



Health Tips for Parents

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How childhood friendships boost social, emotional development

Making and maintaining friendships are critical to a child's social and emotional development. Developing healthy friendships early on can help children maintain positive influences and friendships throughout their lives.

Forming friendships.

"A friendship is a mutual relationship formed with affection and commitment between people who consider themselves as equals," according to Fred Frankel, PhD, director of the UCLA Children's Friendship Program. "Friends teach each other social skills, provide moral support, mature together, and shield each other from bullying."

Make the connection.

In elementary school, children begin selectively choosing their friends. Parents can encourage this process by asking their child about his or her playmates at school, actively networking with other parents and arranging one-on-one play dates. "Chemistry between children and shared interests are good starting points for a

lasting friendship," Dr. Frankel explains. Once a child has singled out another child, they will gradually develop a reciprocal relationship. According to Dr. Frankel, parents should not worry about how many friends their child has. "Quality is more important than quantity," he explains. Having a few close friends will help a child feel less lonely as a young adult, Dr. Frankel advises, whereas relying on only one best friend may leave a child isolated and dependent. Parents should also help their child practice social cues by encouraging their child to approach another child to explore mutual interests.

If a child starts mimicking an acquaintance's offensive behavior, parents should explain their concerns to their child and steer them away from that person before the friendship is formed.

Be involved

If you are having trouble gauging your child's ability to connect with peers, start by reaching out to his or her teacher to find out more about your child's day-to-day interactions.

Children who have problems making and keeping friends may benefit from attending friendship classes with a parent to help them learn social skills and set personal goals for making friends.



The role of social media

"Social media is a great way to maintain and enhance friendships by allowing children to instantly update and keep in touch with each other," explains Dr. Frankel. "However, it does interfere with face-to-face interaction and can lead to cyber bullying." Parents should also set firm rules on social media networking to help protect their children from online predators.