

## IV. Intervention Strategies/Model Programs

### B. Do Kids Need Friends?

by Anita Gurian, Ph.D. and Alice Pope, Ph.D.

Excerpted from: [http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/do\\_kids\\_need\\_friends](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/do_kids_need_friends)

#### **...What are friends for?**

Friendships are important in helping children develop emotionally and socially. They provide a training ground for trying out different ways of relating to others. Through interacting with friends, children learn the give and take of social behavior in general. They learn how to set up rules, how to weigh alternatives and make decisions when faced with dilemmas. They experience fear, anger, aggression and rejection. They learn how to win, how to lose, what's appropriate, what's not. They learn about social standing and power - who's in, who's out, how to lead and how to follow, what's fair and what's not. They learn that different people and different situations call for different behaviors and they come to understand the viewpoints of other people. Friends provide companionship and stimulation for each other, and they find out who they are by comparing themselves to other children - who's bigger, faster, who can add better, who can catch better. They learn that they're both similar to and different from others. Through friendships and belonging to a group children improve their sense of self-esteem. The solace and support of friends help children cope with troubling times and through transition times - moving up to a new school, entering adolescence, dealing with family stresses, facing disappointments.

Friendships are not just a luxury; they are a necessity for healthy psychological development. Research shows that children with friends have a greater sense of well-being, better self-esteem and fewer social problems as adults than individuals without friends. On the other hand, children with friendship problems are more likely than other children to feel lonely, to be victimized by peers, to have problems adjusting to school, and to engage in deviant behaviors...<sup>1</sup>

#### **Friends and school achievement**

It seems logical that having friends at school would enhance a child's academic progress. Schools can provide a network of rewarding experiences and represent natural communities of reinforcement. Friends can help each other with class assignments and homework; they can fill in what's missed during absences, and most importantly, friends make school more fun. Research confirms these impressions. Longitudinal studies show that children entering first grade have better school attitudes if they already have friends and are successful in keeping the old friends as well as in making new ones. <sup>3</sup> Similarly teens who have friends experience fewer psychological problems than friendless teens when school changes or transitions occur. <sup>4</sup>

#### **When friendships are not helpful - the downside of friendship**

The quality of friendship is important. The well known "peer pressure" effect which starts in early adolescence, although positive for many, can also have negative consequences. Children who align themselves with friends who engage in antisocial behavior are at risk for also engaging in this type of behavior. Antisocial friends are not good role models. Especially during adolescence, teenagers who have a history of difficult behavior and poor peer relationships can engage in delinquent behavior. In contrast, adolescents who have a history of positive peer relationships and are socially mature are more resilient and better able to deal with life changes and stress. <sup>5</sup> Learning to deal with peer pressure, competition and difference is a necessary part of development. Helping children deal with pressure from friends is more important than protecting them from it.

## ***Encouraging children's friendships***

### **What Schools Can Do**

For children who require individual help several different formats are presently in use:

- Children are taught social skills individually by an adult coach or counselor and then they practice the new strategies.
- Peer pairing therapy; two children with difficulties interact while they receive feedback from an adult coach. In some instances a shy child is matched with a more outgoing child.

For group interventions in the classroom:

- Conflict resolution programs teach children alternate ways of handling problems through peer counselors or adult-supervised techniques.
- Collaborative learning, cooperative assignments and games or "buddy systems" may foster alliances and encourage positive peer interactions.
- Reinforcement of appropriate social skills may enhance a socially reluctant child's social interaction.

### **What Parents Can Do**

- Let your child know that you feel friendships are important and worth the effort.
- Respect your child's social style; some children do best with a host of friends, and some do best with a few close friends. Some make friends quickly, and some warm up to friends slowly.
- Find practical ways you can help your child make room in his/her life for being with other children. This is especially important if your child is shy or reluctant about peer interactions. For example, be flexible about family schedules so that your child can find time to be with friends. Offer your home or offer to accompany children on outings. You might also make arrangements for your family to spend time with another family that has a similar-age child.

### **References**

1. Rose, AJ & Asher, SR. (2000) Children's friendships. In *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
2. Hartup, WW & Stevens, N (1999) Friendships and adaptation across the life span. *Current directions in psychological science*. 8, 3, 76-79.
3. Ladd, GW (1990) Having friends, keeping friends, making friends, and being liked by peers in the classroom: Predictors of children's early school adjustment? *Child Development*, 67,1081-1100.
4. Berndt,TJ & Keefe, K (1992) Friends' influence on adolescents' perceptions of themselves in school. In DH Schunk & JL Meece (Eds.) *Student Perceptions in the Classroom* (pp. 51-73). Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum
5. Dishion, TJ, Andrews, DW & Crosby, L (1995) Anti-social boys and their friends in early adolescence: Relationship characteristics, quality, and interactional process. *Child Development*, 66, 139-151.