Supporting the Development of Positive Friendship Skills

Peer relationships are a critical component of a child’s social, emotional and academic development. The ability to form and maintain peer relationships allows children to participate positively and be accepted within our community. This serves to satisfy our basic human need to belong, a primary component of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954). The development of peer relationships contributes to the advancement of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is now considered a critical skill, due to the significant influence of emotional intelligence on positive life outcomes and success across environments. In addition, positive peer relationships promote self-confidence and happiness in the school environment. While children in early primary typically do not have a “best friend” per se, the opportunity to connect with the other children in their environment is pivotal to positive social development and lays the foundations to the complex concept of “friendship”.

The Development of Friendship

According to KidsMatter (2013), children tend to develop friendships based on similar needs, which continue to change as children grow older. Often, the activities that children choose to engage in with their friends provide an insight into their social and friendship needs. The table below has been taken from the KidsMatter information sheet, Helping children learn positive friendship skills (2013).
Often, children in the primary years choose friends of the same sex, partially due to children’s preferences in play activities. While it is desirable for children to participate in a range of activities and interact with both male and female peers, organic play with boys often involves active, group play, while girls generally are drawn towards gentler games in smaller dyads or triads. However, these expectations and behavioural patterns may cause difficulty for male students who prefer small group, gentle play and for female students preferring more active, large-group play. As such, supporting your child in accessing play appropriately with a wide range of peers will support them in identifying patterns of behaviours and social skills that will allow them to satisfy their friendship needs.

**Steps to Accessing Play**
Research suggests that children seek positive social behaviours in their early friendships, which includes the ability to use “low risk” tactics for entering a group in play (Styles, 2007). The steps to accessing play in this manner are as follows:

1. Move close to the group and smile
2. Look and listen to what is happening in the game
3. Say something nice about the game, e.g “Cool game!” or, “That looks fun!”
4. Just start playing; don’t wait to be asked!
5. Have fun!
Supporting your child in following these steps to access group play will allow them to join a range of groups and activities in the playground, giving them the tools to develop positive peer relationships through play.

**Social Skills that Stimulate Peer Relationships**

The development of positive friendships relies on our application of relevant social skills. However, at the beginning of primary school, many of these social skills are still in the early stages of development. This is absolutely fine! However, as parents, caregivers and teachers, we can model these social skills and provide opportunities for peer interaction, thereby demonstrating the effect of these skills on the development of positive relationships. The following table shows the social skills that promote and encumber the development of friendships, again taken from the KidsMatter handout, *Helping children learn positive friendship skills* (2013).

![Social Skills Table](image)

**What we can do to support friendship skills:**

As adult role-models in our children’s lives, we have a wonderful opportunity to support and stimulate the development of the social skills that support peer relationships.

1. **Provide opportunities for your child to play with peers**

In order to learn to apply friendship skills successfully, children require experience in natural play with peers. It may be helpful to plan short play-dates with one other child if your little one is still learning to get along with others, and to have some engaging activities up your sleeve for these play experiences. Try these steps to a successful play-over:
• Keep it short. 2 hours will be adequate time for children to interact positively.
• Keep it small (one child at a time)
• Plan it, and have something up your sleeve. You might like to do something special, e.g. bubble machine, make slime, cooking, make/do something a bit different! Remind children what activities are available to play.
• Supervise it
• Expect social bumps and bruises, and try to refrain from social “bandaiding” too quickly! See how the children attempt to resolve conflicts and support them in applying some conflict resolution strategies. This may involve having each child explain what they feel occurred, how each of them are feeling, what could be done to resolve the conflict and trying this idea.

2. **Teach positive social skills**

Take time to observe your child in play. What kinds of positive social behaviours can you reinforce? Are there any social behaviours present that are not appropriate? Look out for little things that you can praise your child for, such as smiling at another child, making eye contact in play, commenting and using a friendly / kind voice. It could be helpful for you to support your child in identifying the needs of others, and managing emotions of anger, fear or uncertainty by talking about these emotions gently and encouraging your child to take some time to “cool down” these “hot feelings” in a supportive manner. This may mean encouraging your child to take five minutes to play with some play doh, quietly colour in or read a favourite story, before returning to the social interaction.

3. **Coach your child**

Children require ample opportunity and positive praise to apply and generalise social skills across contexts. This means that often, they require a supportive adult to prompt, remind and encourage them to use relevant social skills that have been taught and discussed previously. Support your child in applying these skills with close family members and friends, before attempting application with an unfamiliar peer. Continue giving specific positive feedback for attempting these skills, for example, “I love the way you smiled at Aunty Jackie when you said hello to her, she loved talking with you!” or “It was so kind of you to share your favourite toy with your cousin today, well done on being a caring friend!”
4. Support conflict resolution

All children will encounter little problems here and there in their interactions with others. Talk through these problems with your child by using the conflict resolution steps:

- **Have each child describe what they believe happened, without interruption**
- **Identify how each child is feeling (use facial expression recognition to support here)**
- **Support the children in identifying what they could have done differently**
- **Have the children try their idea**

Stepping children through these strategies will scaffold their independent conflict resolution skills in later childhood.

I wish you all the best of luck in supporting your child in peer interactions and later, in developing friendships! If you have any questions, queries or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at the LDC on any of the lines of communication below.

**Tina Kilpatrick**
Certified Speech Pathologist
Working Days: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday
North East Metropolitan Language Development Centre
18 View Street Dianella, WA, 6059
P (08) 9275 5511 F (08) 9275 5319
E Tina.Kilpatrick@education.wa.edu.au
References:
