

Family information: Relationships

All children want close relationships with friends and classmates at school. These relationships are important to feeling happy and helping them to cope better with life's occasional hard times. Children who have good social skills are more likely to be healthy and happy and to achieve more at school and be more successful in their future careers. They are less likely to get into trouble, or be attracted to anti-social peer groups or become depressed. There is a 'luck' factor with regards to the people they will meet as potential friends, but it will be their social skills that make the difference in developing and maintaining friendships.

◆ Key messages to communicate to your child about relationships

No one has close friends all the time and most people feel lonely sometimes.

Most people have times in their life when they feel lonely and their social life isn't as good as they would like it to be. It isn't the end of the world if sometimes you don't have a close friend.

Not everyone will like you but lots of people will.

Nobody is liked by everybody. Being socially 'rebuffed' is a common experience that most children have at times. There are lots of other people to get to know. If you try to get to know people, tell them a bit about yourself, and treat everyone with respect and friendliness you will make some friends.

Friendships can change and not be as strong as they once were.

People change as they grow and friendships don't always last or stay strong. Sometimes people who were your friends move on to other friendships and don't spend as much time with you anymore. Sometimes you are the one who moves on and lets the friendship go. This is normal and it happens to everyone. It doesn't mean anything negative about you.

Social skills are ways of behaving that help people get along with others and make friends.

People are more likely to want to spend time with you and be friends with you if you use the following social skills: play fairly, act like a good winner and loser, share and take turns, be kind and thoughtful and negotiate (i.e. compromise so that everyone gets at least some of what they want).

To HAVE a good friend, you have to BE a good friend.

You are more likely to find someone who wants to be your special friend if you act like a good friend towards them. A good friend is loyal, kind, thoughtful and fair. They stand up for their friend, spend time with them, tell them about their feelings, listen to their problems and keep their secrets where appropriate. A good friend looks for the good things their friend does.

It's okay to have an argument as long as you don't hurt the other person.

Disagreement happens sometimes in friendships or between classmates. Speak up when you think that things are not fair or when you don't agree about something, but do so in a way that doesn't hurt the other person or their feelings, and remember to try and see things from their point of view as well. It is important to find a way to disagree that lets you both find a solution to the problem and still be friends. It is easier to do this if you try to manage your angry feelings.

◆ What can you do to help your child develop good social skills to get along well with others, and make and keep friends?

- Make your child's friends and classmates welcome in your home and get to know them. Discuss beforehand what your child can do to make sure their visitor has a good time (e.g. do things that the visitor will enjoy too and not just what your child will enjoy).
- Model good social skills when you are with your own friends and talk to your child about what you do to be a good friend (e.g. be a good listener, have conversations about things you have in common, and support them when they are feeling sad or worried).
- Suggest to your child that all of the children they meet regularly at school, sporting activities and clubs are potential friends. Encourage them to develop a diverse social network so that they can interact with and learn about many people, not just people who are similar to them. Discourage the belief that only certain 'cool' or very popular classmates are worth being friends with.

- Empathy means understanding the feelings of someone else and letting them know you understand how they are feeling. Help your child to develop empathy by talking about how others might be feeling by stressing the importance of trying to understand rather than judge.
- Teach your child how to negotiate by negotiating with them whenever possible. For example, they may not want to shower at the time that suits your timetable. You could offer them a 15-minute extension if they do it without any further argument when that time arrives.
- Teach and model the social skill of ‘respectful disagreeing’, which involves finding a point of agreement before stating disagreement (e.g. ‘The scary movie you want to see did get a good review but I think most of us would rather see a funny movie.’)
- If your children are arguing with each other, sit them down and ask them to listen to each other’s feelings and points of view, then insist on their negotiating a solution. Try not to act as referee, and stress that put-downs are unacceptable.