Making and Keeping Friends

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What do you think is the greatest predictor of happiness for your children? Could it be having a stable home, loving parents, enough food to eat, fun activities, experiencing success in school or sports? Certainly these things and many more affect your children's happiness.

But what is the best predictor of happiness? In his book, Brain Rules for Babies, Dr. John Medina reports "The greatest predictor of happiness is having friends."

Friends really are that important. While you can't control how your children and their friends interact, you can help your child develop key friendship skills.

Teaching Your Child Friendship Skills

One of the most heartbreaking things is to see your child struggling to make and keep friends. Your child might be shy and easily ignored by other kids, overly sensitive, intimidating other children, or be the vulnerable child who is continually being picked on. What can you do to help your child develop the skills needed to make good friends?

Many of the rules of friendship are unwritten and some kids easily catch on to those rules while others struggle. In their book The Unwritten Rules of Friendship: Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Make Friends, Elman and Kennedy-Moore define the characteristics of 10 types of children who often have problems with friendships. They describe the typical behaviors that these kids exhibit that turn their peers off. They then list the unwritten friendship rules that this type of child is missing and how you can help your child develop those skills.

Some of the unwritten rules include things like:

- There is no such thing as a perfect friend.
- If you hit someone, odds are they'll hit you back harder.
- Dwelling on bad feelings makes them worse.
- When someone says "Stop", stop.
- Staying out of harm’s way is wise.
- You don't have to stay around people who are unkind to you.

The book provides excellent ideas for guiding your child to learning these rules. If your child is struggling with friends, this book may hold the key to helping your child figure out how to successfully navigate friendships.

Helping Your Child Practice Friendship Skills

After attending one of my presentations at his son's elementary school, a dad wrote me about his 10-year-old son's struggle to make friends. "While the kids play together, he has not made any fast friends yet. We thought that this would change when we moved to this new school but I have not seen any progress. Rather, his experience in school is not great and he is constantly targeted by the popular kids and often shunned by them when he makes an attempt to mingle."

His son was increasingly satisfied just to stay home playing his XBOX instead of going out with friends. This dad decided to try a number of ideas to help his son build his friendships:
• Planned an outing to a swimming pool and allowed his son choose someone to invite along.
• Invited a friend over to their house for a couple hours to help build a fort.
• Started attending a YMCA family night where his son met new friends.
• Encouraged his son to join the school band where he also made friends who shared his interest in music.

When your children are young, you will be involved in speaking to the other parents to arrange activities. As your children get older, it’s important that they reach out initially to their friends about getting together. You can then follow-up by talking with the parents to finalize the details.

Navigating Social Groups and Friendships

In their book, Best Friends, Worst Enemies, the authors describe the importance of social groups for kids.

"Groups are the highways of childhood. Our kids are swept along, going at the same speed as the majority of the traffic. If the other children in your child's school are going fifty-five miles per hour, then your child can move among them at a safe speed. If the other students are traveling at seventy-five miles an hour, it will be difficult - and socially dangerous - for your child to go fifty-five. So he or she will speed up to stay alongside his peers and may not dare to pull over to the side of the road for a break, as it feels too dangerous when the traffic is moving that fast."

They go on to describe how interacting with friends compares to being part of the group. "Friendship, by contrast, resembles the side streets and back roads of childhood. Friends can go at their own pace; they can stop when they want to; they can get away from the speeding traffic. A girl who likes makeup and boys when she's at school can stop and play with dolls with an old friend who reminds her of that recently abandoned pleasure. In the shelter of friendship, children can move at their own developmental pace."

When your children are in the company of their good friends, they are on that welcoming, calm side street. It will take time for your children to discover their real friends and even then these relationships will undoubtedly run into a few twists, turns and potholes along the way.

However, developing strong friendships is worth the effort. Having good friends where your children can be their authentic selves is a key ingredient to their happiness.


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