

## Fostering Early Childhood Friendships

Many adults cherish memories of their first best friends, highlighting the significance of early-childhood friendships and the lessons they bring to life. If you're a concerned parent worried about your child's friend-making progress, remember that the journey to forming friendships is unique to each child. Take a breath and understand that children make friends at their own pace.

Nonetheless, there are some key principles to consider when it comes to preschoolers forging friendships, along with suggestions to help cultivate these meaningful connections.

**Parents: Set Realistic Expectations** Every child is different, and the speed at which they make friends is individual. Keep these two points in mind:

1. Children only need a couple of good friends.
2. True friendships usually form around the age of 3 or older.



Stanford Health experts recommend three factors when assessing your child's friend-making progress: temperament, developmental level, and avoiding comparisons. These factors significantly influence how easily and quickly your child will develop friendships.

**Skills for Making Friends** Here are important considerations to aid your child in navigating the complexities of forming friendships.

1. **Model Positive Social Behavior:** Preschoolers observe adult role models for guidance on friendship. Demonstrate friendly, respectful, and cooperative behavior to those around you, and ensure your child witnesses it.
2. **Teach Basic Social Skills:** Sometimes, initiating a simple "hello" can be challenging. Guide your child through a straightforward greeting, like, "Hi, I'm Allen. What's your name? Want to play?" Also, introduce them to sharing, taking turns, and using polite language.
3. **Nurture Empathy & Kindness:** Strong relationships rely on understanding, kindness, and empathy. Even from an early age, encourage your child to notice and consider others' feelings. Encourage inclusivity, helping, and expressing empathy when others are upset.
4. **Promote Conflict Resolution Skills:** Conflict is natural, even among young children. Help your child develop conflict resolution skills by teaching them to communicate needs, listen to others, and find compromises. Teach them to express emotions with words, not aggression.
5. **Support Independence:** Avoid hovering; encourage your child to take the lead in making friends and resolving social conflicts. Developing these skills boosts their confidence and equips them with valuable social tools.

**Finding Friends** If making friends is a priority for your preschooler, consider these suggestions for introducing them to potential playmates:

- **Preschool:** Enroll your child in settings like Little Sunshine’s Playhouse & Preschool, where organized activities in small groups offer ample opportunities for interaction.
- **Local Parks & Playgrounds:** Outdoor spaces are ideal for friend-making. Parks provide a mix of ages, allowing your child to learn how to interact with peers of different ages.
- **Community Centers:** Enroll them in classes like art, music, or sports offered by community centers specifically designed for preschoolers.
- **Libraries:** Libraries often host activities for young children. Attend storytime or other sessions, providing low-pressure opportunities for interaction.
- **Sports or Recreational Programs:** Such programs promote basic skills in activities like soccer, gymnastics, or swimming, fostering friendships and energy release.
- **Religious Centers:** Churches, synagogues, and mosques usually have tailored programs or events for preschoolers, fostering connections and community engagement.

As your child plays, seize the chance to make friends yourself! Model the behavior you want your child to exhibit.

Friendship cultivation takes time and effort, particularly for preschoolers developing their social skills. Be patient and supportive; they'll eventually find their way. Each child's journey is unique, and their friendship-making style will reflect that. Soon enough, they'll be excitedly inviting their newfound best friend over to play.