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FPG authors
Barbara Goldman
and Virginia
Buysse suggest
ways parents
and teachers can
identify and foster
young friendships
in children with
and without
disabilities.

Making Friends

Assisting Children's Early Relationships

INCLUSIVE SETTINGS are challenging age-old stereotypes about how children with and without disabilities interact. Peek inside a preschool inclusive classroom and you will often find typically developing children altering their games so that children with disabilities can play along. At circle time, children who need help sitting up are supported by classmates. Children crouch down to speak eye-to-eye to their friend in a wheelchair. In short, friendships are forming. FPG Scientists Barbara Davis Goldman and Virginia Buysse explore these friendships, as well as those between very young children, in the chapter "Friendships in Very Young Children" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Research in Socialization and Social Development*.

In the past, the authenticity of friendships among children with and without disabilities and among very young children has been questioned. However, as Goldman and Buysse note, there are many studies which show that these children can and do form friendships. The focus of this chapter is on sharing the descriptive evidence of early friendships between very young children, and young children with disabilities. They also suggest ways that parents and teachers can use the information to help identify and foster these relationships in young children with and without disabilities.



Characteristics of Friendship

In very young children, as with older children, friendship is defined as a positive relationship between two children. Young children who are friends are interested in being near one another, have fun together, will choose to play with one another over others in a group, and challenge themselves and the friend to try new and more complicated tasks.

Some interactions between children of this age may appear to the casual observer to be meaningless or without structure, yet many involve reciprocal turn-taking, and a clear awareness of how the actions fit together. These early "games" can help solidify a growing friendship. Often young children interact by copying one another. One child will perform an action, and then look at the other child, using body language to ask them to repeat the same action. This creates a similarity between the children. When children cannot yet speak, this seems to say, "Look, I like to do the same things you do!" Mimicking behavior shows cooperation and the desire to keep the interaction going. These games can have their own set of rules that the two children make up, and can be played once, or repeatedly, often across days. These are among the most complex interactions for toddlers, both requiring and encouraging the child and the friend to develop socially and cognitively.

The Benefits of Friendship

Friendships among very young children provide more than just entertainment. In a 1994 study by Whaley and Rubenstein, very young children assisted their friends, willingly gave up a toy to a friend, and supported a friend in a conflict he/she had with a peer. These acts of sharing, helping and loyalty were done spontaneously, without prompting by an adult.

Very young children also can develop a strong sense of empathy for their friends. A 1981 study by Musatti and Panni notes that the observed children (all younger than 18 months) were three times more likely to respond to a crying friend than a crying child they did not know. Many times the toddler would try to console the distressed friend by coming close to the friend's face and smiling, talking or singing, or even offering a toy in an attempt to cheer the friend up. Sometimes, the toddler would ask for help by getting an adult's attention and motioning towards the crying child.

Friendship in Children with Disabilities

Studies such as these about friendships and supportive interactions among typically-developing very young children are used by Goldman and Buysse in their chapter to establish parallels with selected studies on friendships among young children with disabilities, who also may be developmentally young.

While challenges do exist, researchers, including Goldman and Buysse, have found that children with disabilities do indeed form meaningful friendships, and in many cases, these friendships are with typically developing children. These studies also provide further support for creating inclusive classroom settings (classrooms that include children both with and without disabilities). Additionally, the severity of a child's disability is not necessarily linked to their acceptance or rejection as a friend. In a 1999 Wolfberg et al. study, ten severely disabled children were studied in an inclusive classroom. Their peers viewed *four of the ten* as highly desirable playmates, and at least three had fully reciprocal friendships.

Encouraging Friendship

Parents and educators can take measures to foster and deepen friendships among very young children and children with disabilities.

1. In a group, educators should allow a pair some privacy so they can concentrate on their relationship. This may mean allowing the pair to exclude other children at times. Teachers also can encourage parents to arrange play dates between two friends.

2. Specific environments also can help support friendships as well as encourage new ones. Small, cozy spaces just big enough for two encourage closeness. Toys, materials and playground equipment that need two partners to function well promote working together and communication.
3. Adults can provide multiple versions of similar toys and materials. This allows friends to perform the same action at the same time, an important part of very young children's friendships.
4. Adults can allow noisy, silly, active play in the group or pair, so that the children can experience the closeness created by shared laughter.
5. For younger children with disabilities, parents and educators can act as matchmakers. Children who have shown an interest in one another, or in similar activities, can be encouraged to play together or at least be near one another, both in a group and separately.
6. Though adults are often in the background for children's friendships, they can be more involved when the children are just learning to communicate. They can carefully join the children in play in order to keep the interaction going, or to explain a child's actions that the friend might not understand.

Friendship among very young children and children with disabilities is not only possible, but beneficial. With support and encouragement from adults, young children with and without disabilities can form connections that not only provide enjoyment, but help promote their growth and development in multiple domains. ■

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