

Helping Your Toddler Learn Friendship Skills

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Why: It's easy to think that making friends is something kids *just do*, not something they need to *learn* how to do well. But, like most things, social skills are easier to figure out and master if someone more experienced and wiser helps give you tips along the way.

Developmental Capabilities: Toddlers may not yet be ready to make friends, but we can start teaching the skills now that will help them later. Toddlers tend to do *parallel play* – they may play side-by-side with the same toys, or they may totally tune out the other child for a long time to focus on their own play. They tend not to really play *with* another child for any length of time.

An older toddler may do parallel-but-aware play: they may smile the other child, they occasionally hand a toy to another child, they may observe another child for a while and even copy some of what the other child is doing. The downside to their beginning to notice the other child is that sometimes what they notice is “that kid has a toy that I want” and there may be a period of yanking toys out of other kids' hands or hitting to get a desired toy or biting when someone gets in their space too much.

Associative play, where they're really interacting with the other child and playing cooperatively, begins around age 3. (It's one of the key focuses of the preschool years.)

If your child is playing with an adult or an older child, you may see them be more interactive than they can be with their own peers, because the older play partner scaffolds and supports their interaction.

Friendship Skills: There are many skills for *making* and *maintaining* social connections. Your toddler is not yet ready to be “taught” these. But, you can role model them all, and trust that your child will be observing and absorbing long before they make sense of it all or can replicate it all. Model skills such as:

- Body Language: Eye contact, open posture, facial expressions.
- Consent: Respecting other people's personal space – asking before you get in their space. And tuning into their body language that says you're crowding them.
- Conversation Skills: Saying hi and bye, asking questions, listening, taking turns without interrupting. Speaking clearly, not too quiet or too loud.
- Manners: Saying please, thank you, excuse me. Apologizing. Asking, not demanding.
- Being Kind: Encouraging, complimenting, helping, sharing. Doing nice things for others.
- Emotional IQ: Identifying emotions. Expressing emotions. Understanding impact of actions.
- Self-control: Taking turns. Being able to wait. Staying calm.

Methods for Teaching Skills: We can teach these skills in many different ways.

- Role model: Act how you would like your child to act.
- Watch for it: Watch people out in public – observe and comment when you see other people using a skill. Watch for examples in books you read together and shows you watch – comment on them. When another child uses the skill well, praise them so your child hears that praise.
- Pretend play: Whether playing house, or dress-up, or playing with puppets or dolls, incorporate examples of good social skills.
- Connect the Play: Be a bridge between two toddlers, finding a way they can participate in the same activity and start to connect. Things like rolling a ball back and forth to a friend, or doing ring-around-the-rosie together, working together on a block tower, or putting toys in a basket.
- Model Fun Interactions: Play games like peek-a-boo and making funny faces, where one person does something and the other one laughs. Then the second does something and the first responds. This is teaching the back and forth of play.

Some Specific Skills to Teach

- Learning Names: Help your child learn the names of people they know. Use names when you talk about people, greet people by name, use names instead of just pronouns – instead of “can you hand that to her” say “can you hand that to Mary.”
- Meeting: Teach how to make eye contact, smile warmly, and say hi.
- Use Kindness to Connect: Share a toy, or let someone play next to you.

Create Opportunities:

Playdates. Set up playdates with other children. The one-on-one practice is the best skill builder, and also the best way for you to build closer friendships with other parents. Tips for success:

- Timing: Pick a time of day when both kids tend to be in good moods, not close to naptime. Keep the playdate short – maybe 30 minutes to an hour.
- Have some plans: Think about possible activities that the friend would particularly enjoy.
- Minimize conflict triggers: If there are toys your child has a hard time sharing, put them away for the playdate. Sometimes it’s easier to meet on neutral territory, where neither feels like they have to defend their possessions. If there’s a particularly appealing toy, try to have a couple of them or similar toys, so we don’t get into battles over the one prized item.
- Play along: The parents should sit on the floor and play with the children, helping them to interact, and modelling nice interactions like giving a toy to another person.
- Big motor play: sometimes it’s easier for toddlers to get along when they’re playing together on a slide or a climber rather than playing with toys they have to share.
- Snacks: If things aren’t going smoothly, offering a tasty snack is often a good distraction.

Free Play Opportunities: Take your child to the park, or other free play locations, often. Taking classes like music class or soccer practice are lots of fun, but children can’t really practice their social skills in those structured settings. Free play with other kids nearby is the best way to build those skills.

When Challenges Inevitably Arise

Toddlers are not always nice to each other. It doesn’t mean they’re bad people or intentionally being mean. It just means that they have not yet learned how to share, how to ask nicely for something, and how to take turns. We will try our best to teach them.

But, as they’re learning, we may see:

- Aggressive behavior (like hitting or biting). Calmly say “No, it’s not OK to hit.” Pick one of the children up and move them away from the other one, then distract both with play.
- Fights over toys. Try offering a different toy to the child who is less invested in the contested item. Engage them in playing with the new toy. Sometimes if neither child is willing to let go of a particular item, we may need to take that item out of play and put it away out of sight. They will cry for a while about this, but then will move on if we engage them in something new.
- Meltdowns. Sometimes interacting with other kids is just overwhelming and your child will go into a meltdown. Try moving them away to a quiet place for a while for a snuggle, a snack, or a book, then re-enter play. If it’s too much, then cut the playdate short and try again another day.

Extra Help:

There are some kids who have an especially hard time with friendship skills. A very introverted, shy, or timid child, or an anxious child, may need a lot of extra encouragement and hand-holding to get up the courage to connect. A high intensity child might struggle with impulsivity, and may need extra help focusing on social play and learning to take turns and share toys. Some children have a particularly hard time regulating their emotions and need more support with transitions. It doesn’t mean they can’t learn all these skills – it just means your support with this learning is even more important!