

# A friend in need?

Whether it's the noticeable lack of invites to parties or spotting your little one sat alone in the playground, friendship problems spark huge anxiety for parents. To a certain extent it's right to be concerned if your child has trouble making friends, as friendships are fundamentally important for your child's emotional well-being and self-confidence. However, bear in mind that all children have friendship blips from time to time and remember that your child's limited friendships are only really a problem if your child is unhappy. Some little people are perfectly content having just one friend or spending a lot of time on their own.

Try not to make too bigger deal about your child's social circle (or lack of it) as they may feel they are disappointing you - resulting in them being more anxious and exacerbate the problem.

Instead, try to conceal your concerns, convey a confidence that things will improve and focus on following the practical strategies we are outlining today in our workshop.

## Top Tips

### 1. Listen to your child's worries

- If your child tells you that other children "won't let" them play, or shares other worries about friendships, listen and accept their feelings. Let them know that you take these concerns seriously and are on their side.
- In school we use phrases like "Ooh so they wouldn't let you join in, I'm not surprised you're feeling hurt" so as not to play down the child's fears and instead validate their feelings:
- Whether your child is having difficulties with friendships because they are quiet and reserved or because they are overly boisterous and controlling, be careful of labelling

your child. *Labels such as 'bossy' or 'shy' can trap your child in exactly the kind of role you want them to avoid.*

- If it seems your child is being treated cruelly or being bullied by children then step in, or raise your concerns with teachers or adults who are caring for them.

## **2. Be a good role model**

- Children learn from watching others so your behaviour can inadvertently influence how your child interacts with other children. For example, if you feel anxious in social situations, you may find your child is also nervous. Equally being a controlling parent can result in bossiness.

- The plus side of this is that you can act as a very valuable role model for your child. So things like showing an interest in new people you meet; being polite and friendly, listening and asking questions. With friends, your partner and relatives demonstrate basic social rules like sharing belongings, being considerate and thoughtful and compromising over decisions. Combine this with direct guidance as in our Parenting Workshop, through commentating and role play.

## **3. Practice makes perfect! Use role play.**

- Use role play as a fun way to help your child to learn and relate better to social situations. Role play helps children to rehearse how to deal with potential anxious situations and equips them with skills to help them feel more confident with friends.
- Begin by teaching your child how to approach a group, enter a conversation or begin an interaction. When your child is playing, approach him, pause and watch him play for a while, and then say something like: "Wow that looks fun. Do you mind if I play?"
- Show responses to refusal and acceptance i.e. "Great, thanks, which pieces can I use?" or "OK, maybe another time" demonstrating some resilience.

- With time you can practice other skills such as how to share things, how to compromise etc.
- You could also try role play with dolls, cuddly toys or puppets. Act out situations such as approaching friends in the playground or inviting friends to start a game. Show your child how to respond by first playing the role of the child trying to make an approach.

#### **4. Set up (monitored) play dates at home**

- If your child is repeatedly getting himself into trouble with friends, it's easy to find yourself avoiding contact with other children through fear of negative reactions from other parents. This sets up an unfortunate vicious cycle whereby your child has little opportunity to practice social skills and becomes increasingly isolated.
- Step out of this cycle by gradually increasing opportunities for positive play experiences by inviting friends over. Initially ask friends who are most likely to be positive role models i.e. children who are outgoing and have good social skills.

**Do not** leave this play time unstructured. Set up the visit so it has a clear purpose and structure. Plan with your child in advance a cooperative activity that he and the other child would like to do together e.g. baking, working on a craft activity, building a den or playing football.

- When your child and his friend are playing nicely, praise co-operative behaviour and comment on how they are becoming good friends "You two are working really well together! You make a perfect team"
- Keep the visits relatively brief to increase chances of success. Monitor your child and his friend closely and watch for signs of problems. If either is getting a little frustrated, take a break with a snack or change of activity.

- If you can see a disagreement brewing, take the role of 'coach' from the side-lines - define the problem and ask for solutions: "Okay, we have a problem, there's only one lightsaber and you both want to play with it. Do you have any ideas for how we can solve this?" Praise all attempts at problem solving.

## **5. Praise and reward social skills**

- Whenever your child is interacting nicely with other children, praise the kind of social skills you want to see more of e.g. sharing, taking turns, waiting, helping someone. Be specific: "I noticed you waited quietly for your turn, even though you were itching to have a go; that was really patient of you!"

- You may want to provide additional reinforcement for positive behaviour by using a star chart. Decide on a social behaviour to work on e.g. sharing, compromising, waiting. Focus on only one type of behaviour at a time.

- Clearly define the behaviour you are looking for, framing the behaviour in positive words: 'Bobby waits patiently for his turn' (not: 'Bobby does not grab things'). Agree on a small treat for when an (achievable) amount of stars have been gained. Watch out for examples of the behaviour, label it, praise it and put a star on the chart.

If you've tried all these strategies but your child continues to have repeated conflicts with friends, is chronically unhappy about their lack of friends or shows absolutely no interest in relating to other people, it would be advisable to seek support.

School can support in various ways: class teacher and teaching assistants both of whom will already have a relationship with your child.

Also the Pastoral Team that is myself, Lisa Cameron and Donna Wealleans.