

## Quick guide – building positive friendships

Friendships can play a vital role in children’s emotional wellbeing, confidence, and social development. However, learning to navigate the social complexities around initiating and maintaining connections can be challenging, and sometimes children need support, coaching and guidance.

### **Why Positive Friendships Matter**

Positive friendships help children:

- Feel a sense of belonging and acceptance
- Develop empathy, communication, and problem-solving skills
- Build self-esteem and resilience
- Learn how to manage conflict in healthy ways
- Develop their emotional intelligence



### **Reflection questions:**

Question for us as parents	Questions for our children
What qualities do you value in your child’s friends?	What do you look for in a friend?
What kind of friend do you think <i>your child</i> is to others?	How do <i>you</i> demonstrate that you are a good friend to others?
What skills would you like your child to develop further? Why?	What skills do you think you need to work on?

### **Who do we choose to share our time and energy with?**

Ultimately, we *do* have the power to choose people who:

- are kind
- inspire us
- support and encourage us
- listen to us
- accept and value our opinions
- respect us

Helping a child understand the meaning of the word, ‘**respect**’ is important. What does that word mean to you? What does that word mean to your child?

### **How we can help support healthy friendship development?**

Healthy, positive friendships can bring so much to our lives – we can gently encourage our children to initiate and maintain positive relationships.

#### **Top tips:**

- **What is a healthy friendship?** - sometimes the first place to start is by asking our children what they think a, ‘healthy’ friendship looks like? Allowing them time to reflect and celebrate what is going well can be a great starter to a conversation
- **Model** - children learn a lot from watching us, how we navigate interactions and how we show respect and kindness to others
- **Structured playdates** - time-limited, structured playdates can be a wonderful way to carefully observe our children’s interactions and identify which skills may need to be developed.
- **Help them choose friendships that make them feel good** - “How did you feel when you played with.....?”, “Who made you feel good about yourself today?”, “Who may you smile?”
- **Set boundaries that are firm and respectful** - it is important of children to set personal boundaries and understand that it is absolutely ok to do so.

- **Create opportunities for connections-** friendships aren't restricted to the classroom - we have friends for different purposes and in different places.
- **Help prepare them and manage their expectations** – we don't all have one single best friend, and some children are perfectly content in their own company.
- **Support emotional regulation** – friendships can be wonderful, but that can also be frustrating and exhausting! Helping our children to express their emotions in healthy ways and identify coping mechanisms can be useful.

### How can we help our children recognise, 'unhealthy' friendships?

As horrible as it is to discuss, there is real value in openly identifying, 'friendship red flags' with our children. By doing this, we are able to help our children independently recognise when they are being disrespected.

#### Top tips:

- **Asking open questions:**
  - ❖ How do you feel when you're with that person? Or after you've spent time with them?
  - ❖ Does that friend ever put you and your needs first?
  - ❖ Do you feel that person respects you? What does respect mean?
- **Discussing 'Friendship red flags'** e.g. exclusion, pressure, or unkind behaviour
- **Friendships can end & people can change....and that's ok.**
- **Role play scenarios** - *"What would you do if someone said you couldn't play with them?"*, *"How might you respond if someone said something unkind?"* Allowing children to rehearse and practise can help prepare them.
- **Reflect and consider the friendship and what they are gaining from it.**
- **It's ok to back away** – we can remind our children that it's not being selfish or unkind to back away from a friendship that no longer serves them.
- **Highlight examples** – we can do this through TV shows/book they are engaged with and use this as a conversation starter tool.

### When children struggle with friendships

It is heart breaking when a child is struggling with a friendship. The temptation to try and 'fix' our child's problem may feel overwhelming, however our children will ultimately need to **learn** how to navigate tricky interactions, especially as they get older and more independent. We can help our children develop problem solving skills by sometimes simply giving them the time and space to process, and then voice their issue. Thanking them for sharing their problem can be a lovely way to start the conversation. As tempting as it is, just allowing their voice to be heard may be exactly what they need in that moment, *"Do you want to hear my advice or do you just need me to listen?"* Reminding children what is in and out of their control can be a useful reminder to help them take ownership of the situation and come up with a plan moving forward. These conversations can also help build empathy and understanding, *"What does this situation tell you about the other child?"*

#### Other suggestions:

##### Comic strip conversations:

Carol Gray released her book, 'Comic Strip Conversations' and these strategies are used to teach social understanding. This strategy can be particularly helpful for children who are neurodivergent.



We can 'unpick' scenarios related to friendships. ***"How might the other child have felt then? Why might they have said that?"***

### **'I feel....' statements:**

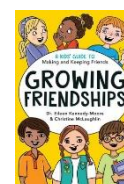
These can be particularly useful after a conflict as they are presented in a non-judgemental way, can be calmly presented and promotes empathy

***'I feel.....when you.....because.....I would like.....'***

### **Book recommendations:**

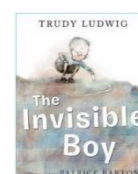
#### **'Growing Friendships' by Eileen Kennedy-Moore & Christine McLaughlin**

*A practical, kid-friendly guide that teaches social skills like reaching out, handling conflict, and keeping friends — useful for both children and shared reading with adults.*



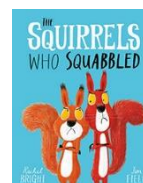
#### **'The Invisible Boy' by Trudy Ludwig**

*This beautiful book promotes inclusivity and empathy, encouraging children to 'leave no-one behind' in friendship groups and to consider other people's feelings.*



#### **'The squirrels who squabbled' by Rachel Bright**

*This is a comical tale of two squirrels with very different personalities and how they learn to get along.*



#### **'How to be a lion' by Ed Vere**

*A brilliant and entertaining story with a strong and clear message: Don't be afraid to be yourself; embrace the differences in yourself and others.*



### **'Kind' by Alison Green**

*This is not a story book, but rather a child-friendly description of the many forms of kindness, suggesting numerous simple and attainable ways that young children can be kind to others. It boils down to simple messages – consider the feelings of others, be helpful and thoughtful whenever you can, and respect and enjoy each other's differences.*



### **'The Not-So-Friendly Friend: How to Set Boundaries for Healthy Friendships' by Christina Furnival**

*This can be a useful tool for parents who are struggling to support their child to draw boundaries*



### **'Milo's monster' by Tom Percival**

This book deals with friendship, jealousy and what happens when a new friend comes along. It looks at what happens when the friendship dynamic changes and how to deal with this in a child friendly way



### **'Will you be my friend?' by Molly Potter**

This is a very useful guide to help children understand how friendships work.

