

Supporting children to develop friendships and empathy

Some children seem to get along with others easily. They bound in and out of groups effortlessly without a care in the world. For others, joining in or getting along with others does not seem to come so naturally. This may be because they have not yet learned the social and emotional skills they need to get along with others.

When parents and carers are in tune with what is going on for the child they can help the child to develop the skills they need to get along with those around them and enjoy the company of others. Having good social relationships benefits children in all aspects of their development.

Young children don't learn all these things at once but gradually over time. Don't expect too much and give praise when you see your child learning a new friendship skill.



Tips for developing children's friendship skills

- ▶ Arrange plenty of opportunities for your child to meet lots of different people starting right from birth.
- ▶ Children learn from seeing how you treat your friends and their friends and playmates.
- ▶ Children find it easier to get along with others if they can do the same things (e.g., learning to swim or having ball skills).
- ▶ Talk with children about how to be with others. (e.g., 'When someone comes to visit we say "Hello"'; for an older child 'Being a good sport means saying well done to the other person even if you don't feel like it.').
- ▶ Play games with them so they learn about cooperating and considering others.
- ▶ Read stories about friends.
- ▶ If a child is aggressive, respond to their feeling but tell them that you don't like their behaviour. Ask them to think of another way to get what they want. When they are very young you need to show and tell them. 'I know you feel angry when I am on the phone, but I don't like it when you hit. If you want me to come just touch me gently.'
- ▶ Have other children over one at a time when your children are young. This means no-one is being left out while they are learning.
- ▶ When children are first learning to play together have something planned for them to do.
- ▶ Teach your child to smile and greet other people. Don't force the issue if your child is not ready. It may help to practice at home, when you greet each other in the morning for example.
- ▶ Teach children some skills in relating to others—listening, being friendly, and responding and showing interest in what others have to say.
- ▶ Help them to show interest in what others are doing, and give compliments to their playmates.
- ▶ Praise your child for being friendly and caring about others.
- ▶ Help children to use words to say what they need and feel (e.g., 'I would like a turn with that' or 'Would you like to play in the play house with me?').

Naming feelings for children

- ▶ This is very important in helping children learn to manage their own feelings. It also helps them to start thinking about what other children are feeling. Sometimes a two-year-old will spontaneously do something to offer comfort for a child who is upset or give a dummy to a crying baby.
- ▶ There are lots of opportunities for learning about feelings such as frustration and anger when there is more than one toddler, as they take toys from each other if they want something and physically hang on to what they have. Adults can help them to say what they feel in words, to think about others and to manage frustration when things don't go their way (e.g., to help them to wait for their turn).

Some things staff may be doing

Modelling social skills by connecting with each child

- ▶ Make sure that your service has an atmosphere of treasuring children and caring for others.
- ▶ Smile at a child across the room.
- ▶ Make little gestures to support children's social interactions.
- ▶ Get down to their level to talk and make eye contact.
- ▶ Show you are interested by commenting on what you see them doing without judging or adding your own suggestions.

Intentionally teaching social skills to the group

Do not just expect children to know how to be a friend or join a group just from modelling.

- ▶ Staff may teach social skills using puppets and asking the children to solve the puppets' problems. This helps all the children in the group to understand what they need to do about things like sharing and what is fair.
- ▶ Talking about stories is another way to help children think about being a friend.
- ▶ Involve children in activities that help others.
- ▶ Involve children in making rules about how to treat others.

Providing extra support for children who appear to be experiencing difficulty getting along with others

- ▶ Observe what is happening and what friendship skills the child or other children might still need to learn (e.g., if a child is feeling left out or excluded).
- ▶ Coach children in the skills they need to develop and provide them with feedback when they do well.
- ▶ Talk with parents and carers to share information and find out if there is anything worrying the child at that time.
- ▶ Assure parents and carers you are observing and will help and let them know how their child's relationships are developing.
- ▶ Children with additional needs also need relationships and may need extra help.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing



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