

GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Helping children make friends

Some children have a knack for friendship, but others have a hard time in this aspect of life. When a child lacks friends, it's natural for parents to be concerned. The good news is that the skills of friendship—like any other set of skills—can be learned, and that parents are the most effective teachers. The techniques in this handout can get you started, and we're ready to discuss this important aspect of your child's development at any time.



Recognizing the problem

Your child may be visibly lonely, or may tell you that other children tease him or don't want to play with him. Or your child may conceal his friendless state, expressing his unhappiness by being tearful or complaining about tummy aches and wanting to stay home from school. Loneliness is a sensitive subject, and children tend to cover it up; don't take their denials at face value. One way to find out more is to ask about "hot spots" like the school bus or the cafeteria, when parents and teachers aren't around: "Who do you sit with? What happens? Do other kids call you names? Will they let you join in their games?"

How parents can help

You can help your child most by providing an understanding and supportive home environment. Be a model of empathic social behavior your child can emulate. Make gentle suggestions when you see him committing social errors. Arrange social opportunities that build on your child's special talents and interests: a soccer or music camp,

a children's theater group, a chess club.

If certain situations like entering a group or knowing when to say goodbye are especially difficult, a five-step program like this one can help:

■ **Coach the child.** Pick a situation. Help your child plan how to handle it and role-play the interaction.

■ **Preview.** Before your child puts the plan into action, ask him to imagine how it will play out.

■ **Review and revise.** Go over the plan again and ask your child to think of alternative ways to do it and choose the best one.

■ **Act.** Tell your child to monitor how the interaction goes and think about how to recover if things go wrong.

■ **Evaluate.** Afterwards, talk over what happened. If the plan went well, talk about how to use it another time. If things went badly, talk about what changes to make.

You might also be able to promote friendships by setting up some controlled social encounters. Invite another child to come over and play. Choose brief, low-key activities the children can do together, with some fall-back separate activities if they have trouble cooperating. Keep an eye on the situation, but don't try to control it completely. If the children get into a fight, intervene early and diplomatically, without embarrassing or blaming either child. End the visit on time (or earlier, if necessary), so that both children are eager for the next meeting.

Whatever you try, make sure your child knows you accept and value her as she is. Within that framework, helping your child improve specific social skills will enrich her life, and yours.