

# Tactics for Teaching

STRATEGIES FOR THE  
CLASSROOM AND HOME



## What Early Educators and Parents Can Do to Support Friendships in Early Childhood

by Barbara Davis Goldman

**It's safe to say that having at least one or two good friends is considered to be important by just about everyone. But how old, or how capable, does a person have to be to have friends?**

Parents, early educators, and researchers all generally agree that preschoolers, or children ages 3 to 5, are capable of having friendships. There's also ample evidence that children younger than 3 can also have friendships, though these early friendships often differ from the friendships of more mature children. And we know that while children with special needs may have more difficulty forming friendships, having friends is beneficial to and possible for all children.

### The roles adults play in childhood friendships

Most of us would readily acknowledge that our friendships contribute to our overall happiness and feelings of well being. The same is true for childhood friendships. Young friends serve as sources of emotional support, even for children who get plenty of support from their family and other caregivers. And it's often with the support of their friends that young children feel confident or brave enough to try out new skills (including communication, problem solving, motor, or interpersonal skills) and seek out new adventures. As such, spending time with friends is good for a child's development.

What can we adults do to support these important early friendships? First, adults need to be able to identify friendships that have already started to develop and to figure out where there is potential for future friendships to take hold. So what do these early friendships look like, particularly in children who are not yet talking much?

### Features of friendship

Friendships are dyadic, meaning that they involve two people. And true friendships are also reciprocal in that each person considers the other to be a friend. Some researchers talk about one-sided friendships, when one child is very interested in playing with another and may call that child his friend even though the other child ignores him or refuses to play with him. And while a friendship may eventually develop, there must be some mutual affection or interest for the relationship to be a real friendship.

In addition, friendships are generally positive relationships. Friends enjoy being with each other and have more "happy times" than times when they are not getting along. Friendship is also voluntary.

Even though adults can encourage certain relationships by arranging play dates and grouping children together for activities, friendships must still emerge from the children's own interest in each other. By being aware of the signs of friendship, early educators and parents can better identify friendships that have already developed and

then help promote further development of these budding relationships. Adults can also help spark promising new friendships.

### Three signs of friendship in young children

The most obvious sign of friendship is togetherness. Two children who choose to play together frequently, or just "hang out" together as a pair, are likely to consider each other friends. One of the hallmarks of a good friendship is that the partners don't have to be doing anything specific together; simply being together is enough. Two friends can also play with others as part of a larger group and may also play with other children, separate from each other. Researchers who observe children commonly use "frequently playing together" or being near each other as a hallmark of early friendship. However, children who are observed playing together might simply be playmates, not true friends. Togetherness is one of several signs of friendship, but it is not enough by itself.

Another sign of friendship in young children is similarity. Toddlers and young children who are observed doing the same thing or being in the same play area might be friends, especially if they appear to highlight their similarity to each other. Of course, the specific ways that toddlers achieve similarity differ from those used by older, more verbally sophisticated



preschoolers. Further, brief observation will not necessarily reveal the motivation (or source) of the similarity. Two children could be doing the same thing at the same time by chance, stemming only from common interests rather than interest in each other. What is more relevant for friendship is similarity that appears to be created intentionally — that is, when the children appear to work at creating that similarity together. That can be seen when a pair engages in a series of different activities but seem to stay in step with each other. For young children, it can be banging blocks, then crawling or running to a specific location, and then putting the blocks on their head. Older children might follow each other from center to center or from action to action on the playground.

Two children who actively copy or imitate each other might be friends. Even toddlers can use imitation to create an extended interaction. Doing the same thing creates a feeling of togetherness that is stronger than simply being near each other. It also can create a sense of responsiveness to each other, and can at times turn into a fun imitation game. Simple imitation is sometimes used as a shortcut to create a feeling of similarity and togetherness, even before children have developed more mature communication or negotiation skills.

Older, more verbal children can use their language abilities to highlight their similar interests and thus mark their togetherness. They use “we talk” such as “we’re building a giant tower” or “we like playing dress up” or even “we’re silly” to announce their common bond to each other and others. Such behaviors are sometimes seen in established friendships but are more common in emergent friendships.

Building agreement is another sophisticated verbal strategy that children (and

adults) use to promote similarity and togetherness. Verbal children establish agreement through the use of tag questions, such as “Right?” or “OK?” after statements of fact, such as, “This is our fort, right?” This act of checking in with each other frequently to establish that they are “on the same page” helps both partners participate in a co-constructed activity that involves cooperation and negotiation, such as making something together or pretend play.


The third major sign of friendship is positive affect. Children who share their enjoyment with each other and who frequently express or share positive behaviors such as smiling, giggling, and laughing, are likely to be friends. Being able to make each other laugh is both a sign of friendship and a quality that helps establish friendships. It can be evident even in toddlers, who can transform an accidental fall by one followed by laughter by the other into a game of repeated pratfalls and joyful giggling.

### **Strategies to support established friendships and encourage new ones**

Now let’s take a look at a variety of interwoven strategies that early educators and parents can use to support existing friendships, foster the development of emerging friendships, and scout for and encourage promising new friendships.

To support established friendships, early educators can allow the pair some interpersonal “privacy.” Being able to be together as a pair allows them to concentrate on their relationship, even if it means that they occasionally exclude others. It’s easier for young children to interact in sophisticated ways with just one other person rather than a group. This “interpersonal privacy” is even more important when friendships are just emerging and are more fragile. Once the friendship is well established, the pair may need private times less frequently and may become skilled at finding those opportunities themselves, even in a busy classroom.

Educators should communicate with parents about budding and established friendships. Parents can then arrange play dates outside the classroom with one friend at a time to help friendships along. Parents should also be encouraged to talk to their child’s teacher about classmates their child frequently talks about. By talking about friendships, families and educators can support these important relationships both at the home and in the classroom, which, in turn, promotes social, language, and cognitive development in these young friends.

To support the togetherness of established friendships and encourage new ones to develop, educators can also arrange the 

classroom environment with pairs in mind. This can be accomplished by creating small, cozy spaces just big enough for two. Teachers can also incorporate toys, playground equipment, and other materials that require the participation of two partners (for example, placing two telephones or matching dress-up clothes in the dramatic play area). These materials and equipment help create a sense of similarity, togetherness, and interpersonal privacy. Educators and parents can make it easy for even the developmentally youngest children to do the same thing together by providing multiples or sets of toys in the same play area. Most educators do this anyway as a way of minimizing competition for the same popular toys, but, here, the purpose is different. Seeing each other do the same things together, like a mirror image, is central to early friendships.

Educators can ask two friends (or two children who seem to have potential to become friends) to do tasks together. This strategy of actively arranging for the pair to do tasks together is even better if the task is one that both children will have fun doing.

The same strategy can be used for older children or for groups that are larger than two.

While adults tend to enjoy “peace and quiet,” children have more fun when things aren’t too quiet or too structured. Typically the more fun children are having the louder their play becomes. With this in mind, young children should be allowed to engage in vigorous, noisy, or silly play whenever it’s appropriate. Children who are friends do silly things together, and children who are not yet friends may discover a potential partner when they have noisy, vigorous fun together. There’s nothing like shared laughter to bring children together and help them feel close.

### **More strategies for children who may need extra help finding friends**

Educators and parents may need to be creative and flexible and provide extra support to some children. For instance, children who are shy, who are not as socially skilled as their peers, who are very young, or who have special educational needs may need extra guidance. While the techniques adults

should use are not different, they do need to be tailored to the child’s developmental level and specific needs.

It’s also worth noting that not all young children are ready or interested in having friendships. Accepting that what attracts peers to each other can be unpredictable, adults can still be on the lookout for glimmers of interest or common bonds between two peers. This information can then be used as a basis for arranging for these “potential friends” to be together, so they can be in close proximity. Sometimes simply being near each other while having the right props nearby will nudge a friendship into being.

For children who have trouble moving around independently, either because they are very young or have specific motoric disabilities, educators and parents can physically bring them together. While more guidance might be needed from adults, doing so may get the ball rolling.

Adults sometimes need to more actively facilitate joint activity between two children by joining the pair at their level. When adults do become active participants, however, they should not direct the play but instead support and extend it, keeping the interaction going. For example, when joining an activity with a child whose communication skills are just emerging, an adult might interpret the children’s behaviors to their peers. This would help the children learn to understand each other’s cues and would help maintain an interaction that might otherwise fall apart. Adults also can participate by constructing pretend play with children. However, it is important that the adult’s agenda be strictly to help the children do what they would naturally want to do — even if this strikes the adult as being silly or not what adults would do. Adults who have spent time observing young friends together will have good ideas about what kind of play young children enjoy and find engaging.

### **Evidence of efficacy**

The literature on early friendships is primarily descriptive, with scattered effective interventions. But it is important to note that the specific techniques here have not been formally tested scientifically. The signs and strategies in this article stem in part from the observational research literature on early peer interaction and early friendships. Two highly relevant chapters, which are currently in press (Goldman, Buysse, and et al.), are noted in the reference sidebar. The first provides detailed descriptive information on very early friendships in children younger than 36 months in a wide range of cultures and environments around the world. These careful, extensive, observational studies reveal that these early friendships provide emotional support for young children and support further development. In addition, the descriptions of the interactions mesh seamlessly with both the signs and the suggested strategies. The second chapter deals with the developmental significance of early friendships up through early childhood in a comprehensive review of the literature with a specific focus on friendships in young children with disabilities.

The signs and strategies proposed here also stem in part from adaptations of strategies developed for an earlier set of six videotapes that focus on helping early educators develop interaction and communication skills in infants and young children with and without disabilities (Goldman, et al., 1993/1995).

With a little help, all young children can find playmates. With thoughtful assistance from early educators and parents, and a little luck, all children — including very young children and those with considerable special needs — can form friendships that will enrich their childhood and contribute to their development. **C&F**

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ments of learning and memory, parent-child and teacher-child interaction, and ways to improve the informed consent process for research participants.

For the past 40 years, FPG Child Development Institute has generated research that has shaped how the nation cares for and educates young children. FPG has a proud history of serving as an objective, knowledgeable force for social change to enhance the lives of children and families. Researchers focus on parent and family support; early care and education; child health and development; early identification and intervention; equity, access and inclusion; and early childhood policy. For more information, visit [www.fpg.unc.edu](http://www.fpg.unc.edu).

## Resources and reference

Here is a list of additional relevant resources about early friendships by our research group and a recent review of the research literature written by others.

- "Friendship Formation in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms," by V. Buysse, B. D. Goldman, and M. Skinner (*Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 18, 2003).
- "Friendships in early childhood: Implications for early education and intervention," written by V. Buysse, B. D. Goldman, T. West, and H. Hollingsworth, and to appear in *Social Competence of Young Children* (2nd edition), edited by W. H. Brown, S. L. Odom, and S. R. McConnell (*in press*). (Published 2008)
- "Friendships in very young children," written by B. D. Goldman and V. Buysse, published in *Contemporary Perspectives on Research in Socialization and Social Development*, edited by O. N. Saracho and B. Spodek (Information Age Publishing, 2007).
- "Setting Effects on Friendship Formation among Young Children with and without Disabilities," by V. Buysse, B. D. Goldman, and M. Skinner (*Exceptional Children*, 68, 2002).
- *SMALLTALK: Creating conversations with young children* (a series of six videotapes), by B. D. Goldman, J. E. Roberts, and H. B. Nychka, (Originally distributed by Riverside Publishing Company and by PRO-ED, 1993/1995). For current availability, contact B. D. Goldman ([barbara\\_goldman@unc.edu](mailto:barbara_goldman@unc.edu)).
- *The Differential Impact of Friendships vs. Friends on Peer Interactions in Preschool Children with and without Disabilities* (Poster presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Conference), by B. D. Goldman, V. Buysse, M. Skinner, and D. Edgerton, (April 2005).
- "Young Children's Peer Relationships and Social Competence," by G. W. Ladd, S. L. Herald, and R. K. Andrews and published in *Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children*, edited by B. Spodek and O.N. Saracho (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2006).

## Free tool for educators to download...

*Playmates & Friends Questionnaire for Teachers*, Revised (3rd edition), by B.D. Goldman and V. Buysse (FPG Child Development Institute, 2005) is available at [www.fpg.unc.edu/~publicationsoffice/pdfs/playmates\\_friends\\_rev.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~publicationsoffice/pdfs/playmates_friends_rev.pdf)

This is a copy of an article recently published in the magazine of the National Head Start Association, "Children and Families," Spring/Summer 2007.

The content is related to a presentation at the Tenth National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute, Chapel Hill NC, May 17-19, 2010 entitled:

Promising Practices to Help Young Children Find Friends, by Barbara Davis Goldman, Ph.D. and Heidi Hollingworth, Ph.D.

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