

Children's Friendships

The Importance of Friendships in Childhood

Even if a child has the two best parents in the whole world, three close-in-age sibling, four attentive aunts, five fun cousins, six swell uncles, loving grandparents, a big backyard to play in....he/she still needs friends. A special friend and just pals to hang with are important.

Through friendships, children learn how to deal with different types of people their own age, setting the stage for a well-balanced adult life. At all ages, friendships are a source of emotional strength. As a culture, we value friendships. We feel strong, warm relationships make life richer. It is important to differentiate between friendship and popularity. We aren't talking about how many friends a child has but the ability to make them and keep them. For some children, one best friend is sustenance enough; others need to have a group of friends.

Babies have friendships much earlier than most people would suppose. Caregivers who work with the youngest age group witness the development of friendships very clearly. A baby responds to seeing and hearing another baby and often seems to miss that friend when he/she is not around. These are not long lasting friendships usually but can be if the two babies have families with long term relationships.

One of the major tasks of the preschooler years is to learn how to make friends and how to be a friend. There are, even at this young age, many elements to friendships, including genuinely liking another person, showing oneself in a favorable light so that person will return the feelings, and discovering which actions, attitudes and words "work" and which don't.

Strong friendships in childhood and adolescence are in many ways, preparation for intimacy in long-term relationships and partnerships in adulthood. They are the foundation that teaches people to share, to care and to support another person. They teach that relationships change from day to day, that it is beneficial to get away from someone for a while then want to be together again, that it is possible to have a disagreement, flare up with negative feelings, and then calm down, and still be friends.

A lack of friends can be caused by such things as little opportunity, fear of rejection, or problems with social skills. Friendships formed during school hours are traditionally cemented with after-school get-togethers. However, many children today do not have that opportunity because of working parents, living far from schools, or other life circumstances.

Parents can demonstrate how friendships begin and how to sustain a friendship during all types of experiences. Children can be taught to initiate meetings with friends, give and take with a friend, taking a little teasing that is fun-spirited, discuss disagreements, and showing understanding to the other person. Keep in mind that "three is a crowd" when you, your child, has friends over. One person is usually left out as the other two interact.

Parents cannot make friends for their children but they can show them how to be a friend and to provide opportunities for cultivating friendships.