

Making Friends - How Parents Can Help Their Kids With Friendship

By Patricia J. Robinson



Some kids have no problem. They start school and instantly have a gang - a best friend, birthday party invitations, play dates, sleep-overs. For other children, the social aspects of school can be difficult. Sometimes this is because the child has a diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder, Autism, or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and sometimes the child is just shy. As a therapist with years of experience working in schools, I've seen how tough the school day can be if a child has not figured out how to make and keep friends. I know there are simple steps that you as a parent can take to help make friendship easier for your child.

1. Talk about it

The first step is to talk to your child and make sure there really is a problem. Some kids are more introverted than others and they need a lot of alone time. Not every child wants to be the class president or most popular student. But every kid needs to learn how to get along with peers, work in a group and have satisfying social interactions. Try to discuss friendship with your child and set a realistic goal, such as a couple of friends, an occasional play date or someone to eat lunch with.

2. Get to know the other parents

Other parents are your best resource. A friendly parent can help pave the way for your own child, introducing him to the gang, inviting her for play dates. Also, parents may not be comfortable extending or accepting invitations to kids when they don't know the parents. Usually, parents of small children will be waiting together at school as it gets out. For even the most introverted parent, this can be a low key, easy place to meet people and a great opportunity to allow a little after school free play. Try to show up a bit early, smile and be sociable, and let your child have some free time with classmates. For older kids, see if you can volunteer at the school and meet the other parents there.

3. Try to join groups

Find a group that your child can be a part of, whether it's scouts, drama, an after school class, or a sports team. This new setting may allow your child's special skills to shine in a way they don't in the classroom. It's also a new opportunity for you to meet other parents. A bonus is that often the entire team is invited to a pizza party or a camping

trip. Of course, if the family is invited, you should make every attempt to attend also, even if your own introverted nature makes this tough.

4. Work on social skills

This brings us to the next point, social skills. When your child is playing after school or at the pizza party, you have the perfect opportunity to watch her interact. Is your child being bossy, clingy, whiny or difficult in other ways? Public places are not ideal for discussing the problems you see. Wait until you get home and then talk to your child, pulling in the friendship goals you've already set. If you see major problems with social skills, you may want to address this further in a social skills group.

5. Pay attention to appearance

Your child may care nothing about his appearance, and maybe you admire his independent spirit. Unfortunately the other kids may not be as open-minded. If friendships are being impacted, some degree of conformity may be a compromise you're willing to make. Take a look at the other kids at school. Does your child stand out from the rest of the class? You don't have to bow to fashion and buy the most stylish and expensive clothes, but maybe a simple move away from the too-short-pants and bright over-sized sweatshirt will help your child be one of the gang. Pay attention to hygiene and personal habits too. Behavior that's OK in kindergarten can be a social death knell in middle school.

6. Beware of being too different

Your child may be brilliant, unique and know everything about comets, and you can see how delightful he is, but the truth is, the other kids may just think he's weird. Don't think your child has to give up his special interests and talents. Aim instead to supplement these areas with something more universally accepted. Sit down as a family and watch the popular TV shows or go to a blockbuster movie. School is similar to your office, where everyone is discussing the Super Bowl or the presidential primary. At school, your child will have an easier time if she has been to the school carnival or seen the latest episode of Hannah Montana.

7. Take the plunge - Invite someone over

For more reserved parents, the idea of a child's play-dates can be a bit daunting. But, it's an important step, because it helps move the friendship outside of the realm of just "school friends." If your child has not had play-dates before, relax. You don't need to structure activities or entertain the children. Discuss in advance what activities your child might enjoy doing with a friend and then try to step out of the picture. As a backup, set up a few simple projects in case things are not running smoothly, such as an easy craft project or a movie to watch on TV. You might want to set up a private signal to use with your child if you need to correct your child's behavior.

8. One special friend

Sometimes, all it takes is one special friend. If your child can make just one friend, that eases the way throughout the school day. He'll have a partner for projects and someone to eat lunch with. Bullies will usually choose a solo target rather than a pair. For many kids, one friend is enough.

9. Encourage more than one friend

That said, one friend can be a problem. Depending on the situation, your child may be demanding too much from his solitary friend. Watch for signals that the best friend is feeling overwhelmed. This may take the form of complaints from your child that the best friend invited someone else for a sleep-over, or would not eat lunch together as usual. This should not mean the end of the friendship. It just signals to your child that he should move out a bit and socialize with a few other kids.

10. If all else fails

If these simple steps are not helping, don't despair! There are many other options. The teacher may be able to step in and assist your child. Many teachers will deliberately set up table and work groups to help shyer kids socialize. Find a social skills group by talking to the principal, or searching online. Therapists and other mental health professionals can work on the basics with you and your child.

Finally, progress takes time. Your child does not have to get there all at once and things may get easier as your child matures. The group dynamics of every class will be different. Middle school may provide more kids to choose from, so your child can find a group where he fits. Just keep making an effort and trying new things.

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