



Making friends

All parents hope their children will have the necessary skills to make and keep friends throughout their school years. We feel our children's pain when we notice they seem lonely and excluded.

It is natural to want to fix this situation immediately and put an end to the misery and isolation the child must be feeling. There are some practical things we can do to help our children make and keep friends.

One important place to start is to check your own assumptions and reactions to your child's plight. It is more helpful to express confidence in your child's ability to make friends, than it is to anxiously express how awful it must be not to be included. However, there are times when it is right to act and get involved when your child is unhappy or overwhelmed by the situation. It helps to have an idea of some of the things you can do.

What teachers can do

Talk to your child's teacher. She can often see the bigger picture and tell you whether your child is spending too much time alone. It also helps for a teacher to be made aware that your child is finding friendships challenging so that she can observe what is going on. Sometimes a teacher will strategically 'buddy' your child up with someone else in the class to include them in activities during interval time.

A pro-active teacher can also be helpful in creating a culture of kindness and inclusion in the classroom. She can insist that children in her class speak kindly to one another and can firmly expect that her children will

not use isolating words such as, "You are not my friend", "If you don't do this you can't play with us" or "You can't come to my party anymore." All it takes is clear direction. "In our classroom we are kind and thoughtful to each other."

What you can do

Arrange some one-on-one play dates with your child and another child in the same class. Your child gets to enjoy time with another child in the safety of your home which can build confidence in connecting with that child at school.

Some children need to be coached on ways to enter a group. They may be timid or uncertain on how to behave. It can be helpful to role play how to confidently join a group and even help script the kinds of words and phrases they could use.

"Nobody wants to play with me."

Your child may need reassurance that it is appropriate for them to assume they can sit next to someone or join in a game. Some children are so hesitant and unsure of whether they will be accepted and liked, that they exude an air of anxiety. If your child is like this encourage them to join a game and expect it to be fine.

Remember – your child may have reported to you that they didn't play with anyone at morning tea time but you should not assume that their whole day was a disaster. It is important to get a bigger picture of the day by asking pertinent questions. "What was the best part of the day? What story did you enjoy today? Who did you sit next to at lunch time? What do you hope you will do tomorrow? What was something you didn't like about today?"

Children may focus on the challenging part of the day when, in reality, they enjoyed a good portion of it. We can help our children evaluate their day in a balanced way by getting an overview of the day from them. Of course, your children's view of themselves, their ability to handle adversity and the development of a robust self-esteem all affect their relationships.

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Overcoming shyness

- Making friends can be especially difficult for shy children, but they can learn skills that enable them to take more risks in initiating conversation and share more about what they are thinking.
- Set up a chart that encourages your child to focus on joining in with a particular activity, or group of people, at school. Reward with ticks and celebrate the success with a special outing or treat.
- Let your children see your own development. Instead of saying, "This is how I am," let them see you make steps towards growing in an area that is not your natural strength. Celebrate your achievements, too!

hot tips

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