

# You've Got to Have Friends

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Cesar is one of the more popular children in his preschool class. He often lands his classmates in creating unusual and fun imaginary games. He readily shares toys and materials, often proposing a trade that works for all. Cesar laughs a lot, he is enthusiastic, and he almost always says, “Yes” when a classmate asks him to play or has a different play idea. Cesar also says nice things to his classmates and acknowledges their accomplishments. When it is time to choose a friend for an activity Cesar is always in great demand.

Chloe is one of Cesar’s classmates. She spends most of her time in preschool staying close to her teacher, occasionally hovering around a gang of children playing together. Chloe doesn’t say much to her classmates and they in turn seldom speak to her. Chloe, in fact, has lots of skills. She knows what to do with toys and utensils; she knows the usual “scripts” that emerge in imaginary play. Chloe seldom gets chosen by another classmate to participate together. In her world of social isolation she occasionally appears sad to the outside observer.

The behavioral contrast between Cesar and Chloe is profound. Cesar has classmates who advocate for him, encourage him, and include him. Chloe, on the other hand, is like an invisible member of the class. No one asks, “Where’s Chloe;” no one says, “We need Chloe;” no one says, “Come

on Chloe!” The differing social worlds experienced by Chloe and Cesar not only predict very divergent developmental trajectories in preschool, but they set the occasion for life-long consequences. Based upon longitudinal and retrospective research it is clear that Cesar is on a developmental path toward self-confidence, continual friendships, school success, and healthy adult adjustment. Chloe is sadly on a developmental path toward deepening isolation, loneliness, and adult mental health problems. Indeed early friendships are the most powerful single predictor of long-term adjustment.

## What behaviors lead to friendship?

Several discrete behaviors that young children engage in during play with each other are directly related to having friends (Tremblay, Strain, Hendrickson & Shores, 1981). That is, children who do more of these behaviors are more likely to have friends. These specific behaviors including:

Organizing Play – with preschoolers these are usually, “Let’s” statements, such as, “Let’s play trucks.” Often these “Let’s” statements are followed by suggestions about roles (e.g., “You be the driver”) or specific activities (e.g., “Roll it to me”).

Sharing – sharing takes many forms among preschoolers. Children with friends request in the form of, “Can I have some paint” and they also oblige share requests from peers.

Assisting Others – assisting also takes many forms at the preschool level. Children can help each other onto or off of an apparatus, they can tell or show a friend how to do something, or

they can assist someone in distress.

Giving compliments – While these behaviors do not often occur among preschoolers they tend to have a powerful effect on the formation of friendships. Preschoolers compliment one another’s successes, buildings, and appearances.

In addition to engaging in these discrete behaviors, the formation of friendship is equally dependent upon two patterns of interaction. First, it is necessary for children to be reciprocal in their interactions. Reciprocity has two dimensions. Initially, children need to be responsive to the social bids of others. Also, over a period of time (say several months), it is important that there be a relatively equal number of occasions that each member of a friendship dyad starts an interaction. In addition to reciprocity, friendship patterns of interaction are also characterized by the length of interaction occurrences. That is, friendship pairs engage in more lengthy episodes.

## Setting the stage for friendship

Prior to beginning instruction in friendly behavior, teachers need to attend to five elements of the classroom. First, an inclusive classroom where children with disabilities are meaningfully included in natural proportions is critical to setting the stage (Guralnick, 1990). Second, the presence and pre-selection of cooperative use toys and materials increase the opportunities for social interaction. Cooperative use toys are those that naturally lend themselves to two or more children playing together. See Box 1 for a list. Third, it is necessary to examine all classroom routines and embed social interaction

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instruction and practice opportunities throughout the day. Box 2 provides an example of how one teacher decided to embed social opportunities in her classroom routines. Fourth, in order to ensure that social interaction instruction has the necessary importance; teachers need to include social interaction goals and objectives on a child's IEP/IFSP. While these goals are likely to be the most critical for the child's later development, they often do not appear on IEPs or IFSPs (McConnell, McEvoy, Odom, 1992). This could be due to the fact that many assessments do not include these skills as test items. Finally, and most importantly, teachers need to devote energy toward creating a classroom climate with an ethos of friendship. When one walks into a classroom where a teacher has done this successfully you see adults give time and attention to children when they engage in friendly behaviors, you hear adults talk nicely to one another, you hear children supporting one another's friendly behavior and overall you get a sense that friendship is the ultimate goal.

### Cooperative Use Toys

Balls  
Puppets  
Wagons  
Two telephones  
Teeter-totters  
Dress-up clothes  
Dramatic play materials  
Tire swings  
Rocking boats  
Board games

*Box 1. Cooperative Use Toys*

| Example of schedule with embedded friendship opportunities |  |
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| Arrival  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find a "buddy" to walk with from the bus to class.</li> <li>One child is assigned to be the "greeter" and greets children by name as they arrive.</li> </ul>  |
| Circle Time  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One child is selected to pass out the circle time props to each classmate. As the child progresses around the circle they call each child by their name and say "pick a ____." Each child then responds with, "Thanks (child's name)." After children have a chance to use the circle time prop they will trade with a friend.</li> <li>Children identify a "buddy" to play with at choice time. The pair must decide together where they will play first.</li> </ul>           |
| Free Choice  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children will play with their "buddy" (assigned or selected) for the first ten minutes of free choice time. If they stick with their buddy the whole time they get special reward (sticker, stamp on hand, etc.).</li> <li>Adults watch for friendly behaviors and provide reinforcement when appropriate.</li> <li>Set up the "buddy" table. Children must find a friend to play at the table with in order to gain access to the high preference toys there.</li> </ul>       |
| Small Group  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan cooperative art projects: "Buddy Art"</li> <li>Teach children to play board games (e.g., "Barnyard Bingo," "Candy Land," "Don't spill the beans").</li> <li>Put children in charge of different materials needed for the small group project (e.g., Tommy has the glue, Helen has the sequins, Haley has the paper, Finot has the scissors, etc.). The children must use their peers name to request materials.</li> <li>Adults reinforce children for sharing.</li> </ul> |
| Outside  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pre-select cooperative use toys for outside play (e.g., tire swings, wagons, double tricycles, balls, etc.).</li> <li>Adults organize peer play (e.g., Duck, Duck, Goose; Red Rover; Farmer in the Dell; tag, etc.).</li> <li>Adults watch for and reinforce friendly behavior at appropriate times.</li> </ul>   |
| Snack  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have each child in charge of different snack items (e.g., Joey has juice, Haley has crackers, Sam has orange slices, Ben has cups, Olivia has peanut butter, Cody has napkins). Children have to ask each other for the snack items from a peer.</li> <li>Adults reinforce children for sharing.</li> </ul>   |
| Story time   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select books with friendship themes.</li> </ul>   |
| Goodbye Circle   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compliment circle – children have a chance to give a friend a compliment while passing around the "compliment bear."</li> <li>One child can pass out backpacks from the cubbies as children are about to leave.</li> <li>One child can say goodbye to each classmate.</li> </ul>  |
| Transitions  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During choice time, instead of transitioning to a center – transition to a friend (use a friend picture schedule).</li> <li>Children can hold hands going from one activity to another.</li> <li>One child can give children a high-five as they come in from outside.</li> <li>During clean-up, adults watch for and reinforce children's helping behavior.</li> </ul>   |

*Box 2*

### Strategies for developing friendships

Setting the stage is a necessary element of supporting children's developing friendships. However, some children will require systematic teaching in order to develop the skills that lead to having friends. This teaching involves instruction that often includes modeling appropriate behavior and providing practice opportunities with feedback.

Modeling principles. Modeling can include adults or peers demonstrating the friendship skill, or video-based modeling with short vignettes of children engaging in friendly behavior (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997). Often it is effective to model both examples and non-examples followed by opportunities for correct responding.

There are three guiding principles of effective role-play modeling strategies. The first guiding principle of modeling is to use invisible support, that is, call on the child who you are confident will model the skill appropriately before calling on a child who will need more support.

Second, sometimes when children are modeling the friendship skill in front of their peers they can get carried away with being silly or inappropriate. It is important to give the child another chance and support so that they are successful in demonstrating the skill positively. This allows them to receive positive reinforcement from the teacher for doing the skill.

Third, because role plays typically involve only one or two children at a time, it is necessary to plan ways for the rest of the children to be actively engaged. This can include giving a thumbs up for friendly behavior and a thumbs down for unfriendly; patting themselves on the back if this is a behavior they do; clapping when the role play is over; saying "ready, set, action" before the role play begins; or having a popsicle stick sign with a happy face on one side and a sad face

on the other (children show the happy face when the behavior being modeled is friendly and the sad face when the behavior being modeled is unfriendly). It is also important to keep track of who has had a chance to role play and ensure that all of the children in the class get a turn during the week.

#### **Modeling with video and puppets.**

The use of video and puppets to help model friendship skills can be very effective with young children. Video based modeling is particularly effective for several reasons. First, videos can capture pristine examples of children using friendly behavior. These examples can be used to generate discussion about the friendly behavior, and the context in which it is used on the video. Also, these examples can be used as a standard with which to compare the children's practice attempts. Video vignettes can also display non-examples. These vignettes can be used to teach children to discriminate between friendly and unfriendly behavior and prompt children to develop and share alternative behaviors and solutions if initial ideas are not effective. Second, video clips can be frozen (paused) and children can be prompted to attend to the often fleeting salient features of the friendly behaviors and the context in which they occur. Children can also make predictions about "what will happen next" when the child featured in the video uses a friendly or unfriendly behavior. Third, the very format of video is particularly powerful in engaging and keeping children's attention.

Similar to video, puppets are very engaging to young children. Since the play of preschool children often involves fantasy, puppets, in essence, join children in this fantasy world while modeling positive friendship skills. Because adults are in control of the puppet, the puppet can always be a responsive play partner. The puppet can model friendly play, and when

appropriate and planned, can model non-examples. Puppets in the image of children are particularly effective because they provide a proximate model. That is, children are more likely to emulate the behavior of models that look like themselves. Additionally, some children will disclose more about their feelings and friendship problems to puppets than to adults, especially if adults are historically not seen as trustworthy by the child.

**Preparing peer partners.** When typical children are assisting their classmates with special needs to acquire friendships skills it is necessary for them to learn to suspend social rules in order not to feel rejected. In the usual course of events, interactions between typical children are usually quite reciprocal. If someone asks nicely to play they usually get a positive response. On the other hand, as children with special needs begin to acquire peer interaction skills they often reject the social overtures of their peers and they seldom initiate play. Using role-play and rehearsal strategies, there is a well-researched set of procedures for teaching typical peers to be persistent with their social behavior while their peers with special needs are becoming more fluent. Simply put, adults model peer rejection, provide verbal feedback ("That's what might happen when you ask kids to play") and then provide a behavioral alternative that they reinforce ("if that happens, try again" — "good, you tried again.").

**The buddy system.** Often it is helpful to utilize a "buddy system" when trying to increase the friendship skills of children. Right before a free-play period children are assigned to a buddy role, meaning that they begin freeplay in some planned play activity with a certain child. In utilizing a buddy system there are several rules to follow. First, it is important to always have two or more buddies for each child with special needs. This arrangement helps to keep the play

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interesting for the socially competent children and it helps to create the conditions for maximizing the number of diverse play ideas. Second, it is important to rotate buddies for several reasons. First, rotating buddies helps to ensure that children have the opportunity to engage in friendship skills with the widest variety of playmates. Second, rotating helps to avoid buddy-burnout, a condition in which children come to respond negatively to their helper role because they always play with the same individual. Third, one can optimize the buddy system by pairing the most popular and liked children with those that need the most help. This type of pairing can lead to other children simultaneously helping their peers because the “cool” kids are doing it. Finally, at the end of a play period children should receive specific praise for being buddies – praise that specifically enumerates the friendly ways they interacted with their assigned partner.

**Priming.** Teachers can increase the likelihood of children using friendship skills with specific priming strategies. For example, prior to a freeplay period teachers can ask children who they are going to play with, they can ask what specific toy or material they are going to share, and they can provide practice opportunities. A practice opportunity might include, “Hey Josh, lets pretend I am Cody and you are going to ask me to play trucks.” Josh would then practice asking, with or without adult prompting, and the adult would provide reinforcement or corrective feedback for Josh’s social initiation to play.

**Suggesting play ideas.** Teachers can increase the duration of peer play by providing suggestions or prompting role reversals. Expanding play ideas can occur by suggesting new ways of playing with the materials, new ways for dramatic play to unfold, and new ways of including more children in a game or activity. When a teacher notices children are disengaging from play with one another, he or she can

prompt the children to reverse dramatic play roles (“how about you be the mom now and she is the baby?”). This can reengage children in the play sequence and lead to more lengthy social encounters.

**Direct modeling.** Another way to keep children engaged in friendly play is to directly model desired behaviors as a play partner. When teachers notice that children are becoming less engaged they can join the play group and provide specific models of friendly behavior. For example, a teacher might join two children who are playing together and begin to share the materials available.

**Reinforcement.** While it is almost always necessary to reinforce children for their friendly behavior it is also the case that the proper use of reinforcement requires ongoing attention to several key factors. First, timing of reinforcement delivery is crucial. As long as children are engaged in friendly behavior, it is a good idea to withhold reinforcement. While this may seem counterintuitive, evidence suggests that adults’ delivery of attention to children at play can have the immediate effect of terminating their play. Given this fact, it is more advisable to comment on children’s friendly play shortly after the fact. When commenting on children’s friendly play, it is essential to describe the specific friendly behavior(s) that you observed. Instead of saying, “you’re playing so nicely together” say, “you are taking turns and saying nice things to each other.” This descriptive commenting provides children with specific feedback about what they are doing well. For many children, teachers may need to provide lots of reinforcement early on. Once children start to use their friendly behaviors, however, teachers need to begin the process of slowly removing their specific feedback from the ongoing play. The goal is not to remove all teacher reinforcement, but to provide sufficient opportunity for friendly play in and of itself to become reinforcing.

## Conclusion

Several thousand years ago, Aristotle suggested the following about friendship— “who would choose to live, even if possessed with all other things, without friends.” Based upon what is now known from longitudinal studies, it is clear that Aristotle was on the right track (Asher & Renshaw, 1981). It is also the case that the vast majority of children with special needs do not develop friendship skills without thoughtful instruction. In this paper we have highlighted the specific skills known to influence friendship at the preschool level. These skills and patterns of behavior may be considered as the scope of instruction most likely to lead to friendship. We also describe a variety of strategies for creating a classroom climate conducive to friendship development. Finally, we describe specific strategies for teaching friendship skills.

One of the struggles that all teachers face is how best to allocate their always limited, always stretched resources. We hope that this paper successfully communicates the fundamental importance of friendship skills along with a straightforward set of strategies to maximize children’s opportunities to live in a social world where “everyone knows their name.”

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