Chapter 8
Supporting Children’s Peer Relationships and Friendships

Relationships and Interactions

- All relationships are not defined as friendships. Interactions describe a two-way exchange that is reciprocal in nature. Relationships are much more. They infer a sense of belonging. They are established over time through a series of interactions that are filled with shared meaning, evolving expectations, and emotion. Friendships are voluntary associations in which each member recognizes and shares responsibility for the relationship. They are marked by reciprocity of affection.

Adult-child Relationships

- The interactions between adults and children are characterized by differences.
- Society has defined certain expectations for adult-child relationships. The interactions between adults and children are characterized by differences in status.
- Whether the relationship involves teacher and child, coach and player, or parent and child, it is expected that the adult will be the expert/leader and the child will be the learner/follower.

Peer Relationships

- Peers are typically others who are around the same age or maturity level as the child. Beyond the activity that has drawn them together, little or no contact occurs outside the scheduled event.
- Peers are typically the group from which friends are selected.
- Peers serve important socializing functions for children. Friends are often selected from this social network based on “what feels right”.
- Children try on different roles and learn what is acceptable social behavior and what is not.
- Peer relationships provide an opportunity for children to learn new skills and refine current ones.

Friendship Relationships

- As with peer relationships, friendships offer an opportunity for equal partnerships.
- Friends choose to be with one another as specially chosen playmates outside of, and in addition to, peer activities.
- Benefits of friendship. Friends offer unique opportunities and benefits for children to develop their social competence. They practice the difficult task of balancing their personal wants and desires with those of others, or community shared goals.
- Children who have friends are more likely to be socially skilled, sociable, cooperative, altruistic, self-confident, and less lonely than those without friends.
- In addition, children with friends appear to perform better academically in school.
- Friendships provide a source of security and social support.
- Friends are able to discuss attitudes and compare skills.
- Friendships may offer children a distraction from less pleasant assignments and responsibilities making certain situations more fun.
- Also serve as an emotional buffer against stress in the children’s lives.
• In addition, children with friends are likely to get social support or reciprocity from others when needed.
• Friendships also provide a place for children to practice their social problem-solving skills.

**Cost of Not Having Friends**
• Children without friends are more likely to be troubled.
• They are more likely to suffer academically and have more negative attitudes towards school.
• They are more likely to be lonely and are less likely to be able to initiate and maintain play with peers.
• They miss the opportunity to practice the important social skills necessary for maintaining social attachments throughout life.
• Friendless children are more likely than their counterparts, who have friends to become juvenile delinquents, drop out of school, receive a dishonorable discharge from the military, experience psychiatric problems, and commit suicide.
• For most children, the critical factor is not how many friends they have, but the quality of the friendships they establish.

**Variable That Influence Children’s Friendships**
• There are multiple aspects influencing children’s peer relationships and ability to make friends. The grounding influence for all of these is the cultural values of each child, which springs from the family. Finally, it is the child’s view of self that filters each of these influences and paves the way for a child to believe in his or her ability to make friends or not.
• Social Cognition—Children with greater social cognitive abilities along with emotional maturity are better able to make friends.
• Emotional Regulation—to do well with friends, children must learn to regulate not only their own behavior, but also their emotions. The quality of the friendship is linked with children’s ability to show and to regulate their emotions, which in turn is linked with their developing social understanding of self and others.
• Play Experiences—one of the best places to practice talking about the emotions and thoughts of others and taking appropriate action is in pretend play. It has been found that pretend imaginative play is an important force in forming early friendships.
• Language—children with strong language skills are also more able to construct responses that describe their emotions and point of view to the other children. Children’s responses to peers in conversation predict their social status.
• Adult Support—early experiences with adults set the stage for the type of interaction that children expect from others, including peers, in their social world. The responsibility to create or administer social experiences for children rests with the adults in their lives. The expectations adults have for children’s behavior also plays a large role in their peer relationships and potential friendships. Children’s temperament is known to influence their peer interactions. The amount of security in the form of warmth and support that children experience in their relationships with adults directly influences their potential for other relationships.
• Cultural—adults are the ones that introduce and socialize children into their culture. The role of the family in any given culture contributes to one’s perception of the importance of friends.

**The Emergence of Friendship**

• Friends are important from the first days of life.
• Researchers have studied children’s friendships for the past 20 years and have devised a hierarchy of how children develop friendship as they mature.
• Friendship framework begins around the age of three and coincides with children’s development of empathy and their understanding of other people’s perspectives.
• In the early levels of friendship, children are occupied with their own emotions, with the physical characteristics of their companions, and with what is happening here and now.
• In the later levels, children are more sensitive to the desires and concerns of others, they appreciate psychological traits such as humor and trustworthiness, and they think about the future of their relationships as well as the present.
• Adults cannot necessarily accelerate children’s progress through the sequence in the friendship framework, but they can attempt to understand children’s behavior by knowing more about their friendship understanding, friendship skills, and friendship valuing at each level to better plan for ways to assist the children in their development.

**The Friendship Framework**

**Level Zero: Momentary Playmates: Ages three to Six**
• Young children call “friend” those peers with whom they play most often or who engage in similar activities at a given time.
• Because children of this age are egocentric, they think only about their own side of the relationship.
• They focus on what they want the other child to do for them.
• It is common for youngsters to assume that friends think just the way they do.
• Level Zero youngsters are better at initiating an interaction than they are at responding to others’ overtures.

**Level One: One-Way Assistance: Ages Five to Nine**
• In Level One, children identify those age-mates as friends whose behavior pleases them.
• For some children, good feelings are engendered by a playmate that will give them a turn, share gum, offer them rides on the new two-wheeler, pick them for the team, or save them a seat on the bus.
• Another characteristic of a Level One is that children try out different social roles: leader, follower, and negotiator.
• Their desire to have a friend is so strong that many prefer to play with an uncongenial companion rather than play alone. They will try almost anything to initiate a relationship and may attempt to bribe or coerce another child to like them by saying: “If you’ll be my friend, I’ll invite you to my party.”
• Level One also is notable for the fact that boys play with boys and girls play with girls.
They have difficulty maintaining more than one close relationship at a time.

There is also evidence that some friendships begun in the preschool may last throughout kindergarten and even beyond and that these stable friendships predict future success for both children in their peer relationships.

**Level Two: Two-Way, Fair-Weather Cooperation: Ages Seven to Twelve**

- The thinking of children at Level Two has matured to the point at which they are able to consider both points of view in the friendship.
- Children expect friends to be “nice” to each other and often trade favors as a way of helping each other satisfy their separate interests.
- Friends are concerned about what each thinks of the other and evaluate their own actions as they feel the other might evaluate them.
- It is at this level that conformity in dress, language, and behavior reaches a peak as children try to find ways to fit in with the group.
- Forming clubs is a natural outgrowth of this.
- Friendships tend to develop in pairs.
- Within both male and female groups, friends are very possessive of each other, and jealousy over who is “friends” with whom is quite pronounced.

**Level Three: Intimate, Mutually Shared Relationships: Ages Eight to Fifteen**

- Level Three marks the first time that children view friendship as an ongoing relationship with shared goals. Now, children are more willing to compromise rather than simply cooperate.
- Friends share feelings and help each other solve personal conflicts and problems. They reveal thoughts and emotions to each other that they keep from everyone else.
- Friendship has now become intimate and the best-friend relationship is a crucial one.
- It is natural for them to become totally absorbed in each other.
- Friends are not supposed to have another close friend, and they are expected to include each other in everything.

**Level Four: Mature Friendships: Ages Twelve and Older**

- For persons at the mature-friendship level, emotional and psychological benefits are the most valued qualities of friendship.
- Friends are not as possessive of each other as they were in previous levels; they can have some dissimilar interests and can pursue activities separately.
- No matter what the age of a child, friendships are dynamic and continually in a process of change.
- Adults often wonder why children choose the friends they do.

**Friendship Selection**

- No matter what the age of a child (or adult), friendships are dynamic and continually in a process of change.
- Children are more likely to choose friends who they think are similar to them.

**Physical Appearance**

- One factor that contributes to children’s friendship selection is personal appearance. Children who are overweight, mentally impaired, disabled, slovenly,
or physically unattractive are less likely to be chosen as friends than are youngsters who fit children’s concept of beauty.

Race
• Children also pick their friends based on race and are most likely to choose friends from their own racial group.
• Parental attitudes do influence how children feel about making friends with someone of another race or culture.

Gender
• Gender is another dominant consideration in who is “friends” with whom. Children prefer same-sex playmates throughout childhood and even at a very early age tend to exclude the opposite sex.

Age
• Children are also more likely to select friends who are close to their own age.
  When friendships develop between children of different ages, it usually is because the participants are developmentally similar in some ways.
• Children are also more likely to select friends who are close to their own age.

Behavior Characteristics
• The likelihood that two children will become friends can be closely linked to the number of behavioral attributes they share.
• Children are not attracted to those who they view as opposites.
• Friends also may resemble one another in terms of achievement, physical or cognitive skill, and degree of sociability.
• Youngsters often choose as friends those peers whose characteristics complement their own personality and capacities.

Play Behaviors
• Children are likely to seek out friends with similar styles of play.

Attitudes
• When children who are dissimilar in some fashion discover that they share like attitudes, they feel more positive about one another. This awareness facilitates friendly relations between children who initially perceive themselves as totally different.
• Adults who want children to experience the rewards of friendships with children of the opposite sex, of another race, or whose abilities do not match their own must provide opportunities for the children to recognize more subtle similarities.

Uncomfortable Friendships Choices
• Adults sometimes express concern about children’s friendship choices when they observe what seems to be an unequal relationship between two youngsters.
• Another issue of concern to adults is what is sometimes referred to as “peer pressure.”
• Peer conformity becomes an increasingly important manner of behavior as children strive for peer acceptance.
• Professionals who work with children at this phase of development must recognize that they cannot eliminate peer pressure.
• Adults can be valuable resources in offering support and suggesting alternative responses that children can use when confronted by pressures.
• While the peer group has a greater effect on children’s behavior in middle childhood than in early childhood, parents and teachers continue to be powerful and important socializing influences as well.

DIFFICULTY WITH FRIENDSHIPS
• Some children are rarely or never selected as friends. These children fall into two categories: neglected and rejected.
• They make very few attempts to enter play and dislike being the focus of attention.

Peer Neglected Children
• Neglected children are typically shy and passive. They are not talkative.
• They make very few attempts to enter play and dislike being the focus of attention.
• Often children are neglected simply because they do not know or do not use socially accepted ways of attracting other children’s attention.

Peer Rejected Children
• Children who experience rejection from peers are more likely to become aggressive, especially if they already have a tendency towards aggression.
• Rejected children seem to follow two patterns: rejected-withdrawn or rejected-aggressive. Each comes with its own set of baggage.
• Rejected-withdrawn children are socially awkward. They display immature or unusual behavior and are insensitive to their peer group expectations.
• They know they are not liked by others.
• Rejected-withdrawn children are lonely. They possess low self-esteem, depression, negative social-emotional functioning and other emotional disorders.
• Rejected-aggressive children are just the opposite. They are often the bullies. Rejected-aggressive children alienate themselves from their peer group through the use of force. They try to dominate interactions, are critical of others, and typically are uncooperative.
• These children are more likely than all others to become chronically hostile, develop conduct disorders, and engage in criminal violence.
• All children experience some degree of loneliness at some point in time.
• Children with difficulties with peer interactions and friendship may encounter difficulty at one or many points in the four states of friendship.

STATES OF FRIENDSHIP
Making Contact
• Before a friendship can “get off the ground,” one person must make an approach and another must respond. How this contact is carried out influences each child’s perception of the other.
Maintaining Positive Relationships

- How well youngsters communicate influences their likeableness
- In particular, how well youngsters communicate both verbally, and nonverbally influences their likeableness.
- The following techniques characterize their interaction with others:
  - Expressing interest: Smiling, nodding, establishing eye contact, asking related questions.
  - Cooperating: taking turns, sharing, working together
  - Expressing acceptance: listening to another child’s idea, adopting another child’s approach to a play situation.
  - Expressing affection: hugging, holding hands, or saying “I like you” or “Let’s be friends”.
  - Expressing empathy: “that’s a neat picture you made,” “you look sad, want to me to sit with you while you wait?”
  - Offering assistance and helpful suggestions: “If you like, I can hold the box while you tie it. It may need some string on top of the tape.”
  - Praising playmates: “That was a great hit,” “Neat idea! I think it’ll work,” “You’re pretty.”

Negotiating Conflict

- Perhaps the most severe test of a relationship occurs when the friends disagree.
- Children who use constructive ways of resolving differences, while still meeting their own needs, are most successful in pursuing lasting relationships.
- Children who are so passive that they never stand up for themselves lose self-respect and, eventually, the respect of peers.
- There is a strong correlation between children’s effective use of negotiation skills and their ability to communicate accurately.
- In the same way that positive cycles are established, so, too, are negative ones. Children who are aggressive or uncooperative or who act silly, show off, or display immature behavior irritate, frustrate, and offend their peers.

Ending Relationships/Friendships

- Children must learn how to deal graciously with the ending of a relationship.

Adult Strategies to Support the Improvement of Children’s Peer Relationships and Friendships

Children are not born automatically knowing the best ways to make friends. They must learn by observing others, by practicing, by experimenting with a variety of social behaviors, and experiencing the consequences of their actions.

Methods to Use with All Children to Improve Social Interactions

- From the research, there appear to be six strategies successfully used with children to improve their friendship process.
- When selecting a method, keep in mind that some of these techniques are more effective with certain ages.
1. Shaping
   - Shaping is among the most powerful of intervention tools to help socially isolated children. It involves using rewards to maintain or encourage a desired behavior a little bit at a time.

2. Modeling
   - Modeling is the process of demonstrating a skill in action such as friendship skits using puppets, dolls, or people.

3. Coaching
   - Coaching works well with children in elementary and later grades. It involves directly telling the child how to perform the skill or strategy and helping the child practice it, giving feedback to the child to help improve performance.
   - Typically, coaching occurs in a one-on-one situation with the helping professional working directly with one child.
   - A coaching “session” includes discussion, demonstration of the skill, practice, and evaluation.

4. Peer teaching
   - Peer teaching or pairing is the act of putting a more friendship-able child with a less able child.

5. Increasing Social Problem-solving skills
   - Teaching social problem solving skills has been identified as a powerful method for improving elementary school children’s friendship process abilities through discussions and role playing.

   - Cooperative activities and play can serve as powerful places for teaching the phases of the friendship process.

PITFALLS TO AVOID
   - Barging in too quickly
   - Missing opportunities to promote friendly interactions among children
   - Insisting that everyone be “friends”
   - Requiring everyone to be together all the time
   - Breaking up children’s friendships
   - Failing to recognize children’s friendship cues