

# **Ages & Stages: How Children Build Friendships**

Your support and sensitive approach to children's relationships can foster budding friendships in the classroom.  
By Carla Poole, Susan A. Miller, EdD, and Ellen Booth Church | October , 2003

## **WE'RE PLAYING! WE'RE FRIENDS!**

Four-year-old Owen and 5-year-old Chris have been best friends since they started preschool together last year. Now that Chris has moved on to kindergarten, Owen feels a strong sense of sadness. He asks his Mom if she thinks he will ever see Chris again.

## **Forming Attachments**

As part of their social development process, 4-year-olds are beginning to form deeper attachments to special buddies, especially those of the same sex. This makes losing friends particularly stressful.

Emotionally, fours are starting to look at things from another's perspective. However, when a preschooler is not able to maintain playing with a special friend because of something she cannot control, her behavior frequently becomes rather egocentric. For example, when Julia's Mom arrives early to take her home, this upsets Laura. She carries on and demands to know, "Why does she have to go home and leave me?" She is apt to feel that a good friendship involves the other person doing what she wants her to do.

## **Fleeting Friendships**

For 3-year-olds, who still have some difficulty in seeing things from another child's point of view, friendships are more fleeting. Threes are still practicing their necessary social strategies and have more limited communication skills. These young preschoolers usually base their friendships on one of the following: How physically close is the other child? Is she playing with something of interest? Does she have appealing physical features?

Three-year-old Lyla's friend, at this moment, is Olivia, who is playing alongside her with a fascinating marble game. However, by the afternoon, Tracy could be Lyla's new friend. This may be only because Tracy is sitting next to Lyla on the floor reading a bright new picture book. If Lyla grabs the book to see the pictures, the friendship could immediately end. Tracy may not understand that Lyla might have a need to share or move the book closer to see. Competition over desirable materials can quickly end a friendship. Threes may restart their friendship or they might just as easily move on to other children or other activities of interest.

## **Moving Toward Cooperation**

With longer-lasting friendships than the threes, the 4-year-olds become more cooperative in their relationships. They have a desire to interact with others and participate in collaborative play activities. Cooperation is certainly one way to help maintain a friendship. How well they relate to other children is due to their emerging social competence. When preschoolers can acknowledge others' ideas through shared planning, and use them in play, these positive interactions help sustain friendships.

Problems arise when one person takes a leadership role and expects another child to follow along. When that doesn't happen, the friendship may fall apart. For instance, Brendan

decides, "I am the captain." Not pleased with this decision, Julio tells him, "I'm flying to a better galaxy." After such a conflict, the 4-year-olds need to determine whether they want their independence or are willing to cooperate with one another to maintain the friendship.

### **What You Can Do**

- Because it can be difficult for children to understand how their behavior affects friendships, coach them early on. For example, if Beth hits Savanna to get her attention, explain that she could instead say, "Savanna, I want to play with the doll, too."
- Children need to have a variety of experiences interacting with their peers to practice their social skills. Provide collaborative interest centers, offer blocks for building together, and promote dancing with music. Keep play simple by encouraging pairs to work together.
- Read books such as *Frog and Toad are Friends* by Arnold Lobel (HarperCollins, 1979) which recounts the adventures of two best friends. Talk about the problems different story characters have and what they do about them.

### **About the Authors**

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**See the Scholastic website for information on friendships for ages 0-2 & 5-6.**

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