

Tip Sheets

Creating Healthy Friendships

Research shows that establishing friendships is an important developmental goal for children under age seven. Friendships created during early childhood provide valuable contexts for learning and practicing skills related to social, cognitive, communicative, and emotional development.

Benefits of Friendship

Good friends are good for your health.

Child psychologists find that early childhood friendships contribute to children's quality of life and ability to adjust to changes within their environments. Having friends to communicate with makes children feel less alone and provides a sense of building community. Playing helps develop imagination; and there is a positive correlation between friendship and school performance.

Friends can:

- Bring connection, belonging, and purpose.
- Boost happiness and lower stress.
- Help celebrate good times and provide support during bad times.
- Improve self-confidence.

Creating friendships develops life skills. Children will learn:

- The meaning of true friendship and will increase a child's confidence and self-esteem.
- That a good friend will have their best interests at heart and have their back.
- How to deal with conflict and adversity.
- Leadership skills.
- To make decisions without micromanaging from adults.



Six Core Strengths for Healthy Development

Dr. Bruce Perry, an internationally recognized authority on child mental health, is credited with the concept of the "Six Core Strengths." These strengths build on one another and—when given the opportunity to develop in early childhood—foster a child's emotional development and provide a strong foundation for the ability to create healthy relationships.

Attachment: Being a friend

Attachment is the cornerstone of all other strengths. An infant's interactions with a parent or primary caregiver create his or her first relationship. Healthy attachments allow a child to love, to become a good friend, and to have a positive and useful model for future relationships.

Self-Regulation: Thinking before you act

Developing and maintaining the ability to notice and control primary urges such as hunger, as well as feelings of anger and fear, is a lifelong process. Pausing between an impulse and an action is a life tool. Developing this strength helps children physiologically and emotionally. In social situations, the age-appropriate ability to self-regulate may spell a child's success and build his self-confidence.

Affiliation: Joining in

Affiliation allows us to form and maintain relationships with individuals and within groups to create something stronger, more adaptive, and more creative than the individual. It's in these groups and situations that children make stronger connections with peers ... their first friendships.

Awareness: Thinking of others

Awareness is the ability to recognize the needs, interests, strengths, and values of others. As children grow, their awareness of differences and similarities becomes more complex. An aware child learns about the needs and complexities of others by watching, listening, and forming relationships with a variety of children. The aware child will also be much less likely to exclude others from a group, to tease, and to act in a violent way.

Tolerance: Accepting differences

Tolerance is the capacity to understand and accept how others are different from you. Children learn to reach out and be more sensitive to others when they learn tolerance. The tolerant child is more flexible and adaptive in many ways.

Respect: Respecting yourself and others.

Appreciating your own self-worth and the value of others grows from the foundation of the preceding five strengths. An aware, tolerant child with good affiliation, attachment, and self-regulation strengths gains respect naturally. Children will belong to many groups, meet many kinds of people, and will need to be able to listen, negotiate, compromise, and cooperate. Having respect enables a child to accept others and to see the value in diversity. The development of respect is a lifelong process, yet its roots are in early childhood.

Stages of Play and Friendship

The way a child plays and makes friends will change through early childhood. Children learn

different things from playing at different ages and stages, including creativity, flexibility, and problem-solving. **The more chances a child has to play, the more a child can learn about how to play.**

Supporting the development of friendships

- Praise and encourage children in their friendship endeavors. Praise builds confidence!
- Plan for play with the appropriate toys for all developmental levels. Have activities you know the children can do confidently.
- Prepare for play with books or social stories about friendships and different situations that might occur when playing.
- Have spaces/activities so children can choose to play together, in a small group, or alone.
- Be available to support the friends in play.
 - Do they need help initiating play?
 - Extending the learning
 - Using language skills
 - Navigating conflict?
- Try to make playing with other children as fun, calm, and enjoyable as possible.

Remember: Playing with other children takes physical and emotional energy, children may need to spend time alone after a big play session.

We know childhood is about trial and error, and this philosophy applies to friendships as well. Each experience offers an opportunity for children to learn and grow in their relationships with others.

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