

Promoting First Friendships

By Judith S. Bloch, ACSW



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ll of us know that preschool children sometimes fight or don't want to play.

This is part of growing up. But, classified children show worrisome patterns. They're often unable to move from adult-child interactions to more co-equal relationships with peers. The basic skills and feelings that are required to make friends don't always develop appropriately. Some have personal characteristics that keep them isolated or contribute to rejection from peers, with no idea that their own behavior is part of the problem. And children with an autistic disorder don't become social in the usual ways. They need support to participate in group games or activities and tend to prefer solitary play. Other children are quite social and interested in peers, but they struggle with frustration tolerance, impulsivity, temper outbursts and bossiness, qualities that interfere with friendships. These relationship difficulties can limit a child's participation in community activities and success in inclusionary classes.

Since social skills and a child's relationships will generate many moments of pleasure or pain, and even have an impact on learning, these abilities are critical. Famed pediatrician Melvin Levine, M.D., says, "Some kids seem to be born with distinct social talent that allows for friendship formation . . . others have to be taught how to relate." Many children with disabilities need special help since, unfortunately, they're all too often the least preferred partners of typically developing children.

Since relationships with other children are a central developmental task in early childhood, adults in classrooms, therapy sessions and at home should make this a priority. There are many ways to help children develop and maintain friendships.

- Use pictures to identify feelings and moods.
- Choose, read and discuss appropriate friendship stories.
- Help children find suitable playmates. (Consider other children, with or without disabilities, who seem compatible.)
- Encourage twosomes and play dates. (Notice common interests and potential matches.)

Some children will benefit from extra help, available through special afterschool social skill training groups. For others, frequent well-designed experiences at school and at home will improve their ability to enjoy and play peacefully and cooperatively with their peers. ☺

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