

Making friends

Forming friendships are a crucial part of a child's development and you can help.

'It's critical that children engage in social interaction with their peers. It provides them with a relationship within which they can develop intimacy and trust', psychologist Professor Alison Garton says.

Levels of friendship vary depending on the age of a child. Friendship in younger kids (four to six years) can be very transient. Children at this age will choose their friends by fairly superficial criteria. It could be someone with whom they have fun playing, share a mutual interest or just enjoy playing with their toys. As a child reaches seven to nine years they develop trust.

'They can define their friendship as things they might like about the other person. There's a deeper relationship forming. By 10 and 11 years it's self-disclosure, empathy, shared values and attitudes. These are all extremely important because they are the foundations for Friendship in adolescence,' Professor Garton emphasises.

Friendships can develop differently between boys and girls too. We often label groups of girls as 'cliquey'. Professor Garton explains this is because girls tend to form more exclusive, one –on-one friendships, while boys will have a wider group of friends. Some kids are more socially confident than others, but there are times when everyone faces the hard prospect of making new friends. Changing schools or moving to a new area can make even the most outgoing child feel vulnerable and isolated. Like adults, children need time to develop their friendships.

Fortunately, awareness is high for children who aren't as comfortable developing relationships. The protective aspect of friendship against things such as bullying is well known and many schools have methods in place to help children who are socially isolated.

But friendship isn't always positive and sometimes a child can develop a relationship that's fraught with problems. For parents of younger children, steering a child in a different direction isn't too difficult as they still have reasonable control over social activities. However, when kids are attracted to a troublesome friend often there's a reason as to why that dynamic is being played out. Psychologist Meredith Fuller suggests that parents should find out what need is being expressed .

'Pay good attention to your child and know what they need and what's toxic for them. It's possible to then work out what's a good mix. If they've fallen in love with the "naughty girls" then try to have a relaxed approach and the friendship should phase out,' Meredith says.

'However, if the friendship becomes entrenched then, depending on age, it's appropriate to talk to the child and work out what they like in people and help them meet lots of different people.

'Above all, trust your instincts and if you need help there are some great resources available.

For help, call the Australian Psychological Society referral line 1800 333 497.

What you can do to help

1. Pay attention to you child's interests and try to surround them with kids who have similar likes. This makes it easier for kids to make friends.
2. Involve yourself with the school and meet other parents.
3. Enrol in a sporting club or extracurricular activity that will introduce you to people who share a similar interest.
4. Don't push your child too hard- let them develop friendships at their own pace.
5. Help them develop skills or interests that allow them to join in, such as skipping or kicking a ball.

New Idea