

## Making Friends

Establishing relationships with other children is one of the major developmental tasks of early childhood. It matters to:

- children themselves, as they evaluate their self-worth, competence, and view of the world as pleasant or hostile.
- their future, as the patterns of early peer interaction predict whether children will walk pathways to competence or deviance in middle childhood and adolescence.
- other children because peer experiences depend on the nature of other children with whom they interact.

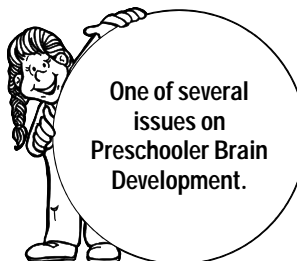
The attachment relationship you have with your child forms the basis for your child's social competence. Secure attachment predicts more harmonious, supportive friendships with other preschoolers. Insecure attachments may result in angry and aggressive behaviors or whiny and easily frustrated children.



The attachment relationship with your child forms the model for your child's future relationships with others. Your relationship might be based on a mutual consideration for each other's needs, or it might be based on each person trying to dominate or get what they can out of the other person. Either way, this is the model of relationships that your child will apply to friendships.

### What is attachment?

Attachment is the emotional bond between child and caregiver (parent) that grows over time. It is:

- an instinctive process
- about basic patterns of the emotional relationship between infant and caregiver
- builds self-regulation in the child



As attachment develops, a mental model of the world is formed.	
 With a positive attachment model, a child learns:	 With a negative attachment model, a child learns:
About Self: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am worthwhile/wanted.</li> <li>• I am safe.</li> <li>• I am capable.</li> </ul>	About Self: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am worthless.</li> <li>• I am unsafe.</li> <li>• I am impotent.</li> </ul>
About Caretakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are available.</li> <li>• They are responsive.</li> <li>• They meet my needs.</li> </ul>	About Caretakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are unresponsive.</li> <li>• They are unreliable.</li> <li>• They are frightening or hurtful.</li> </ul>

It's the enduring emotional bond that develops over time, primarily during the first 18 months of life and is the foundation for all future relationships.

A securely attached child enjoys close relationships with people, demonstrates a growing ability to empathize with others, expresses emotions appropriately, and tends to have good relationships with peers. As a parent or caregiver, you can foster secure attachment by showing affection and love to your child, listening to your child's feelings and thoughts, and setting appropriate non-harsh limits.

Factors that may prevent a normal parent-child bond include fetal alcohol syndrome and developmental disorders. Abuse, neglect, depressed parent, inconsistent or rejecting parent may also negatively affect attachment. Secure attachment is more likely when parents have supportive relationships with other adults.

Beyond attachment security you can do many other things to support your child's relations with other children.

**Arrange for your child to play with other children.** Preschool children who have experience with peers are more involved, positive, and cooperative with peers. Also, they engage in more complex forms of play. This is especially true when children remain with the same group of peers over time. An even bigger issue is the quality of the program: high quality programs teach children social skills, while low quality programs contribute to children's problem behaviors.

**Show your child your love.** When you are warm and caring towards your child, that motivates your child to live up to your expectations. Your child is more likely to identify with your values such as being considerate and fair when playing with others.

**Offer explanations for the demands you place on your child.** When your child understands the reasons for rules and regulations, your child is better able to monitor behavior in your absence. Harsher forms of punishment can be effective in the short run, but often generate resentment and hostility that carry over to the peer group, reducing the child's effectiveness in these settings.

**Intervene when necessary, but let preschoolers work out their problems when possible.** Children benefit from working things out on their own. A parent's involvement may actually interfere with children's development of social skills. When conflict happens, play usually dissolves either because children stop trying to be together or an adult intervenes. However, when conflict happens among friends, children are more likely to stick it out, negotiate, compromise, and continue to play. Friendship is seen to support competent social behavior.

An example from the Early Childhood Excellence Initiative web page <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/ece/promprac/index.html> shows a child care provider helping a child negotiate and problem solve. Sometimes a parent or child care provider can give children an idea on how to solve a disagreement.

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Two children are playing in the dramatic play area. The teacher has lined up some chairs in a row and the children are pretending to ride on a bus. They each have their purse and babies along for the ride. The child in the front chair places her bag around her shoulder, and accidentally bumps her friend who is sitting behind her. He screams, "You hit me!" The teacher notices the argument, and comes over. The first child says to the teacher, "He is yelling at me because I hit him, but I did not mean to." The teacher responds, "Why don't you tell him that." She turns to her friend, "I did not really mean to hit you, I'm sorry." He says, "Okay, lets keep driving to the store." Both children begin to pretend together again.



Young children are still developing the ability to get along with others. They are still learning how to negotiate and solve problems with one another. The teacher helps this child develop social competence by telling her to express her feelings directly to her friend, giving the children a chance to work it out for themselves.

**Reflect a positive attitude toward social setbacks.** Exclusion by peers is a fact of preschoolers' lives. Children have different reactions to these rejections. Parents can encourage a child to take an optimistic view of others, have a resilient attitude toward social setbacks, and help a child problem-solve peer relationship issues.

**Avoid blaming a child when peer relations turn negative.** Parents of socially adroit children attribute their children's social gaffes to transitory, fixable factors (she's tired, we let them play too long, the group is too large). Try to structure play activities where your child can be successful.

**Sources:**

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