivity or social isolation? Many parents focus on their children's needs to the exclusion of their own whereas a child seeing their parents socialising will pick up these skills naturally. Kids love helping prepare for visitors and learning how to entertain in their home. They also enjoy learning how to be a polite and courteous visitor themselves.

### [4] Activities

Organising activities that your child enjoys will assist them in meeting other like-minded children. Team and individual sports, music, art, kids clubs, scouts and guides are all great opportunities to develop and share a passion with other children. They also allow your child to practise their social skills as well as develop relationships within these activities.

As your child meets new friends, help them in organising play dates so they have the opportunity to consolidate these friendships. And, don't forget to connect with the parents too.

If your child continues to have difficulties forming friendships then it's time to analyse

the behaviours that are preventing them from forming and maintaining friendships. Pick up a social skills checklist from the internet for the age of your child and note which ones are causing them problems. Once identified you can role model and practice them within family activities, play act them with super heroes or puppets, watch and discuss them in different movies and shows and then practice and reinforce them during play dates at home.

Most children pick up their social skills from watching others and learning quickly from their own social successes and failures. However, if your child has a challenging temperament that hinders the formation or maintenance of friendships, and has not picked up appropriate social skills, it is important to focus on this early so that they don't develop a pattern of interaction that becomes entrenched.

Children that are too bossy, clingy, aggressive, touchy, competitive or shy may need more assistance in developing the right skills. You may need to actually teach these skills in the same way that they learn maths and spelling. Don't assume it should come naturally to them. Once they know how, kids will go out and use those skills so they can make those important connections and friendships with other kids.

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