

## Helping Young Children Make New Friends at School

### Ann-Marie Clark

Entering a new school can be a frightening experience for a young child, whether it is caused by a family's moving or comes as the child begins pre-school or kindergarten. Apprehension about making friends is often a central issue. Children may be afraid that no one will play with them at recess or sit next to them at lunch. The situation sometimes becomes more difficult because children may be reluctant to talk about these feelings with parents or teachers. However, parents can act positively to help children develop new friendships in new situations.

#### What Parents Can Do

**Acknowledge the child's feelings.** It is helpful to listen carefully to children when they are discussing their feelings about friends. It may be more helpful to accept their feelings as part of a legitimate concern than to tell children not to be so concerned or to think about something else. The use of the word "should" can be especially problematic. Children may have difficulty knowing how to deal with their feelings if they are told what they "should" or "should not" feel about making new friends. Instead, parents may choose to reply by restating what they hear their child saying. For example, when a child expresses concern about going out to recess with no one to play with, the parent might first say, "I can tell you are worried about recess tomorrow."

**Make a plan together.** A first step is to ask the child who they would like to have as a friend. Then the parent might arrange to invite the prospective friend for after-school play or may choose to enroll their child in extracurricular activities with the prospective friend. Parents may wish to volunteer to work in scouts or 4-H, or coach sports, so that they might facilitate their child's interactions with others.

**Accept the challenge.** Parents can become good role models in solving problems. They can help children see that the problem of making friends in a new classroom, although sometimes difficult, can be tackled. Talking about possible solutions with the child may be an ongoing useful strategy. Helping the child understand that if one course of action does not work, another can be tried, offers the child reassurance that the problem will eventually be resolved.

**Show empathy.** Parents might think of a time when they were in a similar situation and tell their child how they felt. It might be helpful for them to let the child know that they experienced the same fears about making friends on a new job. They can share with the child what they did to overcome their fear and make new friends.

**Give it time.** It might be helpful to explain to the child that friendships take time to form. Time invested by parents in helping children make friends can be time well spent.

#### Helping Newcomers

Studies show that newcomers to children's groups often "hover" around the group in the beginning. Gradually newcomers will try to enter the group as they gain more information and confidence. It can be helpful if an adult temporarily joins the group and invites in the newcomer. This is more effective if it occurs naturally as part of an ongoing activity. In this way, the adult models acceptance of the newcomer and creates a situation in which the newcomer can make a meaningful contribution. Effective social skills are developed best in active social situations.

Sometimes the adult can forewarn a particular child who has good social skills about the newcomer to ensure that a "leader" will accept the child and

model the inclusive behavior for the children. Assigning the newcomer to a “buddy” to show him or her around and explain procedures is also helpful. When children are given opportunities to work together to solve problems, they are often better able to develop effective social skills in situations that ultimately contribute to making friends.

## Conclusion

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Feelings of anxiety are normal when entering an unfamiliar environment, such as beginning a new school, particularly when friendships have not yet been formed. Parents can support children in working through these feelings and in making new friends in their new school.

## Source

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## For More Information

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