



Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders OAFCCD

Helping Children Make Friends

Friends are very important and most of us can remember having a close friend at school. Friends are people with whom we can share our thoughts and ideas; people who like to be with us and who we can sit with at lunch, or visit after school.

Children with communication disorders often have difficulty making and keeping friends. Children with speech problems may be shunned because they talk differently or are hard to understand. Children with language problems often have difficulty following rules and miss social cues, or they may behave inappropriately and get into trouble.

Parents want to help their children, but often don't know how. Friends can't be bought and bringing children together in a room doesn't automatically lead to friendship. However, there are lots of things that parents can do to help their child to develop social skills and foster relationships with other children.

Preparing Your Child

It is important to make sure your child has the skills to be a friend. Many children with communication disorders need help to develop the social skills they will need to make and keep a friend.

Good Manners - Parents start working on social skills and manners with babies and toddlers and will likely still be reminding older teenagers. It is not a one step process but rather skills are built over time. For children with communication disorders it may take longer and a more explicit approach may be needed. Parents need to model the skills (make sure you always say please and thank you to your child), teach the words (exaggerate the words and repeat frequently), and provide lots of opportunity to practice (allow extra time for the please and thank you and provide positive feedback and praise).

Eye Contact - Making and maintaining eye contact is very important to social relationships. Children need to be told that other people expect them to look at their faces when they are talking. It may take a lot of prompts (look at me) and encouragement (smiles) but children can learn that by looking at people and making eye contact, they are showing that they value the other person and want to communicate.

Turn Taking - Talking to another person involves taking turns to speak and listen. Children need to learn to listen to the other person and allow the listener time to respond. Many children are in a hurry to share their news and you may need to encourage them to slow down. Asking questions will help the child to provide more details and also make sure you each get a turn to speak.

Listening - Everyone wants the chance to share their story and be heard. Children need to learn the importance of listening to others, and how to show they are listening. Encourage the child to look at the person who is speaking, and let them know that they can't interrupt and must wait for a break in the conversation. Children with language disorders do not recognize the language rules and the speaker may need to emphasize the beginning and end of sentences. Explain that maintaining eye contact, keeping still and occasionally nodding their head, lets the listener know they are still listening.

Conversation Skills - Children with speech and language disorders often have difficulty starting and maintaining a conversation. You may have to teach your child some basic questions that can be used to start a conversation or keep it going. By providing your child a script, or list of questions and responses, they will have something to say. This is especially important for the child with a speech problem who has difficulty with fluency or clarity. By teaching them a script of questions and responses and providing lots of practice, they will have something to say to a new friend.

Setting the Scene

Children with language disorders usually have weak non-verbal language skills. This means they have trouble noticing and understanding non-verbal information such as body language and tone of voice. They will need to be taught how to look for clues in the behaviour and actions of other people. Television and video tapes can provide families with the opportunity to look at people and point out the non-verbal clues to what they are saying. Turn down the sound and ask your child to tell you what is happening. Discuss the expressions on the actors faces and what they mean.

Facial Expression - A lot of information about how we feel and what we are saying can be found on the face of the speaker. Children need to learn how to identify feelings from facial cues - which way does the mouth curve when we are happy, how do the eyes look when we are angry, etc.

Body Language - Body posture and movements can also provide information about how the speaker feels and what he is saying. Children with language disorders need to learn to look at the whole person and figure out what different gestures and poses mean. Parents may need to exaggerate their actions and talk about gestures and poses.

Appearance and Clothing - Whether we like it or not, people are judged by their appearance. While children may have more relaxed rules about clothing, it is still important to consider how your child appears to others. Are the clothes age appropriate? Designer and name brand clothes are not necessary, but does your child look similar to other children of the same age? It is also important that your child appears to be well groomed, with clean and tidy hair, clean hands and fingernails, and no food stains on their shirt.

Social Situation - Language rules can change in different social situations. Children with language disorders often fail to notice that different social rules apply in different settings. For example: when playing in the house we tell children to "use their inside voices." Children with language disorders will need to have the different rules explained and will need to learn how to examine a new environment and decide which social rules apply. Children with speech disorders may need more help in finding ways to communicate with other children. If your child uses picture symbols or sign language, you may have to set up training sessions for other children. Children are open to new ideas and may be very interested in learning a new language. By increasing the

number of children who can communicate with your child, you are creating more opportunities for friendship.

Making the Connections

To help build friendships, children need opportunities to spend time with other children and share experiences. When a child has a communication disorder parents may need to spend more time creating opportunities and fostering connections with other children. A good place to start is by connecting with other parents in the community. Families are more socially isolated because of their busy schedules and distance from extended families, and parents are more nervous of strangers. By starting the connections at the adult level, children have a chance to meet each other in a safe environment under the watchful eye of adults. By connecting with more families, you can create a larger circle of acquaintances and increase the chances that your child will find someone that could be a friend.

Everyday Activities - There are opportunities every day in your child's routine to connect with other children. The walk to school or visit to the park can include siblings and neighbourhood children. Walking together, the parent can include all the children in conversations and games. At the park everyone can be included on the swings, or run around together in a game of tag. By sharing activities and talking about what they are doing, children can get to know each other.

Hobbies and Teams - Friendships are more likely to develop between children that have a common interest. If your child has a talent or interest, joining a club or team will provide the opportunity to meet other children. Discussing the day's practice, talking about the coach, and having fun will strengthen the connections between the children and may lead to a new friendship.

Parties - Parents of children with communication disorders, or other disabilities, often have to take more of a lead in creating opportunities for friendship than other parents. Parents can invite extra children to their home for casual play dates or for more organized activities, such as pool parties or Halloween parties. There is more work involved but the parent remains on hand to keep the conversations going and provide help when a child struggles to be understood.

Support Circles

All of us have a circle of friends and relatives that provides support. Your circle may be as small as your immediate family, or it may include neighbours, co-workers and extended family. One strategy used by families of children with disabilities is to build a circle of support for their child.

A circle is usually established by bringing people together for a meeting with a facilitator. The facilitator can be a professional who works with your child, or a family friend. Those invited to the meeting can include anyone who has an interest or connection with your child. Children can attend the meeting and they bring a lot of enthusiasm and great ideas. However, children may need extra support to understand the discussion and participate.

The circle of friends is a group of people who care about your child and have made a commitment to be with your child for specific activities. It may feel a bit forced at first, but it can lead to new relationships and friendships.

Friendships Change

It is important to remember that friends come and go. Few of us have friends we have known since grade school. As we grow and mature our interests and activities change and so do the people around us. Your child will also grow and change and their friendships may end. However, if you have helped your child to develop the social skills, and there continues to be opportunities to meet people, your child will be able to make new friends. Over time, your child will need less help from you and should be able to make friends on their own.

Resources

Turn-Taking and Conversation by: M. Ann Marquis, M.S., C.C.C., Parent Articles 1, Enhance Parent Involvement in Language Learning, Edited by: Margaret Schrader, Communication Skills Builders, The Psychological Corporation, pg 59 -60, ISBN 076 167 439X

Improve Your Child's Listening Skills by: Beth Witt, M.A., Parent Articles 1, Enhance Parent Involvement in Language Learning, Edited by Margaret Schrader, Communication Skills Builders, The Psychological Corporation, pg 65-66, ISBN 076 167 439X

How to Model Social Language by: Linda M. Levine, Ed.D, Parent Articles 2, More Articles to Enhance Parent Involvement, Edited by: Anthony b. De Feo, Communication Skills Builders, The Psychological Corporation, pg. 103-104, ISBN 076 1630732,

Finding Friends at School and at Home, Parents' Strategies for Helping Pre-schoolers Develop Friendships, by: Marci J. Hanson, Maria Morgan, Sonya Gutierrez, Deidre Barnwell and Paula Beckman, Exceptional Parent, May 1997, pg. 24-26

Friends - a social skills/recreation program for children, available from the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, www.ldao.ca

Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children, Social and Emotional Development Activities for Asperger Syndrome, Autism, PDD and NLD, by: Steven E. Gutstein and Rachelle K. Sheely, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN 1-84310-720-1

Nonverbal Learning Disabilities at Home, A Parent's Guide, by: Pamela B. Tanguay, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN 1- 85302-940-8

Reader's Digest, September 2002, *Help Your Child Make Friends*, or on the Website at: www.readersdigest.ca/mag/2002/10/friends_kids.html

All My Life's a Circle, Using the Tools: Circles, MAPS & PATH, by: Mary A. Falvey, Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint, and Richard L. Rosenberg, Inclusion Press ISBN 1-895418-12-7

The Dynamics of Support Circles, by: Patrick Macken and Roslyn Cormier, pg. 58 -61, *The Inclusion Papers, Strategies to Make Inclusion Work*, Inclusion Press, ISBN 1-895418-08-9

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