Play Dates and Peer Groups: Forming Friendships across Childhood

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- High quality friendships serve many important functions in children's lives. The benefits of friendship include:
  - Validation and support
  - Emotional security
  - Context for self-disclosure
  - Help and guidance
  - Reliable allies
  - Companionship and stimulation

- Children with friendship difficulties are at risk for a number of adjustment problems, including:
  - Loneliness
  - Peer victimization
  - School adjustment difficulties
  - Deviant behavior

- The goals and processes involved in forming friendships change with development.
  - Toddler Years
    - Capable of complementary social interactions
    - Form rudimentary friendships
  - Early Childhood (3-7 years)
    - Primary concern is to maximize enjoyment through play
    - Expect friends to share common activities, join in organized play, and be physically nearby
  - Middle Childhood (8-12 years)
    - Primary concern is peer acceptance
    - Expect friends to accept and admire them and be loyal
  - Adolescence (13-17 years)
    - Primary concern is self-understanding
    - Expect friends to understand them and be willing to self-disclose.

- Gender differences in friendships
Gender segregation is common through the middle childhood years

- Girls’ friendships involve higher levels of intimacy, self-disclosure, and validation. Co-rumination is more frequent in girls’ friendships
- Boys are higher on rough-and-tumble play and overt aggression, more involved in competitive activities, and care more about dominance in the peer group

Other-gender friendships become more common in adolescence.

Friendship skills

- Being an enjoyable and resourceful companion
- Expressing caring and concern
- Being a reliable partner
- Helping a friend in need
- Managing disagreement
- Being able to forgive

Suggestions for supporting children’s friendships

- Respect your child’s social style
- Be a good role model
- Provide children with opportunities to play with peers
- Encourage participation in activities and recreational groups
- Talk to your child about their friendships
- Teach positive social skills
- Take a problem-solving approach and encourage positive strategies
- Get to know your child’s friends and their parents
- Encourage friendships with positive role models
- Share your confidence that your child can handle social situations

If you are concerned, contact:

- Your child’s teachers and school counselor
- The Community Liaison Specialist, Dr. Cynthia Frosch, at the Center for Children and Families (caf091000@utdallas.edu; 972-883-4827)

Additional Reading

Natalie Madorsky Elman and Eileen Kennedy-Moore, The Unwritten Rules of Friendship

Fred Frankel, Good Friends Are Hard to Find

Patti Kelley Criswell and Angela Martini, A Smart Girl’s Guide to Friendship Troubles