



Social skills for children with additional friendship needs

Almost all children who have difficulty with friendships can be taught how to make and keep friends. Friendship contributes to student wellbeing and is integral to learning and school improvement.

Children and adolescents who have no friends are at risk of social and emotional problems, poor academic achievement and dropping out of school early. Helping a child to build one or more specific social skills can improve wellbeing, academic performance and attitudes to learning.

The following ten skill areas are associated with social competency, friendship and peer acceptance.

1. **Communicating non-verbally**
2. **Communicating assertively**
3. **Making conversation**
4. **Behaving in a group**
5. **Joining in**
6. **Problem solving and negotiation**
7. **Giving and receiving compliments**
8. **Coping skills**
9. **Changing thinking**
10. **Increasing emotional literacy and regulation**

This document outlines strategies for teachers to use in developing their students' mastery of these friendship skill areas.

Planning and implementing a specific friendship skills program

Ensure you work within your skill level and comfort zone and seek support as necessary.

- **Work with or consult a psychologist** or other appropriate allied health professional **when working with a specific child**. Ensure that you obtain parental consent.
- **Encourage your school to appoint additional needs and wellbeing staff teams**. Teamwork provides opportunities to learn new skills and gain confidence from observing and working with more experienced staff.
- **If the child talks to you about their friendship difficulties and you feel uncomfortable**, it's okay to indicate that you do not have 'the' answer and refer the child to another staff member such as the Deputy or Assistant Principal, saying 'How about we talk to Mrs. Jones?'
- **When dealing with challenging children or parents**, work in pairs or with senior staff for support. Be mindful of your duty-of-care obligations to the child and the potential for professional liability repercussions if parents become oppositional. Teamwork allows self-care and learning from more experienced staff. When other staff or invitees attend meetings with parents, ensure the parents are advised in advance, and made aware of others' roles in providing help and support.
- **Build a sound relationship with the family**. Use active listening skills and develop confidence to determine when you should enquire about difficulties the child is confronting, and when to step back and involve others.

For the program to succeed:

- **Reflect on the developmental and language expectations** being placed on the child.



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- **Focus on teaching children a realistic number of new skills.** For example, in term 1 focus on one or two new skills, before focusing on a new skill the following term.

Communicating non-verbally

Body language communicates to others how we feel and helps us to know how others feel. When we are happy, sad or angry, for example, our body expresses these emotions through tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and the way we stand, hold our arms and hands, and move. These responses are automatic and often unconscious. However, we can learn to control them.

- **Teach children to be careful with what they ‘say’.** Emphasise that we need to be careful with what we say with our bodies, as well as what we say with our mouths.
- **Teach the child or class how to use friendly, open body language.** For example:
 - **For younger children**, this can mean looking the other person in the eyes (or at their forehead), smiling and nodding to show you are listening, not wriggling.
 - **For older children**, you may also include having an open posture, modelling the other person’s stance, leaning in, not looking at your phone or other distractions and maintaining appropriate eye contact.

Activities

- **Choose some images of people.** In small groups speculate about how people in a photo are feeling by reading their body language. For example, ‘How do you think the man is feeling?’ ‘What is he thinking?’ ‘Why do you think this?’ ‘What do you think he was doing before this photo was taken?’ ‘What will he do next?’ ‘Would you want to talk to this man? Why or why not?’ Have each group report their beliefs. Were there any common responses or shared ideas?
- **Write several different emotions on paper slips and place them in a hat.** Have children take turns to select a slip and create a mime to show the emotion. Class members should guess the feeling shown and discuss their reactions to the mime.
- **Show you are a good listener.** Have students work in pairs to create posters about being a good listener. For example, look at the person, smile or nod to show you are listening, uncross arms and legs, relax, lean forward. Examples are readily accessible through a web search on [How to be a good listener](#).



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- **Voice.** Just as our bodies communicate how we are feeling through facial expressions and gestures, our tone of voice can tell others how we are feeling. For example, when someone is angry they may yell, when they are very sad they may sob, speak very quietly or speak with difficulty.

Activity

Practise saying phrases using different tones of voice to convey emotions. For example, ask the class to say 'no thanks' using an angry, happy, sad, funny, disgusted, abrupt, thoughtful or friendly voice. Brainstorm other phrases and emotions and repeat the activity.

- **Personal space.** Some people feel uncomfortable when people stand too close or touch them. When someone you don't know well is in your personal space you may feel uncomfortable, but when people you love or like are in your personal space you might feel okay. Explain that, for example, when your mum or a friend gives you a hug you might relax into the hug, but if your neighbour gave you a hug you might feel stiff and rigid as you wait to be released.

Activities

- **Measuring personal space.** Have the child hold their arms out at a 90-degree angle to their body. Establish that the distance to the end of your fingertips is usually considered personal space. That is approximately how far away they should stand from others.
 - **Reading body language when someone feels their personal space is being invaded.** For example, they may cross their arms, look down, back away. Model these behaviours and have the child respond appropriately. Change your body language once they have moved an appropriate distance away and identify how the person's body language presents now – relaxed, looking at your face and so on.
- **Personal hygiene.** Talk respectfully with the whole class about why personal hygiene is important, not just for the individual but for those around them. Outline how to achieve personal hygiene including toileting, hand washing, teeth brushing, daily showering, regular hair and clothes washing, and for children entering puberty daily use of deodorant. Highlight also the negative impact on others of over-using deodorants, particularly highly scented products.



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Communicating assertively

Assertive communication increases empathy, raises awareness of the concerns of others, and helps children to respect difference. We are concerned with three key types of communication:

ASSERTIVE - confidently and respectfully standing up for yourself and defending your opinions, without putting anyone else down.

PASSIVE – putting the needs of others before your own. For example, not choosing a game to play then feeling aggrieved because you are left out. Crying or withdrawing if you don't get your own way.

AGGRESSIVE – putting the needs of yourself before anyone else. Aggression can occur not just when someone yells or threatens others physically but can also be subtle and lead to feelings of hostility from others. For example, adding a 'put down' at the end of a request, such as, 'Please don't do that, you silly!'

Learning to communicate assertively can be taught to young children and will benefit them throughout their lives.

Activities

Model all three ways of communicating - aggressively, passively and assertively when borrowing a friend's watch.

List famous movie or TV characters who often act passively, aggressively and assertively, and act out examples of what they say or do. Discuss the pros and cons of each communication style.

- **Teach the class how to communicate assertively using 'I statements'** which allow you to state your views without blaming the other person. For example, 'You made me angry' is aggressive, but saying 'I felt angry' is assertive. Some tips to discuss include:
 - Be firm, clear, and friendly with your words and voice.
 - Maintain eye contact most of the time.
 - Listen. Pay close attention to what the other person has to say.
 - Focus only on specific behaviours. That is, what the person does or has done. Do not name or label them or make interpretations based on their behaviour. For example, don't call them 'mean or nasty', instead say, 'I don't like it when you call me fat and ugly and run away from me.'
 - Keep your responses short and focused. The more you talk the more likely you are to talk off topic or waffle or become either passive or aggressive.
 - Monitor your tone of voice and non-verbal messages. You can use appropriate words but ruin the communication with an aggressive tone of voice or posture.



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- Use the following prompt sheet to assist individuals to practise speaking assertively.

'I statement' prompt sheet

I feel.....

Insert emotion (e.g. hurt, embarrassed, angry) This must be what you feel [a feeling], not what you think.

When you.....

(don't let me hang out with my friends, copy my work, call me a 'dog').

Because.....

(It seems like you take advantage of me, I don't know what is going on, it hurts).

I would like.....

State how this can be resolved (you to talk to me about it, you to stop calling me names, you not to hit me).

Making conversation

You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.'¹

- **Encourage the child to increase their interest in others**, by becoming a 'courteous detective' to find out more about the other person, rather than talking about themselves and pursuing their own interests.
- **Remind the child that both non-verbal and verbal communication** need to complement each other.

Activities

- **Have the child ask questions of a child in their group then report back** to other group members what they found out about the other person. Encourage them to explore special interests, talents, movies or sports they enjoy.
- **Encourage the child to ask questions about the interests, likes and dislikes of others.** Have them practise one-on-one with you or with their parents. A good way to do this is to ask the other person, 'What do you like about' 'How often do you ...', 'How did you get interested in ...', 'Who taught you about Pokemon/footy/rap?'

¹ Dale Carnegie. (1998) *How to make friends and influence people*. Pocket Books, New York.



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- **Increase the child's awareness of their own interests.** Ask them to think about things they like, things they don't like, and assist them to discuss with others.
- **Have the child practise taking turns so they don't dominate the conversation.**

Behaving in a group

Working in groups and getting along is all about cooperation, tolerance, sharing and turn taking. Assist children to understand that reciprocity and sharing of thoughts and ideas is integral to friendship and peer acceptance. To get along with peers, students need to:

- **Learn to cope** with losing a game, not getting their own way, an occasional tease. See the [section on coping](#) below.
- **Learn to regulate their own behaviour.** Some children may act in ways that annoy others, for example not playing by the rules, standing too close to people, or saying things without thinking. If this is the case, talk with the child privately about what may be interfering with them getting along with others. Questions may include, 'Are you giving people breathing space and not getting in too close to their personal space?' 'Do you share the goal area in ball games so that others realise not to hog the goal square?' 'How often do you pass the ball?' 'Are you fair when playing so others can't say you are 'rough' or 'selfish'?'
- **Use social graces.** For example, remembering names and faces, knowing how to politely [join in](#), exit or what to say to others when introduced, how to apologise, and make and give excuses.
- **Learn to 'repair' or help steer conversations back on track.** For example, correcting an inappropriate word you accidentally uttered, rephrasing or clarifying an awkward point or phrase, apologising for an unintended squeal or shout, saying sorry for using the wrong tone of voice, realising you or someone else has simply said something that others don't want to hear and quickly making a suitable short correction.
- **Learn to handle verbal conflict, arguments and debates.** For example, using a typical conflict situation, have two (linguistically able) students model a short disagreement where each student holds a different but valid perspective, such as, whether one needs to ask permission to join in group games during break times or whether they should be able to simply join in. Explore both perspectives.
- **In the absence of an umpire, understand that the majority decision rules** in games and most social situations (as long as it is played safely and fits the school rules).
- **Appreciate that in certain situations, rules may be bent**, relaxed or broken. For example, when playing informal team games, some standard rules may be suspended or relaxed. There may be a play-on rule if the soccer ball goes 'out' during a 5 or 10-minute game at recess, especially when the playing area is unmarked.



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- **Know how to justify behaviour.** For example, if you have been misunderstood or not listened to, ask others to listen for a moment, so you can restate your case or perspective.

Activities

- **Individually, in pairs or in a small group, roll the Psych4Schools Social Skills Dice**, to stimulate discussion based on the sentence starters. Make a class poster or a booklet that reflects examples of each of the social language skills.
- **In circle time, have students take turns to speak and explain how a social situation became unworkable** and how the problem was solved.
- **Play a game in class or with a group, and discuss the elements needed to work effectively** and play safely in a group.
- **In a group, brainstorm 10 character strengths for working well** with other members in the group. For example, list qualities such as being:
 - Your 'best' self, most or all the time
 - Happy and cheerful
 - Interesting, but also interested in others
 - Tolerant and accepting
 - Cool and calm under pressure.

Using a 5-point scale, rate yourself on each character strength. Ask someone in the group to also rate you. Ensure ratings are fair and respectful. Analyse each pair of ratings and note any discrepancies. Total both sets of scores and write a short description of your findings. Share some or all of your description with others in the group. Write a short reflection that incorporates one or more points from above, such as learning to cope, regulating behaviour, and using social graces. Selected volunteers can share some of their findings and reflections with the class.

Joining in

Some children, especially those starting a new school or new class, struggle with how to initiate conversations or join a group. Once accepted, they may have the social skills to integrate into the new friendship group. You can encourage these children to:

- **Be persistent, to try again.** Children who struggle to engage with other students often give up after the first rejection.
- **Teach the child to say something positive from the sidelines of a game**, for example, 'Good shot Vinny'. Leaders in the game will be more open to including the child who has shown a positive interest.
- **Teach students to use open assertive statements** which improve their chances of being included in games or social situations. The child may tend to ask closed questions that can be responded to with a 'No!' Open assertive statements such as those in the following chart can be explicitly taught to students.



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Unassertive statement, self-talk or action	Likely outcome and response	Assertive statement, self-talk or action	Likely outcome and response
'Can I please join in?'	'No!' Dejected, student walks away.	Student is rebuffed. 'Okay, I will watch the first game, and then ask to play in the next game.'	'Sure, Jordan is about to finish up, so it can be your turn next.'
Student stands nearby and watches others play four-square.	Student misses out playing the game.	Student simply stands in line with other students who are waiting their turn.	Student gets to play and even survives several turns before going out.
'No one let me play with them today!'	Student shuffles around the asphalt area feeling unhappy.	Student requests access to a class ball or arranges with the Physical Education teacher to borrow a ball for break times.	Other students ask to play and they all agree quickly on a game to be played.
Student has been following others around.	'You're too weak to play with us, just p-off follower.'	'Who would like to play ... (marbles, jacks, chalk drawing). I have a set here.'	One of the students says he is prepared to 'give-it-a-go'. Eventually the others join in.

Problem solving and negotiation

- **Discuss with the class that teachers work amicably in teams although they may not be friends.** Encourage the child to follow this example explaining, 'You don't need to be friends with everyone, but you need to be kind, considerate and accept that we all need to get along.'
- **Write a persuasive text that argues that children are social beings** who require several pro-social interactions to help maintain wellbeing at school. Before writing, brainstorm as a class some examples of pro-social interactions and ask students to further refine ideas in pairs. Each persuasive text should highlight and argue at least three key pro-social interactions that the school or class promotes well accompanied by specific examples.

Activity

- **Brainstorm problem solving and negotiation skills** that apply to friendships and related issues or conflicts. For older children, you might focus on being assertive rather than aggressive or passive.



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Giving and receiving compliments

- **Explore how to give and receive compliments.** Before commencing the activity below, discuss the idea that children do not give compliments about physical appearance or possessions, rather they give compliments based on actions or strengths. For example; 'Zane you are very good at maths. Thank you for helping me when I didn't understand the homework.' or 'Sophie you tell the funniest jokes.'

Activity

- **Compliments circle.** The class sits in a circle. One child starts by complimenting the child beside them. That child responds appropriately, and then compliments the next child in the circle. For more see, www.responsiveclassroom.org/helping-one-helping-all/

Coping skills

All children can benefit from explicitly learning productive strategies to help them to cope effectively. In a busy classroom, it may be more efficient to teach coping and resilience strategies to the whole class. For a list of resilience programs see the [resources section](#).

- **For ideas on boosting coping skills** see [Working with children who have anxiety](#). In particular, see sections on learning to [change their thinking](#) and [recognise and regulate their emotions](#).
- **Talk with the class about coping.** Explain that there are lots of ways to cope with problems. Some things help us feel better and solve the problem without harming ourselves or others (productive coping). Other ways of coping might make you feel better in the short term but may be harmful for mental wellbeing in the long term, making the problem worse (non-productive coping).
- **Productive coping strategies include:** talking to friends, solving the problem, working harder, exercising, using humour, asking a parent or teacher for help, using relaxation techniques, deep breathing, yoga, reading a book and watching television programs you enjoy.



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- **Non-productive coping strategies** include: ignoring the problem, using violence such as hitting, yelling, or destroying furniture, using distractions such as excessive use of video games or binge-watching television or YouTube when you have other things to do, over-eating or using drugs or alcohol.

Activity

- **Assist the child to identify how they cope.** Begin by talking with the class about coping. Encourage the child to use *productive, help-seeking coping strategies* that aim to solve the problem, rather than non-productive strategies that avoid or ignore the issue. Refer to the following evidence-based coping programs for additional ideas:
 - *Developing Everyday Coping Skills in the Early Years: Proactive Strategies for Supporting Social and Emotional Development*
 - *The Best of Coping: Developing Coping Skills for Adolescents.*
- **Make a class book about coping.** Talk with the class about small problems they have faced and the strategies they used to deal with them. Encourage students to select one small problem to write about, explaining how they coped. Monitor the stories to ensure that they are not too confronting, do not name anyone in an inappropriate way, and include a positive outcome or list of useful strategies. Remind the class that parents, and other students will read the stories so names and identifying information need to be changed. If you are concerned about a child's story, discuss it with a senior staff member such as the deputy or assistant principal.
- **As a class select one coping strategy to try each fortnight,** for example deep breathing, listening to music, exercising for 20 minutes a day, yoga. Practise each strategy in class together and set them as regular homework tasks. At the end of each fortnight have the class reflect on which strategies were helpful. Emphasise that there is no right or wrong way to cope.

Changing thinking

Changing thinking involves reviewing self-talk objectively.

Before talking to the child about their self-talk, view or read articles published by Reach Out, Psych4Schools' resilience thinking blog, Beyond Blue's SenseAbility video clips or books such as *The Optimist Child*. If you do not feel comfortable discussing self-talk, refer the child to a senior staff member or a psychologist, with the permission of the parents or guardians.

Self-talk is the voice in our heads that constantly commentates on everything we do. The self-talk of a child who is worried may include comments such as, 'I'll look stupid. Everyone is going to laugh at me.' 'This is dumb. Why do I always do this?' When children experience strong emotions such as anxiety or anger, their self-talk can blow things out of proportion. They imagine the worst and react by avoiding tasks or having an angry outburst which impacts on their ability to make and keep friends. For more on self-talk see the Psych4Schools ebooklet, *Working with children who are anxious*.



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- **Teach the child to monitor their self-talk.** For example,
 - **Stop and think about what they say to themselves** when they feel a strong emotion such as sadness, worry, or anger.
 - **Ask themselves, 'Is it true?'** Teach the child to be a detective and look for clues, asking, 'Is the thought that makes me feel worried really true?' What evidence do I have that this is true? Prompting questions include:

Is there evidence for my worry?

- Have I ever done this type of task well in the past?
 - Is there something else like this I am good at?
 - How did I get this answer? What strategy did/didn't I use?
 - Does this happen every time? Has there been an exception?
 - Could something else other than me be influencing the way I or someone else acted?
 - How do I know what they are thinking?
 - Do you think other people are X (negative label, stupid, boring etc.) when they do Y (behaviour)?
- **What thought is more accurate?** Encourage accurate responses to questions such as those above? Children generally need help to develop more appropriate self-talk and the more they practise the easier it will become. For example, instead of, 'I'm going to forget my speech,' more appropriate self-talk could be, 'I have never forgotten my speech before, I've practised, and I have notes if I forget parts.'

Increasing emotional literacy and regulation

Children who are able to regulate their own emotions and understand, empathise, and respond to the emotions of others are better at making friends. To promote emotional literacy in your students, consider the following ideas:

- **Implement class or whole-school *Emotional intelligence* or *resilience programs*.**
- **Regularly encourage recognition of feelings.** *The skills of identifying your own and others' emotions, and the ability to regulate emotional responses will assist in reducing and managing anxiety.*² Expand vocabularies beyond commonly recognised emotions such as sadness, happiness, fear and anger. Visuals such as *Mood meters*, *St Lukes Bears or Stones feeling cards*, or *Feelings posters* can help children to identify emotions.
- **Teach the child to be aware of their current mood** so they can better regulate their body language, tone of voice and general presentation. Often, we are unaware of exactly how we are feeling. It can be helpful to ask children to analyse how they are feeling before you begin a lesson. Stopping to identify feelings increases emotional literacy and gives the child a chance to think of strategies to help regulate any strong emotions. **Note:** Before using this strategy, the class needs

² Extremera, N. & Pizarro, D. (2006). The role of emotional intelligence in anxiety and depression among adolescents. *Individual differences research*, 4, p.16-27. Retrieved 5 April 2014.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/4ff4905c84aee104c1f4f2c2/t/5084d8ade4b02e0cbd1f6bcb/1350883501345/Fernandez-Berrocal+Alcaide+Extremer+Pizarro+2006.pdf>



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to be taught how to identify different emotions and learn strategies to assist with emotional regulation. Tools such as the [moodmeter](#) and the [RULER](#) have been used effectively for this purpose with students of all ages.

Activity

- **Ask children to identify how they feel at a given time.** How they are feeling and why can be discussed respectfully as a whole-class activity, in small groups or in private. Discussing feelings can help to extend children's emotional vocabulary, normalise the range of emotions people experience, encourage empathy, and reduce challenging behaviours in the classroom. The following video shows a session for [young children in an early learning centre in the USA](#).
- **Request that children identify feelings of characters in books or films,** and if necessary the coping strategies the characters could use to change or manage their feelings.
- **Establish an 'emotion wall'.** As children enter the classroom at the beginning of the day, each child posts their photograph next to the label for the emotion they're feeling. This approach helps teachers to keep track of who might need extra help on a given day. See [Broadmeadows Primary School's use of this tool](#).

Final statement

Close friendships are a key factor to success at school and in later life. Having friends at school and elsewhere improves wellbeing, academic performance and attitudes to learning. Hence, teachers who help the child with friendship issues are assisting the child's social, emotional, academic, psychological and moral development.