

Parent's Guide to supporting their children's friendships from Penny Tassoni



Imagine the scene. It is home time. There are two questions that most parents ask at this point: 'what have you done?', followed by 'who did you play with?' While most parents become used to the child replying 'nothing' to the first question, the same is not true when it comes to friends. Even the most level-headed parent is likely to be slightly anxious when their child complains that they had no-one to play with. So, at what age should children have friendships, and is there anything that we can do as parents to help our children?

EIGHTEEN MONTHS UPWARDS

While most two-year-olds are not necessarily good at sharing, they can be very interested in other children. The term 'parallel play' was coined to express the way that we might see two or three children of a similar age engaged in the same activity. Across a pile of Duplo bricks, they may exchange glances, smile and particularly copy each other. Thus, as soon as one child starts to throw the bricks, another one will join in too.

Parents will also find instances of quite caring behaviours. A toddler might wander up to another child and offer them a toy. These early encounters are very important for children as they start to find their way around social etiquette.

The trouble is that as learners, they often make mistakes when they struggle with their own impulsivity and the inconsistent signals that other toddlers give them. The child who had offered the toy to the other toddler now wants it back. A tussle between them ensues. Suddenly, we are in for a bun fight!

THREE TO FOUR YEARS

After the age of three years, most children start their first proper friendships. These are rarely lifelong affairs, so we must expect bursts of squabbling.

These early friendships are usually linked to what children enjoy playing with. They can be quite fluid as children bob in and out of play and toys they are interested in.

During the course of a play session, some children will have several play partners, although interestingly, some children seem to have some 'core' friends. The strength of these friendships will often depend on how much time the children spend together.

Children who have been together since they were babies in day care are likely to be very close; their relationship might be similar to that of siblings. This is worth taking into account when children leave to go on to school. The sudden end of what has been a strong relationship can be difficult. If your child is in this situation, think about exchanging e-mail addresses and phone numbers with the other child's family.

In some ways, this is a lovely age because, while there may be some same-sex friendships, boys and girls will play together and be friends. It is also delightful to see that children in this age group are quick to strike up friendships and play with each other after only a few minutes. If you have a child of this age, you might spot this if you go to a playground or to the beach on holiday.

FIRST YEAR AT SCHOOL

Once children are in school, friendships take on a new turn. While they do carry on being quite fluid in terms of who they play with, definite partnerships begin to emerge. These may not 'best' friends as such, but groups of other children with whom they can play. This might mean that a child will play with one group at break time, but another group at lunch. It is also likely over this first year to find that children more regularly play with their own sex, although it is far from unusual to find mixed friendships.

One of the key changes that take place in this period is children's feelings about friends. Suddenly, they are likely to mind if they have no-one to play with. They may ask to join in with other children, or tell an adult about it.

As a parent it is heart-rending to hear that your child has not found anyone to play with. But happily, the ever-changing dynamics of the playground means that within a few days, things may well have changed and they have playmates. Having said this, it is worth as a parent keeping a close ear to the ground and checking that your child is not consistently failing to play with others.

HELPING YOUR CHILD

It is worth accepting that your child is likely to experience many 'ups and downs' in the friendship stakes. That said, there are some basic ways in which you can help your child:

- Go regularly to the same places and sessions. Children are likely to be friends if they can see each other frequently.
- Praise kind behaviour in your child, as popular children are often the thoughtful ones.
- Help your child to be a good 'loser'. Other children avoid those who sulk if things do not get their own way. Friendship requires a lot of give and take.