



Friendships are an important part of childhood and growing up. They build a child's sense of belonging and significance in their world, make a child feel cared for and cared about, and in turn teach them how to care for others. Healthy friendships play a key role in a child's emotional growth and their development of important life skills.

Friendships take time

For some children, it takes longer to connect with like-minded peers. We hope that the information below will give you an understanding of where your child is and how friendships are formed.

This is followed up with additional information and parent tips to support your child to navigate friendships in a digital age.

### **The 5 stages of children's friendships**

Children's friendship needs and skills change as they grow. Their ideas about what friendship actually is also changes as they develop. There are 5 stages that children go through as they learn to make and keep friends. The

following 5 step framework by Robert Selman is aimed at helping to understand developmental trends in children's friendships. It is a useful way to look at what's normal and what's not within children's friendships.

The following are key points that highlight the natural progression of children's friendships and the emotional growth that occurs during each stage.

### **STAGE 1 Friendship: Momentary Playmates: (Approximate ages: 3-7 years)**

#### **The Acquaintance Stage**

- Children are primarily focused on play and exploration.
- Children are learning about each other and making initial connections.
- Interactions are based on surface-level observable behaviors and shared activities.
- They may engage in parallel play, where they play alongside each other but not necessarily together.
- Friendship is based on proximity and convenience rather than deep emotional connections.



### **STAGE 2 Friendship: One-Way Assistance: (Approximate ages: 4-9 years)**



## The Building Stage

- Children start to recognize similarities and differences between themselves and others.
- Friendships start to develop as children spend more time together.
- They begin to engage in cooperative play and start forming small groups.
- Shared interests and activities become more important in forming friendships.
- They begin to share personal information and interests.
- They may engage in simple conversations and begin to learn more about each other's likes and dislikes.

## STAGE 3 Friendship: Two-Way Cooperation: (Approximate ages: 6-12 years)

### The Consolidation Stage

- Friendships become more stable and predictable.
- Friendships deepen, and children develop a sense of loyalty and trust.
- Children develop a sense of trust and reliability in their friends.
- They rely on each other for support and understanding.
- They start to understand the concept of reciprocity and take turns in activities.
- Friendships may extend beyond the immediate environment, such as to school or community settings.



## **STAGE 4 Friendship: Mutually Shared Relationships:**

**(Approximate ages: 11-15 years)**

### **The Deepening Stage**

- Friendships become more emotionally significant.
- Friendships become more significant and emotionally intimate.
- Children begin to share personal experiences, feelings, and secrets with their friends.
- They develop empathy and provide emotional support to each other during challenging times.
- Friendships become more independent of adult influence, and children may prefer spending time with friends over family members.

## **STAGE 5 Friendship: Mature Friendship:**

**(Approximate ages: Adolescence to adulthood)**

### **The Ending Stage**

- Friendships may naturally fade due to changes in circumstances or interests.
- Children learn to navigate conflicts and disagreements within friendships.
- They experience the process of saying goodbye and learn important lessons about closure.
- Despite friendships ending, children retain memories and lessons learned from those relationships.





# Friendship skills top tips

## Learn through play

Provide children with opportunities to play with peers, this helps them develop the necessary social skills to maintain good relationships



## Encourage positive social skills

Teach children skills in relating to others, such as listening, sharing, playing by the rules and empathy



## Like attracts like

Children become friends because they share similar interests. It can be helpful to plan activities in advance of a play date

## Praise positive behaviour

Praise your child for being friendly and caring to others, this will support their learning and friendship making skills



## Be a good role model

Children will learn from you and your relationships with others

## Take a back seat

When friendship issues arise, try to help your child resolve conflicts by being supportive and encouraging

# Friendships

## I Can Control

The choices  
I make

Who I choose  
to be friends  
with

The boundaries  
I set

How I react  
when I don't  
agree

The way I  
treat my  
friends



## I Can't Control

How my  
friends feel

Whether or  
not others  
apologize

The choices  
my friends  
make

What my  
friends like and  
don't like

Whether my  
friends like me  
or not

# **Nurturing Friendships in a digital age***(Prosper health collective Olivia Budiman)*

## **1. Prioritise face-to-face time**

Friendships are strongest when children spend real time together. While digital tools help kids stay in touch, nothing replaces shared activities, conversations, and physical presence for building trust and closeness.

**Parent Tip:** *Encourage your child to arrange an outing, playdate, or shared activity rather than relying only on online chats.*

## **2. Engage in meaningful conversation**

Quick messages are convenient, but they can lack depth. Phone calls, video chats, and uninterrupted conversations help kids connect on a more personal level and share how they really feel.

**Parent Tip:** *Suggest regular video calls or phone chats with friends and create “no-screen zones” at home to model genuine connection.*

## **3. Practice digital empathy**

Tone and intention are easily misunderstood online because messages lack facial expressions and body language. Miscommunication can damage friendships if left unresolved.

**Parent Tip:** *Remind your child to read over messages before sending and to clear up misunderstandings with a call or face-to-face chat.*

## **4. Diversify social opportunities**

Social media often keeps kids in familiar circles, but friendships grow when they meet people with different interests and experiences. Real-world social settings build confidence and resilience.

**Parent Tip:** *Encourage your child to join a local hobby, sport, or community activity to expand friendships beyond the digital world.*

## **5. Focus on quality over quantity**

Children may feel pressured to collect hundreds of online “friends,” but it’s the supportive, reliable relationships that truly matter. Deep friendships



bring more joy and security than large networks of acquaintances.

***Parent Tip:*** *Talk with your child about which friendships feel healthy and positive, and reassure them that a few close friends are more valuable than a big follower list.*

Although we are more connected than ever through technology, true friendship is measured by quality not quantity. By balancing the ease of digital communication with the value of face-to-face moments, we can nurture relationships that remain strong and meaningful over time.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Parent information: Supporting healthy and respectful friendships - [Helping kids navigate friendships, bullying, and social challenges in 2025](#)

Triple P parenting portal also provides proven, positive tips that can help every family support their child's development, grow closer and solve problems with a positive approach.

Please explore the following link for a range of free online courses:  
[Triple P free Online Parenting courses](#)

Online safety:

[eSafety parents: Advice for Parents and Carers to help keep children safe online](#)