

PARENTING MATTERS:
FRIENDSHIP

— 3-5 YEARS OLD —

LIFE LOOKS A LITTLE LIKE...

First friends, best friends, and friend-break-ups. Your preschooler is starting to better understand what friendship is, but they are mostly content playing with whoever is close to them. They'll start to have best friends, but they will come and go quickly based on their mood or the activity they're doing. At this age, who you choose to surround them with will frame how they learn to share, communicate, learn, and play together.



YOU PARENT THEM WELL WHEN YOU...

KNOW:

Early childhood friendships play a pivotal role in helping kids learn rules of conversation, sensitivity to other viewpoints, cooperative skills, and age appropriate behaviors. What may appear to be just playing is really your child's way of creating a framework for their world. They are learning what they are capable of, how to work with others, and how to creatively problem solve. Know that healthy friendships early on can help lay the groundwork for mental health and social intelligence throughout their lives.

EXPECT:

Play is your child's main means of discovery. When you allow them time to play, they are learning and growing in huge ways. Expect to see your child begin to play more collaboratively with other kids; building a tower, doing a puzzle, or coloring a picture together instead of next to one another. This will likely bring with it some conflict, but that is ok. They will also start to connect more deeply with a small handful of kids that they consider to be their best friends.

PREPARE:

Many of the foundational skills for interpersonal relationships are created in this stage. Your child is learning to share, which develops into collaboration. They're learning to work together, which develops into teamwork and cooperation. They're discovering their strengths, which develops into leadership. Prepare to foster their growth and discovery by allowing them to play, asking them open ended questions, and giving them lots of opportunities to interact with other kids.

TALK:

Giving your child emotional language is the best thing you can do to prepare them for successful friendships. Your child is experiencing all the same big emotions that you feel, but without the language or life experience to express what, how, or why they are feeling that way. Equip them to talk about how they are feeling by pointing out facial expressions in storybooks, asking them how they feel, and telling them how you feel. Do this frequently throughout your day, not only in times of high stress or anger. Talk regularly about emotions and ways to manage those emotions so that your child can bring those skills into their friendships.

ENGAGE YOUR FAITH BY...

Practice Empathy

One of the biggest things your preschooler is learning in this stage is to recognize and manage emotions. They have been aware of their own emotion their whole life, but they are now starting to be neurologically capable of empathy. Be intentional in fostering empathy in your child to help them form healthy friendships.

- As you read books together, point out the character's faces and ask your child how that character is feeling.
- When you're waiting in line somewhere, play a face game. Make an emotion face (angry, happy, surprised, scared, sad) and have your child name the emotion. Then challenge them to make emotion faces too.
- Encourage and allow your child to talk about their emotions. Validate their difficult feelings by saying things like, "It's okay to be sad, I know this is so hard". They may not be able to articulate their emotions in the heat of the moment, but afterwards give them chances to reflect.
- Practice do-overs. When they speak or act insensitively, give them a chance to think about their actions and try again. Use the CARE model:

C - Call attention to the unkind behavior

A - Asses how that behavior affected others

R - Repair the hurt by apologizing

E - Express disappointment in their unkind behavior and remind them that you love them unconditionally.

Create Community

The best way for kids to learn how to build friendships is being surrounded by potential friends! Make time for play dates, go to the park, take them to daycare or Sunday school, be purposeful in surrounding them with kids their own ages. As you do this, look for ways to encourage their kindness and redirect their insensitive behaviors. Make sure you also give them space to problem solve and interact independent from you.

Use this as an opportunity to create community for yourself, too. Look for parent friends who you connect with and build friendships. Modeling healthy friendships helps your child understand the importance of these bonds. Parenting is hard, but it's a little easier with a solid, loving, healthy community.

ENGAGE YOUR FAITH BY...

Matthew 18:20

For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them.

Social time is key at this age. Whether your child attends preschool or is at home with you, make sure they have plenty of time with other kids learning how to navigate the basic social skills such as sharing, taking turns, using kind words and taking turns leading. Remind your child about how Jesus taught us to love others, to treat others the way we want them to treat us. Encourage your child to remember their friends in their prayers.

RESOURCES...

> **Web**

How Children Build Friendships by Age – Search *Scholastic.com*: ages and stages of friendship *Firstthingsfirst.org*

Why Childhood Friendships Matter – Search *Psychologicalscience.org*: childhood friendships

> **Books**

Friends Forever: How Parents Can Help Their Kids Make and Keep Good Friends by Fred Frankel

Social Rules for Kids: The Top 100 Social Rules Kids Need to Succeed by Susan Diamond

> **Books on Empathy:**

I'm Like You, You're Like Me: A Book About Understanding and Appreciating Each Other by Cindy Gainer and Miki Sakamoto

Bob and Otto by Robert Bruel

Big Dog and Little Dog by P.D. Eastman

Chocolate Milk, Por Favor Celebrating Diversity with Empathy by Maria Dismundy

The Way I Feel by Janan Cain



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