



early education

DR CATHRINE NEILSEN-HEWETT, A LECTURER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, SAYS FRIENDSHIPS ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO HUMAN EXISTENCE AND EXPLAINS HOW THEY DEVELOP IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Once asked a group of six-year-olds what they thought a friend was. Many saw friends as being children who 'play with', 'someone you can count on' or 'someone who will swap their lunch with you if you bring a dud one to school'. They saw friends as being essential and a necessary part of their life.

Friendships are fundamental to human existence. It is our friends who we turn to in times of need or in times of joy. The delight, but also the betrayals, the jealousies and tangled intrigues all make friendships vital to the quality of kids' lives. Children's friendships provide opportunities for companionship and intimacy and for the acquisition and refinement of social behaviours. They serve as emotional resources, increase children's understanding of other people's feelings, are sources of fun and enjoyment, and provide key information about the self and others.

When do friendships between young children begin? As soon as your baby is able to move

WHEN CHILDREN ARE YOUNG IT IS IMPORTANT TO MONITOR THEIR INTERACTIONS – FROM AFAR!

around independently, they will start to show preferences for certain children by seeking them out and maintaining closeness. While infant and toddler friendships are usually restricted to family friends and relatives, studies conducted in day-care centres show children as young as 12 months of age make independent friendship choices and

that these friendships are surprisingly stable, with many lasting until the beginning of school.

Observational research on social interaction patterns suggests children discriminate among peer companions and form friendship preferences within their peer groups by the time they're 12 to 18 months old. Toddler friendships are typically based on physical attraction and mutual liking, although social skills, such as cooperation and sharing, become increasingly important as the children get older.

From about 18 months, many children spend lots of time watching and imitating their friend – children get great enjoyment from doing the same thing together like running around screaming or banging on a box. My 20-month-old son Ethan was so used to his "best friend" Charlotte imitating his actions that he'd pause and turn around to check that she was "doing the right thing" when stomping loudly through the house.

Both affectionate expressions and concern for companions are more common among children who like and are familiar with one another – toddlers as young as 24 months will hug and kiss a friend who is hurt.

Older toddlers who are friends can often play together in quite a grown-up or developmentally mature way, in the sense that they manage to share and cooperate in games, show an understanding of what their friend wants, and share in an imaginary world of pretend play.

While most friendships are a source of fun and enjoyment, there is also a darker side marred by conflicts, rejection and isolation. Although issues of bullying and teasing do not typically emerge

until the preschool years, it is never too early to bully-proof your child. While all children experience conflict at some time in their friendships, it is important that we support our children's friendships so most experiences are positive.

At times you may feel utterly helpless and bewildered about your child's social life – when old friendships are ended and new ones begin.

As a parent you can support your child's friendships by providing opportunities to be with other children, by arranging play-dates and enrolling your child in a playgroup or extracurricular activities as they get older.

When inviting children over often it's better to work with pairs, as odd numbers or larger groups can be overwhelming and easily lead to conflict. When children are young it is important to monitor their interactions (from afar! – overly intrusive parenting can have a negative impact on children's friendship relations) and intervene if you see significant conflicts arising.

Parents can actively promote essential friendship skills by modelling appropriate behaviours or discussing strategies, such as sharing and cooperation, that children can use to make and maintain friends.

It is often useful to talk to your child's carer to see how they are coping socially. If your child appears to be popular it is important to talk to them about being a good friend and how to look out for children who do not have friends.

If your child is unpopular find out if they have habits that annoy other children. If so, it may be necessary to work on changing these. But most importantly, listen to your child, watch how they interact, find out what is important to them – and be their friend! ●