

Working with

# children

who have difficulty making friends



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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## Children who have difficulty making friends

Friendship offers opportunities for sharing, learning, fun, excitement, self-disclosure, support, advice and long-term relationships. For many children, making and keeping friends is quite effortless, but for some it is a challenge. Sadly, about one in ten school-age children have no friends and are disliked by most of their classmates.<sup>1</sup> This ebooklet outlines some critical aspects of friendship, and strategies to support the child who has friendship difficulties.

### The importance of friendship

Having friends improves wellbeing, attitudes to learning and academic performance. Having close friends is related to success at school and in later life. Hence, developing and maintaining friendships is important for a child's social, emotional, psychological and moral development.

Good friendships enable children to learn and practise important social and emotional skills. These include communicating effectively, getting along with others, coping with and solving problems, self-regulation of emotions, and understanding and responding to the reactions and points of view of others. Within friendship groups, children develop their ability to think about issues that arise between friends, to negotiate and solve problems.

Children and adolescents who find it difficult to make friends often feel lonely and unhappy. They are more at risk of academic underachievement and dropping out of school.

Children with no friends are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than those who have at least one friend. They are also more likely to be harmed by experiences of victimisation and rejection.<sup>2</sup> Having just one supportive, loyal, trustworthy friend promotes the development of psychological resilience.<sup>3</sup> It helps play a protective role when managing relationships with a difficult peer, peer group or bullying. The quality of a friendship can impact on resilience, providing a buffer against stress and stressful life events. Close friends usually talk regularly, participate in pro-social activity and learn social competence and conflict resolution skills.

### Developmental nature of friendship

Children tend to play with friends who are like them in some way. For example, they may be similar in age, gender, behavioural tendencies,<sup>4</sup> beliefs, appearance, attitudes, interests and likes.

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<sup>1</sup> Asher, S.R., and Williams, G.A., (1996) Children without friends, Part 1: Their problems, research for the National Network for Child Care's Connections Newsletter. This article may now not be available. Originally sourced at [Webshare.northseattle.edu/fam180/topics/socdev/Children%20wofreinds1.htm](http://Webshare.northseattle.edu/fam180/topics/socdev/Children%20wofreinds1.htm).

<sup>2</sup> The power of friendship: Protection against an escalating cycle of peer victimization. Hodges, Ernest V. E.; Boivin, Michel; Vitaro, Frank; Bukowski, William M. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 35(1), Jan 1999, 94-101.

<sup>3</sup> Graber, R., Turner, R. and Madill, A. (2015), Best friends and better coping: Facilitating psychological resilience through boys' and girls' closest friendships. *British Journal of Psychology*, 107 (2) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279303412\\_Best\\_friends\\_and\\_better\\_coping\\_Facilitating\\_psychological\\_resilience\\_through\\_boys%27\\_and\\_girls%27\\_closest\\_friendships](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279303412_Best_friends_and_better_coping_Facilitating_psychological_resilience_through_boys%27_and_girls%27_closest_friendships)

<sup>4</sup> Rubin, K., Lynch, D., Coplan, R., Rose-Krasnor, L., & Booth, C. (1994). "Birds of a feather...": behavioral concordances and preferential personal attraction in children. *Child Development* 65, 1778-1785.



Most children begin to develop the skills underpinning friendship as infants and toddlers.<sup>5</sup> While young children can be black and white in their sense of justice and fairness and misinterpret social situations, over time friendships usually become more complex, stable and intimate.

### Young children (up to age 7 years)

Until middle childhood, friendships usually develop between children who play together because of shared circumstances. They may live nearby, be in the same class, share mutual interests, or have parents who are friends. At this age, most will show a preference for particular children they have a natural affinity for but will be happy to play with another child if they can agree on what to play.

### Middle childhood (approximately 7 - 11 years)

During these years, friendship usually becomes more stable. Friendships are defined by fairness, loyalty and generosity, but often in a rigid way. If children do something nice for a friend, they expect some reciprocation. Children tend to be concerned with fitting in and being the same as others. Exclusive 'clubs' are common, often with complex rules and criteria about who is and isn't included. Most children in this age group have at least one friend, and many have a group or close network of three to five friends.

### Older children/adolescents (11 years +)

During this period, friendship reflects social, emotional, psychological and physical development. Children become more concerned with their friends' feelings, motivations and intentions. Intimacy and trust increase. They seek out friends with whom they have an emotional connection, rather than just mutual interests, although these remain important. They begin to look for security, love and acceptance, amongst friends and the broader peer group. Friendships may not be fixed, and changes in relationships can occur as individuals mature.

### Who is at risk?

The following children are more likely to have difficulty making and keeping friends. However, this is not necessarily the case, and the ability to establish and maintain friendships may be a strength for some of these children.

- **Children with learning, communication and/or attention difficulties** face barriers that may interfere with their ability to make and keep friends. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), severe language disorder, selective mutism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and non-verbal learning disorders (NVLD) fall into this category. When young, they may have friends when play is more concrete and often parallel. However, it can be difficult for some to retain friends as they get older, and relationships become more complex and nuanced. Children with learning difficulties may have friends who also have learning or behavioural difficulties. Some will not develop effective social skills.
- Information processing difficulties that many of these children have such as poor processing speed, can negatively influence the development of friendships and self-concept. For example, being slow to respond to others by name and unable to 'think on your feet' may lead to social awkwardness. Difficulties with listening and comprehension can interfere with success in the give and take of conversations. Other challenging behaviours such as impulsivity, can also get in the way of friendships. A few may be at risk of associating with students who display antisocial behaviour.
- **Children with an intellectual disability** have reduced adaptive behaviours and cognitive limitations. They may have poorly developed social skills and a lack of ability to understand another person's perspective. Consequently, some may have difficulty making and maintaining friends,

<sup>5</sup> Dunn J. (2004) *Children's Friendships: The Beginnings of Intimacy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.



understanding social cues and rules, and interpreting non-verbal cues. In many ways, the child with an intellectual disability functions as a younger child and often prefers to play and be with younger students. However, most children with an intellectual disability have at least one friend and enjoy meaningful relationships.

- **Children who have a teacher's aide in the classroom or playground** can have difficulty being part of friendship groups, not only because they are perceived as different, but the presence of support people, including parents and carers, can impede friendship-making opportunities.
- **Children who are angry or aggressive** are generally avoided by other children. This includes those who easily or frequently get upset and angry, arrive at school angry or those who don't respect the personal space of others.<sup>6</sup> As early as preschool and kindergarten, children show negative attitudes to peers who display aggressive or disruptive behaviour (such as not playing by the rules or having annoying or unpleasant behaviour). Angry and aggressive children may have friends, but often with other angry or aggressive children.
- **Children who are bossy, mean, annoying, hurtful or arrogant** are disliked by most peers.<sup>7</sup> In addition, being perceived as untrustworthy, 'over the top', or someone who uses triangular relationships impedes peer acceptance. In a triangular relationship one child tries to manipulate others through an ultimatum that they will only be their friend, so long as specific others are not friends.
- **Children who are overweight or obese** are often teased, bullied and excluded.<sup>8</sup> Understandably some will suffer from anxiety and/or depression, and some will have difficulty actively participating in class or physical activities. These difficulties add further barriers to developing friendships.
- **Children who are anxious and depressed** are three times more likely to have fewer friends than other children.<sup>9</sup>
- **Children who are shy** tend to spend less time in social situations and therefore less time learning from peers. Shyness may be perceived as unfriendliness, especially if the child does not speak, is not outgoing or is not involved in peer activities. This can lead to misunderstandings and social problems, and rejection by peers. Some can become targets for bullying.
- **Children who frequently lie** are unlikely to be trusted by peers, and often have complex social problems. Lying can have an emotional impact on the child who lies, those hearing the lie, and anyone included in the lie. Lying is associated with poor self-concept and anxiety.
- **Children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ)** may be bullied or discriminated against. A recent study found that one third of teenage boys wouldn't want to have a same-sex- attracted friend.<sup>10</sup>
- **Children who have multiple absences from school**, the neighbourhood, or peer activity can have problems making and keeping friends. Absences may be due to *a medical condition*, transience, family travels, sport, and school withdrawal where parents and the child collude to stay at home for some non-approved reason.

<sup>6</sup> Action research observed by Murray Evely with assistant principals and teachers and 50 students in Years 3 to Year 9 across schools of varying socio-demographics in Melbourne, from September 2011 till March 2012

<sup>7</sup> Action research observed by Murray Evely with assistant principals and teachers and 50 students in Years 3 to Year 9 across schools of varying socio-demographics in Melbourne, from September 2011 till March 2012

<sup>8</sup> Schafer, DR, & Simpkins, SD (2014). Using social network analysis to clarify the role of obesity in selection of adolescent friends. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104, P;1223-9 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24832139>

<sup>9</sup> Evely, M. and Ganim, Z., (2011) Working with children who are bullied, Melbourne, Australia: Psych4Schools <https://www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resource/bullied/>

<sup>10</sup> 'Major campaign aims to stamp out bullying.' Beyond Blue website (31 May 2015). This article is may now not be available. It was originally viewed at <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/connect-with-others/news/news/2015/03/30/major-campaign-aims-to-stamp-out-discrimination-against-lgbti-people>



- **Children who are gifted** may experience asynchronous or uneven development which can lead to perfectionism, heightened sensitivity, and being out of step socially with peers.<sup>11</sup> While this may result in friendship difficulties from the beginning of schooling, for some of these children their leadership abilities can boost their social and emotional profiles resulting in popularity among peers, particularly during primary school.<sup>12</sup>
- **Children who are perceived as different from school community norms** due to race, religion, parental and family background, poverty or wealth, appearance, personal hygiene issues or other circumstances may experience friendship difficulties.

## Fights and friendship issues

It is normal for misunderstandings and disagreements to occur between friends. It is best to let children sort out most issues themselves where they possess the required social skills and personal resources. Dealing with small friendship issues can help to build resilience and coping skills through learning to problem solve and negotiate.

### Social exclusion

Most school staff regard inclusion and acceptance as core values and aim to assist children who are at risk of exclusion by other children. However, other school community members including some parents and extended family may be less accepting or tolerant. Some may actively or subtly encourage their children to avoid or reject specific children, particularly if the child or the parent's behaviour or presentation appears to deviate from perceived community or personal standards or norms. Such influences can be difficult to ameliorate.

Explicit communication of school values, family codes of conduct and inclusive behaviour policies might require diplomatic discussion and reinforcement by senior staff with some parents.

### Toxic friendships

Toxic friendships tend to occur in the middle years and beyond and are more common amongst girls than boys. Here 'frenemies' can alternate between being *overly affectionate* and *socially aggressive* towards their 'friend', smoothly changing roles to enhance their social power.<sup>13</sup> A child who may have been a good friend, may say mean things, maliciously compete with, exclude, ridicule or taunt their 'friend' while maintaining other aspects of the friendship. This is known as *relational aggression*. Such behaviour is a form of bullying that can be often very hurtful.

It can be difficult for schools to successfully identify and intervene to counter relational aggression. Promoting empathy, kind and respectful relationships and friendship groups beyond one 'best' friend can assist in countering relational aggression.

### Friendships and social media

Social media may contribute to toxic friendships and friendship difficulties through harmful postings or real-time taunts. Schools and parents need to continuously work together to both prevent and quickly respond to cyberbullying with a range of strategies including open communication about healthy digital citizenship, self-help for users who are bullied, and fair codes governing social media use.

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<sup>11</sup> Evely, M. and Ganim, Z., (2011) Working with children who are gifted and talented, Melbourne, Australia: Psych4Schools <https://www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resource/gifted-and-talented/>

<sup>12</sup> Evely, M. and Ganim, Z., (2011) Working with children who are gifted and talented, Melbourne, Australia: Psych4Schools <https://www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resource/gifted-and-talented/>

<sup>13</sup> Simmons, R (2011). *Odd Girl Out, Revised and Updated: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. Mariner Books: USA.



## When to intervene

Inappropriate teacher or parent intervention can hamper skill development. Teacher intervention is warranted if the issue is persistent, serious or involves bullying. While teacher intervention may be necessary in some circumstances, generally talking things through and providing children with opportunities to practise new skills in social situations is more powerful in the longer term. Social and emotional competence develops through meaningful practice over time, in the same way that other skills are developed.

Some parents are uncomfortable leaving their child to solve small friendship issues and pressure teachers to intervene. If this is a recurring issue the teacher should meet with the parents. If necessary, a senior staff member could be included to explain the value of allowing children to learn to solve their own problems. If appropriate, members can provide parents with a copy of the Psych4Schools handout, *What parents can do to help their child with friendships*. This handout is in the Friendship difficulties package. For more strategies see the *Work with the child's parents section* on page 14.

When the incident has occurred online it can be difficult for schools to successfully identify and intervene. It can be challenging to identify the perpetrator, and/or the instigator will often deny that it is occurring, particularly when there are no witnesses to the bullying. With online bullying a screenshot of harmful comments or photos may enable a conversation to be initiated. When conversation fails, use of conflict resolution techniques, initially by the classroom teacher, or another suitably qualified teacher or professional is usually the most effective strategy. If the victim is highly distressed or at risk of more harm being done by a conversation, school staff should choose a more suitable intervention that protects the victim. Appropriate disciplinary action may need to be taken.

## When to seek further assistance

A psychologist or senior staff member should be consulted when:

- Peers are afraid of or repeatedly reject the child.
- Parents regularly seek you out over concerns about their child's friendship/s.
- The child is lacking in social or communication skills.
- The child is increasingly angry or withdrawn over a period of two to four weeks.

Referral to a psychologist, or speech pathologist for language and communication issues (with parent consent) can assist the child to learn appropriate skills, and to feel happier and more confident.



## Strategies to support the child who has friendship difficulties

Select developmentally appropriate strategies from those below to assist children who have difficulty making and keeping friends. You may need to make reasonable adjustments or modifications to suit an individual or a group of children.

When supporting students with specific disabilities or conditions please also refer to the relevant ebooklet(s) listed in the Resources section on page 17.

### Build social inclusion

- **Help all children start the school day with a period of calm by providing quiet learning or reflective activities.** The child who needs to de-escalate worries, tension or anger will be better placed to cooperate with others and be accepted or tolerated by peers and the peer group. This time also allows the teacher to provide additional one-to-one support to assist the child to regulate emotion.
- **Make an effort to discover each child's interests.** Breeding budgerigars or another interest could become the focus of an activity where the child is able to demonstrate strengths; and an interested peer might connect with the child as a result.
- **Model positive social skills** when interacting with all staff and students. Expect all students to interact with you in the same respectful and pro-social manner. Remind students to smile, to look towards you and create a comfortable level of eye contact. Use a friendly voice and pay attention to the other person.
- **Help the child to have positive, successful interactions with other children.** Identify and support the use of foundational skills needed for success in various social learning environments. These include patience, waiting and turn taking, using words to convey needs and wants, respecting personal space, and speaking politely.
- **Model and support the conversational skills of give and take.** Apart from taking turns to speak, help each child learn to listen, to add their ideas to conversations, to ask clarifying questions and explore others' thinking. Friendship and peer acceptance require positive reciprocal interactions.
- **It's not just about you!** Encourage each child to show an interest in what peers think and like. Identify any children who constantly talk about themselves. Gently discourage this practice. Suggest ideas and strategies for talking about other topics showing a genuine interest in peers, and acknowledging others' interests, needs and ideas.
- **Create an expectation of kindness and respect for others.** These are key determinants of peer acceptance. For kindness activities and free classroom lesson plans see the [Random Acts of Kindness Foundation](#) website. Challenge the class to initiate at least one act of kindness towards a person at school and at home each week.
- **Support the young child to earn leaves to add to 'The Tree of Kind Deeds'.** For example, choose children each day who demonstrate a positive interaction, an act of kindness, or calm persistence with a challenging task to reinforce a culture of kindness, acceptance and social success, highlighting that we can all change or improve our behaviour.
- **Teach forgiveness.** All friendships can go through periods of conflict. Help children explore and understand what might have led to an upset, and to share the feelings they experienced. Suggest that accepting an apology is more constructive than harboring resentment and explain that we all make mistakes and can learn from them.





- **If appropriate, remind the child to be truthful**, as those who frequently lie are likely to lose the trust of peers. See the Psych4Schools ebooklet, *Working with children who tell lies (revised)* for strategies.
- **Teach games and playing by the rules**. Rather than allowing the child to stay inside during breaks to ease nervousness regarding outdoor time, assist them to learn how to greet others, understand and apply rules of playground games, and to use friendly, but assertive play requests. Discuss how to join in games such as skipping or four-square by simply standing in line, and generally not having to say much more than, 'I'd like to play too'.
- **Hold group forums with older children**. Involve another teacher and several supportive students. This forum can be used to discuss current affairs, play card and board games or discuss general issues. Use forums as opportunities to discuss the give and take of friendship skills, noting that we all make mistakes, we often need to forgive others, apologise, to find ways to resolve conflict, share confidences, talk about private or personal issues, and to support each other.

## Classroom and group organisation

- **Plan seating, lockers, bags and coat hooks** so that the child with friendship difficulties is near supportive class members, and preferably within your line of sight.
- **Use cooperative learning strategies**. Consider group placement carefully. Give the child a task that uses their strengths. Encourage all students to support one another.
- **Pair the child with like-minded children to complete activities**. This may promote connections between children who may not otherwise become friends. Further paired activities can help build responsive and trusting relationships.
- **Group or pair students with similar skills or extracurricular interests**. For example, chess, collections, performing or entertainment, cartooning, martial arts, athletics, swimming and so on. Set a project or assignment based on this grouping.
- **Partner the child with one or two peers for specific tasks**, such as unlocking and locking the bike shed, tidying bookshelves, helping specialist teachers to audit equipment and resources. Swap the jobs at least once per term. Assigning a task can give the child a sense of responsibility, helping to build self-confidence and resourcefulness.
- **Brainstorm with your class a list of age-appropriate social skills**. Help all students to identify one or two areas that they already do well from a list of five or more skill areas. Pair students with a trusted partner. Request the trusted partner to respectfully and fairly rate the other on these skills using a 3-point scale: 1: Need to improve, 2: A little improvement needed, 3: Okay or good already. Select one or two areas for improvement. The teacher or other support teachers can be consulted or participate to ensure ratings are fair and kind. Support children to make behavioural changes over the following week or two. Review after one month.
- **Separate children who support or follow one another's negative behaviours**. Suggest children can resume associating with or working with others once they have demonstrated three positive or mature social interactions. Consider placement in another class for a period of time for any child who demonstrates persistent aggressive or anti-social behaviours.



## Lunch and break times

- **Audit facilities and line markings** on outdoor surfaces to ensure adequate opportunities for structured ball games, traditional playground games and general play.
- **Provide structured lunchtime activities** at least three days per week across diverse interests, such as sport, craft, board games, gardening, access to newspapers and books in a reading room or library, coding or robotics, or games club, or other activities.
- **Have a friendship tree, seat or area in the school ground.** This is a place to go when children need someone to talk with or a playmate. It is important that the school culture supports use of this area, and promotes acceptance that everyone needs support at times, and that other children offer to join them. If this culture is not supported, the area runs the risk of being a prime area for bullying. This is an appropriate strategy for primary school students and junior secondary students.
- **Provide desirable, age-appropriate props.** Give the child sporting equipment or other objects to use in the playground, such as a ball, skipping rope or chalk. In secondary school provide equipment for table or bat tennis, board games, tennis, soccer or basketball.
- **Encourage the child take equipment outside.** Other children are more likely to ask to play with the child who is custodian of the soccer ball, frisbee or skipping rope.
- **Help the child to problem-solve at a practical level.** For example, the child could request the school to paint an additional four-square game on a play surface or move heavy seating that restricts a specific play area.
- **Encourage the shy or reluctant child to play games** that are outside their comfort zone. Insist that a new game is persisted with, rather than giving up on the first negative experience.

## Playground support plans

Playground support plans can be created as part of the student support program or the overall wellbeing program. They can include written points and visuals such as photos, drawings, video clips and diagrams. The Psych4Schools Blog [Playground support plans](#) provides further information. An app that supports the scheduling of playground plans for a child diagnosed with autism can be viewed at [Autism Classroom Resources](#). For a comprehensive list of apps see [Touch Autism](#) and software from Spectronics [Boardmaker 7](#).

## Explicitly teach social skills

- **Embed a whole-school wellbeing framework** such as Beyond Blue's [Be You](#) for primary schools and for secondary schools, which helps teachers and schools to build their own social and emotional learning frameworks to suit the needs of students.
- **Incorporate social skills into everyday teaching** for a few minutes each day. Teaching age-appropriate social communication skills to the whole class for 5 to 20 minutes a few times per week can be more effective than a separate one-off program. During whole class sessions, socially competent peers can model age and school-based norms. Select an area of focus based on the needs of the class or individuals. Some ideas are included below:
  - **Discuss and demonstrate age-appropriate social problem solving, kindness and negotiation skills during circle time** or oral language groups. Learning about reciprocity and how to share thoughts and ideas is integral to friendship and peer acceptance.



- **Explore themes of friendship and specific social skills or mindsets across the curriculum.** For example, when studying notable Australians, you might consider strengths and skills that helped make a person who they are and examine whether those same skills or behaviours would have made that person a good friend. When reading, or viewing a film, the class could identify behaviours displayed by a character who was a good friend. Compare these with the behaviours of another character who had difficulty making friends or who was a poor friend.
- **Play games as a class or in small groups.** Prior to beginning, set a focus for the game. For example, if the focus is turn taking have a short class discussion about why and when turn taking is important. Discuss how to be a good turn taker by watching other players, waiting for your turn, not taking too long, and so on. Games can be related to units of work or just for fun. Board or card games can help to reinforce turn taking, reciprocating, being a good winner/loser, and getting along with others. Cooperative games are preferable to competitive games. Boys with few or no friends show less disruptive behaviour and more maturity when working with a group towards a common goal.<sup>14</sup>
- **Conduct group investigations.** Set a task over a few weeks or a month on a specific social skill or common issue. Pairs or small groups could determine a topic. For example, 'What to do when your friends want to play with someone else.' 'How to make a new friend.' 'How to respond to teasing.' Projects or tasks could outline steps or behaviours required. Work requirements could include making a poster, live action film or animation, cartoon, scripting a play with puppets, creating a picture book, or writing a blog.
- **Provide one quick daily activity from a social skills program,** such as *Bounce back!* or *Friendly Kids, Friendly Classrooms*, or ask one question such as, 'What can you do if your best friend or someone you were hoping to play with doesn't want to play with you today?' 'Imagine you are new to the school what could you do at lunchtime to help make friends?' 'What can you do if a student is laughing at you and annoying you in class when you are trying to do your work?' Have students discuss in pairs and report to the class.
- **Include one social skills lesson a week.** This could include whole-class activity, discussions or brainstorming about what makes a good friend, being kind, sharing, taking turns, listening to each other, introducing yourself, asking questions about others, asking to join a game, helping others, accepting difference, negotiating or communicating assertively. These are common themes throughout life but approaches and strategies will differ depending on age. Some structured resources for teaching social skills are listed in the resources section.
- **Implement a formal structured resilience, emotional literacy, or values-based program in your school.** Typically, these programs focus on skills such as communicating assertively, problem solving, negotiating, recognising and regulating emotions, and coping skills essential for getting along with others. See the *resources section* for a list of free and commercially available resilience programs.

## When there is a social issue

Before implementing any plans reflect on realistic and developmentally appropriate expectations for the child. For example, it can be pointless asking the child to take responsibility for their behaviour in a relationship when they are too young or otherwise unable to manage a specific social skill. If the

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<sup>14</sup> Gelb R and Jacobson JL. 1988. Popular and unpopular children's interactions during cooperative and competitive peer group activities. *J Abnorm Child Psychol.* 16(3) 247-61.



expectation requires higher-order thinking than the child possesses, concentrate your support and assistance around the child adopting an achievable behaviour.

At times a child will need assistance to learn specific social skills or help with a friendship problem. If this is the case:

- **Observe the child in the playground and classroom.** See who they play with and how they interact. This can provide clues about behaviours that cause friendship difficulties.
- **Meet privately with the child to discuss their friendship issues.** This might be for five minutes before school or lunch. A regular check-in each week, fortnight or month may be beneficial. Though labour intensive, this will reduce the time spent assisting the child throughout the year with entrenched friendship, peer acceptance or behaviour issues.
- **If the child has not approached you with the issue,** first explain why you are talking with them. Talk sensitively about what you have *observed* in the playground or classroom, rather than what you think. Be specific. For example, 'I noticed you have been sitting by yourself at lunchtime for the last week.'
  - **Focus on what the child does well socially** before talking about areas for improvement. Name and praise specific pro-social skills. Identifying what they already do well can help to boost confidence and provide a base of strengths to help them learn new skills.
  - **Complete the Psych4Schools' *Making friends questionnaire*** highlighting statements or phrases to identify areas they believe they need to work on. (This questionnaire is in the Friendship difficulties package in the Members Area). List skills they need to learn or practise. Talk with the child about what they think they need help with when meeting or getting along with others.
  - **Work on behaviours or social skills one at a time.** Brainstorm strategies with the child. Model appropriate behavior by role-playing the situation with the child and provide one or two key behaviours or verbal responses. Have the child practise with you until they can demonstrate the skill. This will take more than one meeting, as learning a new skill takes practice, reinforcement by the teacher, regular encouragement and time.
  - **Set the child a social task based on the identified behaviour to practise over the following two to four weeks.** Ensure the task is action-specific. For example, engage in eye contact with the other person for most (that is, more than half the time) in a conversation. If this is too confronting, have the child look at the other person's nose or forehead while talking. This is preferable to setting a general goal of improving eye contact. Take care to set something achievable.
  - **Discuss failure before the child attempts the new skill.** Explain that everyone makes mistakes when they are learning. Talk to them about how they may have to try a few times to be successful, and that this is common. Plan what to do if they are not able to complete the task. For example, if they have a tantrum and walk off the field during a game, encourage them to stop at the boundary line or return to the boundary line as soon as possible to rejoin the game. Other players may need to be briefed to accept a return to play.
  - **Schedule a review once or twice a fortnight so that the teacher can clarify and reinforce targeted behaviours to support effective change.** Meetings should be encouraging, with a focus on personal growth, rather than causing embarrassment.



- **Refer to a school counsellor or psychologist** (with parental consent) if the child requires more assistance than you can provide, has several issues, or is not showing improvement.
- **Encourage the child to enroll in extra curricula or lunchtime activities** where they can meet children with similar interests.
- **Ask other children to connect with the child.** For a younger child you may ask socially competent and sensitive children in the class to play with the child at lunchtime. For an older child, you might ask competent and sensitive children to involve the child in one or two of their activities for at least part of the week.
- **Praise positive social interactions** between other students and the child.
- **If personal hygiene is an issue talk with the child privately** or ask a teacher with whom the child has a positive relationship to speak with the child. For example, for a child who has body odour, discuss how we all need to shower daily and use deodorant. Such conversations must be sensitive and consider the child's age, cultural and family background. For the child who is often unclean and faces barriers to daily showering at home, set up a system with the principal's approval, to enable them to privately wash their clothes and shower at school.

### Use conflict resolution when there are issues within a group

- **Train specific staff to use effective conflict resolution strategies.** It is useful to have one trained teacher from each year level or department and a school counsellor or psychologist trained to assist group conflicts. Support the child (and others) to learn the social and emotional skills needed to resolve small issues themselves. See for example, [classroom conflict resolution techniques and strategies](#).
- **Select an appropriate quiet space** and a time for the meeting where you will not be disturbed. Note: Only take on conflict resolution if you feel confident you can manage the situation and the child has the language and maturity to benefit from it.
- **Set up the discussion to be respectful** from the beginning. Talk with the children about how the conversation will aim to find a solution that works for everyone and that, all children must be respectful. This means there can be no put-downs or personal attacks. Explain that everyone will have a turn to talk. The conversation should focus on solutions to the problem, rather than on other children. All involved need to listen with an open mind and let each person have their say without interrupting.
- **Provide or make visual templates showing the steps towards conflict resolution.** This ensures that everyone knows the steps which can help to keep the meeting on task.
- **Ensure everyone is calm before starting.** Do not begin the process when emotions are high. If required, have everyone take 7 to 10 deep breaths and calm down. The meeting may need to be set for later in the day or the next day.
- **Identify the problem.** Let each child have a turn to talk about the issue respectfully, explaining how it is affecting them. It can be helpful to follow the model, 'Tell how you feel and why', for example, 'I feel ....., when you... I would prefer it if ...' See the [assertive statement section in Social skills for children with additional friendship needs](#), (in the Friendship difficulties package in the Members Area) for more on using 'I statements'.
- **Brainstorm solutions.** Identify what each person can do to make the situation better. Ask, 'What would each of you like to happen?' Prompts can include; 'What can you do to help the friendship?' 'Do you need time apart?' 'Are you being kind and accepting of difference?'



- **Aim for a win-win for all.** An outcome that all are happy with may be difficult, but brainstorm with the children until you reach a point that is agreed as the best outcome for all.
- **Create a written action plan** that outlines what each person will do to help resolve the conflict. List the specific behaviours each child will undertake, then each child can be accountable. For example, 'When Jade is playing with Taylor I will play with Naomi and Alice or play down-ball with others.'
- **Check progress with the group** at an agreed time. Adapt the plan if necessary.

## Work with the child's parents

- **If a parent is pressuring you to solve their child's friendship issues, don't give in, seek support.** Involve senior staff or, with parental permission, the school psychologist. Refer parents to Psych4Schools document *What parents can do to help their child with friendships*. This resource is available in the Friendship difficulties package in the Members Area.
- **Encourage parents to invite children over or to allow their child to visit other children** from class. This can be a social activity or in the context of a group project that needs to be worked on. Parents may need advice on who their child gets along with in the class.
- **Encourage and support parents to attend school social events** and to interact with their child's preferred peers' parents. Children benefit when parents communicate with friends' parents and work together to help support friendships.<sup>15</sup>
- **Encourage parents to enroll their child in activities outside school.** Help with transport arrangements if this is an issue, for example connecting with another child in your class who attends the activity. If parents cannot afford extra curricula activities, explore additional funding options with the welfare coordinator or the assistant or deputy principal.
- **Encourage parents to consider whether there is one thing they might change** to assist their child manage their friendship difficulty. Respectfully posing this question may help parents consider new possibilities and ways to assist. For example, 'Your son tells me he now spends all afternoon playing online games. Might placing restrictions on game-playing time help him to spend time playing outdoors again with his mates from last year?'
- **Encourage parents to investigate multiple friendship groups** such as Nippers, Taekwondo, Little Aths, Auskick, other sports, Guides, Scouts, so there is an opportunity to interact with more than one group of friends. This can ease the hothousing effects of school friendship groups.
- **Refer to relevant Psych4Schools ebooklets such as, 'Working with children who lack confidence in public speaking' and 'Working with children who are gifted and talented'.**

## When the child is new to the school

- **Partner with two to three buddies** to help the new child to connect with someone, if one of their buddies is absent.
- **Talk with the new student about their interests** and introduce them to students with similar or shared interests. It can be helpful to connect them soon after the new child arrives, by working on a group assignment. Alternatively, help the student to identify school activities that align with their interests as a way of meeting new friends, such as playing down-ball at lunchtime, joining the choir or a sporting team.

<sup>15</sup> Fletcher, A. C., Hunter, A. G., & Eanes, A. Y. (2006). Links between social network closure and child well-being: The organizing roles of race and friendship context. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 1057-1068.



- **Ensure the child and parents have information about the school to help them fit in.** For example, advise opening hours for the canteen and library, details of sports afternoons, lunchtime activities, and after-school clubs.
- **Help parents to fit in by facilitating access to social and community events** and activities. The parents and friends' association or parents club may assist. For practical help see, NSW Government Education *5 things parents can do to make school transitions easier*.
- **If the child is a refugee** also see the Psych4Schools ebooklet, *Working with children from a refugee background*.

## Toxic friendships/frenemies

- **Use conflict resolution with involved children.** Ensure the staff member conducting conflict resolution sessions is trained or has the skills to conduct successful sessions. See the above *conflict resolution* section.
- **Take relational aggression as seriously as physical aggression.** Relational aggression may take the form of excluding, nasty looks, name calling, shaming or setting up the child to fail socially. It can be difficult to monitor, but mean comments or instances of exclusion (where somebody has been deliberately left out) should be addressed immediately by the teacher.
- **Talk with the child about any difficult friendships** if you feel comfortable doing so. Conduct the conversation sensitively and privately. Focus on the values of kindness; respect and loyalty or what makes a 'true friend'. Ask, 'Is this friend treating you well?'
- **Coach the child to use assertive statements and actions.** For example, the child could say, 'That was a mean thing to say', then walk away. Let the child know that even when standing up for themselves their 'friend' may not stop. Encourage them to talk with you if this is the case.
- **Talk with the child about widening their circle of friends.** Encourage them to join sporting teams, arts, other interest groups or clubs to meet new friends with whom they share interests. The wider the child's circle of friends the more protected they will be.
- **Make a friendship contract and ask all members sign it.** This can be particularly helpful for groups of friends who have recurring friendship problems. Sit with the friendship group and assist them to specify points to include in the contract, so each child is clear about how to behave. Make sure all understand and agree on the points. If the contract is broken, meet with all members again to resolve the issues.

## Children who require additional friendship assistance

For some children, strengthening and development of specific social skills are needed so that they can make and maintain friendships and achieve a level of peer acceptance that allows tolerance and social inclusion. Almost all children who have difficulty making friends can be taught how to make and keep friends. See the Psych4Schools document, *Social skills for children with additional friendship needs*, for practical advice, activities and strategies on the following ten friendship areas. (This resource is available in the Friendship difficulties package in the Members Area).

- Communicating non-verbally
- Communicating assertively
- Making conversation
- Joining in



- Behaving in a group
- Problem solving and negotiation
- Giving and receiving compliments
- Coping skills
- Changing thinking
- Increasing emotional literacy and regulation.

Since 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.

## In conclusion

Friendship is crucial to the developing child. Having friends is a key element of social learning and successful integration into a school community.

Teachers can play a vital role in fostering the acquisition and development of friendship skills in their students. Appreciating the nature and importance of friendship and implementing strategies to support children experiencing friendship difficulties will enable teachers to more effectively foster student learning and wellbeing.





## Resources

### Psych4Schools resources

For more information and strategies to help children with friendship problems, members may consult the following resources in the Friendship difficulties package:

- Social skills for children with additional needs
- What parents can do to help their child with friendships
- Helping children with no friends or few friends
- Social skills dice
- Making friends questionnaire (Year 3 to Year 8)

These resources are available to Psych4Schools members here:

<https://www.psych4schools.com.au/members-area/>

### Psych4Schools ebooklets

Available to members at <https://www.psych4schools.com.au/members-area/>

Excerpts available freely to everyone at [www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resources/wwc](http://www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resources/wwc)

- Working with children who have difficulty making friends
- Working with children to help prevent anxiety (new ed. book 1)
- Working with children who are anxious (new ed. book 2)
- Working with children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (revised)
- Working with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Working with children who are bullied
- Working with children who are gifted and talented
- Working with children with an intellectual disability (revised)
- Working with children who lack confidence speaking
- Working with children with learning disabilities
- Working with children who tell lies (revised)
- Working with children who are refugees
- Working with children with serious or chronic medical conditions
- Working with children who are overweight or obese



- Working with children who are selectively mute
- Working with children with a severe expressive or receptive language disorder
- Working with children who worry excessively
- Working with children who are shy (revised)
- Working with children who refuse to go to school (School refusal)
- Working with children who are depressed
- Working with children who are conduct disordered and violent

## Reference books

- Brackett, M.A. & Kremenitzer, J.P. (2011). *Creating emotionally literate classrooms: An introduction to the RULER Approach to Social and Emotional Learning*. Dude Publishing/ National Professional Resources Inc.: Naples, FL.
- Calmer Classrooms, A guide to working with traumatised children. (2007) Commissioned by the Child Safety Commissioner, Melbourne.  
[https://earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/files/calmer\\_classrooms.pdf](https://earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/files/calmer_classrooms.pdf)
- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House: New York, NY.
- Otto, M. & Smits, J. (2011). *Exercise for mood and anxiety: Proven strategies for overcoming depression and enhancing well-being*. Oxford University Press: New York, NY.
- Seligman, M. (2007). *The optimistic child: A proven program to safeguard children against depression and build lifelong resilience*. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston, MA.
- Wiseman, R. (2009). *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*. Harmony: USA
- Wiseman, R. (2014). *Masterminds and Wingmen: Helping Our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power, Locker-Room Tests, Girlfriends, and the New Rules of Boy World*. Harmony: USA

## Websites

- The Social Mind website  
<https://www.socialmind.com.au/>
- Be you Beyond Blue  
<https://beyou.edu.au/>

## Apps

All apps are available in the itunes app store and Google Play.

- **Kloog social skills series** [www.kloogsocialskills.com](http://www.kloogsocialskills.com) :



- **The Zones of Regulation apps**  
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=The+Zones+of+Regulation+apps+>
- **Social skill builder apps**  
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Social+skill+builder+apps+>
- **Happy frog apps** [www.happyfrogapps.com/social-skills-apps](http://www.happyfrogapps.com/social-skills-apps)

### Social skills programs and books for the classroom

- Buckingham, C (2010). The friendship saver program: An evidence based experiential learning program for teachers and their primary school aged students. A social learning studio publication: VIC.
- Shapiro, L. (2004). *101 ways to teach children social skills. A ready-to-use, reproducible activity book*. The Bureau for At-Risk Youth: USA. [https://www.22q11ireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/101\\_Ways\\_Teach\\_Children\\_Social\\_Skills.pdf](https://www.22q11ireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/101_Ways_Teach_Children_Social_Skills.pdf) Free downloadable book
- Winner, M. (2006). Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students. Think Social Publishing Inc.
- Winner, M.G. & Murphy, L.K. (2016). *Social Thinking and me*. Think Social Publishing.

### Resilience/emotional intelligence programs for the classroom

Resilience programs marked with an \* are free

- Bounce back! (K-8). A wellbeing and resilience program  
<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Bounce+back%21+%28K-8%29.+A+wellbeing+and+resilience+program>
- Challenges and choices (K-10) \*. Resources for resilience, drug and road safety education  
<https://www.sdera.wa.edu.au/programs/challenges-and-choices/>
- Firth, N. & Frydenberg, E. (2011). *Success and dyslexia: Sessions for coping in the upper primary years*. ACER Press. An evidence-based program that assists upper primary aged students to cope well with challenges in their lives.
- Frydenberg, E., O'Brien, K. & Deans, J. (2012). *Developing everyday coping skills in the early years*. Continuum International Publishing. Proactive strategies for supporting social and emotional development.
- Frydenberg, E. & Brandon, C. (2007). *The best of coping*. ACER Press. Developing coping skills for adolescents.



- ReachOut.com in schools. Uses a whole-school approach to student wellbeing. Engaging activities for students. Credible, flexible resources for teachers. Practical support for parents and carers. [au.professionals.reachout.com/Australian-Curriculum](http://au.professionals.reachout.com/Australian-Curriculum)
- RULER Approach to social and emotional learning: a school-wide approach <https://www.google.com/search?q=ruler+approach+to+social+and+emotional+learning>
- You can do it! Education (K-12) [www.youcandoiteducation.com.au/](http://www.youcandoiteducation.com.au/)
- Kuypers, L.M. (2011). Zones of Regulation: A curriculum designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control.

### Resources for building resilience

- Authentic Happiness\* Approaches to happiness developed at the [Positive Psychology Center](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu), University of Pennsylvania [www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu)
- Children in Scotland. Your resource for improving children and young people's understanding of their well-being. A resource for teachers and practitioners working with children and young people. <https://education.gov.scot/media/h0gdx2c5/improving-children-and-young-peoples-understanding-of-their-wellbeing.pdf>
- Make kindness the norm at your school\*. Resources developed by the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/for-educators>
- Smiling Mind\*: Mindfulness meditation website and app with classroom resources for children aged 7+ and adults. [www.smilingmind.com.au](http://www.smilingmind.com.au)
- St Luke's Strength/Feeling Cards for Kids (K-12). Help identify emotions or strengths and skills, for use in goal setting, exploring values, and ice-breaker activities [www.innovativeresources.org](http://www.innovativeresources.org)
- Values education resources <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Values+education+resources>
- VIA youth survey\*. A survey that provides information to help understand the personality characteristics that make individuals authentic, unique and feel engaged [www.viacharacter.org/www/The-Survey](http://www.viacharacter.org/www/The-Survey)
- Psych4schools handout, 'Relaxation - Deep abdominal breathing in the 'For the classroom package' in the Members Area. <https://www.psych4schools.com.au/members-area/>

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