

LET'S BE FRIENDS

Learning to make friends is a skill that starts long before school

Words: DR CLARE HENDERSON

What skills does a child need to be ready for school? In a large survey of parents, childcare professionals and teachers carried out last September, very few viewed actual academic skills as essential. Instead, three quarters of respondents felt that good social skills were the key to a successful start at school. Penny Tassoni, president of PACEY (the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years) says that, "Children need friends and they become upset if they do not make any. Popular children are thoughtful and kind." Rozzy Hyslop, principal of the Marmalade nursery schools in south-west London agrees. "Learning to successfully interact with others is one of the most important aspects of a child's development with far-reaching implications. Adults who perform well in the work place generally have excellent social skills."

Good social skills enable a child to interact with their elders as well as their peers. They include the ability to take turns, share and cooperate, to listen to others and follow directions, being aware of other people's feelings as well as making sense of verbal and non-verbal communication. Learning these communication skills is an ongoing process, coming more easily to some than others, and with different aspects being needed at different points throughout childhood.

No reception class teacher would expect impeccable sharing from a four year old, but they would hope that those traits were beginning to emerge. If you are a parent of

a child due to start school in approximately six month's time, then you may be wondering how these skills develop and if there is anything you can do to support their growth.

In the first year, the relationship between the baby and their primary care-giver is the most important social relationship. As a baby becomes a toddler, they become more interested in their peers. Initially they will be choosing to play alongside other children. Sharing and cooperative play will be tricky as they have limited awareness of other people's feelings and intentions.

Between three and four children start to become more cooperative. It dawns on them that others may think differently, and they will get better at listening and starting to make special friendships. All children are individuals with their own temperaments and preferences for friendships. More outgoing children may like to have lots of noisy friends, while quieter, cautious types may seek out just one or two special friends.

The nursery school setting is key for pre-schoolers in learning to adjust to a busier environment with other children. Rozzy Hyslop says, "Nursery schools can provide an arena for children to practise their social skills with support from the teachers. If a child is struggling to respond to a social dilemma, the teachers can support a child's thinking by providing insights to explain the other child's behaviour. Teachers can encourage children to practise their social skills through role play and small world play, encouraging turn-taking and team work."

As parents, we can support our children



to develop social skills so that they are able to make friendships and relate well to adults. Key to healthy social development is play. Playtimes need to be fun and child-led. We can support children in structured play dates with friends but independent play is important too.

Pretend and imaginative play enable children to practice their social skills. They may be pretending to be someone else, helping them understand different social roles and enhancing their ability to see the world from another person's perspective. They may be trying out new language, experimenting with feelings, negotiating rules with a playmate, resolving problems and exploring more complex social ideas. Praising children for sharing, waiting and listening to others will boost their

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social confidence and encourage them to do it more.

Sharing can be particularly challenging, so let your child choose some non-sharing special toys to put away before her playmate arrives or sometimes meet on neutral territory, like the local play-park. In play with other children and siblings, help them learn to be sensitive to other people's feelings.

Not all children manage to develop social skills easily. Children with speech

and language difficulties, hyperactivity, impulsivity or difficulties with social communication and empathy may need extra help. Play dates will tend to be more successful if they are short, well-structured and with just one other. If you are really concerned about your child's social skills, or feel they need extra support, then do talk to their nursery teacher or seek professional support through your GP or health visitor.

If you want to help your child get ready

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING YOUR PRE-SCHOOLERS SOCIAL SKILLS

- * Organise play dates with peers
- * Teach your child how to wait and take turns through games like hide and seek, simple board games, blowing bubbles, building towers and ball games
- * Improve attention and listening skills with Simon Says, Musical Statues, Follow my Leader and treasure hunts for lists of objects
- * Provide opportunities and props (costumes, cardboard boxes) for pretend play
- * Praise children for good sharing, waiting and listening to others
- * Allow your child to select special 'non-sharing' toys before friends arrive or meet on neutral territory such as the play-park
- * Discuss how other children may be feeling to help them develop sensitivity to the emotion's of others. For example, "Jane is probably feeling sad because you knocked down her tower. Why don't you help her build it up again?"
- * Give children the language to help them express their own feelings and frustrations so they don't have to demonstrate them physically. For example, "I think you are feeling cross because Harry took the train you were playing with"
- * If they want to join a group of children at the playground, give them an idea of what they could say
- * Keep playdates short, well-structured and with only one other child if your child finds social situations difficult

for their very first reception year at school then providing as many opportunities as possible for them to play with you, with peers and sometimes just by themselves or with their imaginary friend, is the best start you can give them.

With the skills to listen, share, cooperate, understand feelings and communicate, children will be ready to make the most of their new learning environment at school, as well as have lots of fun making new friends!