

Friends

Thriving Series by **MICHAEL GROSE**




Parenting *ideas*
MICHAEL GROSE



17 essential social skills
every child needs to make & retain friends

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First a few thoughts

Popularity should not be confused with sociability. A number of studies in recent decades have shown that appearance, personality type and ability impact on a child's popularity at school.

Good-looking, easy-going, talented kids usually win peer popularity polls but that doesn't necessarily guarantee they will have friends.

Those children and young people who develop strong friendships have a definite set of skills that help make them easy to like, easy to relate to and easy to play with.

Friendship skills are generally developmental. That is, kids grow into these skills given exposure to different situations and with adult help.

In past generations 'exposure to different situations' meant opportunities to play with each other, with siblings and with older and younger friends.

They were reminded by parents about how they should act around others. They were also 'taught' from a very young age.

Arrested development

The NEW CHILD grows up with fewer siblings, fewer opportunities for unstructured play and less freedom to explore friendships than children of even ten years ago.

A parenting style that promotes a high sense of individual entitlement rather than the notion of fitting in appears to be popular at the moment.

These factors can lead to delayed or arrested development in these essential friendship skills, resulting in very unhappy, self-centered children.

Here are some ideas if you think your child experiences developmental delay in any of these essential skills or just needs some help to acquire them:

- 1. Encourage or insist that kids play and work with each other:** Allowing kids the freedom to be kids is part of the message here but parents have to be cunning with the NEW CHILD and construct situations where kids have to get on with each other. For some kids "Go outside and play" is a good place to start!!
- 2. Play with your kids:** Interact with your kids through games and other means so you can help kids learn directly from you how to get on with others.
- 3. Talk about these skills:** If you notice your kids need to develop some of these skills then talk about them, point out when they show them and give them some implementation ideas.

Kids are quite ego-centric and need to develop a sense of 'other' so they can successfully negotiate the many social situations that they find themselves in.

As parents we often focus on the development of children's academic skills and can quite easily neglect the development of these vitally important social skills, which contribute so much to children's happiness and well-being.

Here are seventeen essential skills that have been identified as being important for making and keeping friends.

17 social skills

SKILL 1 Ability to share possessions and space

Sharing is a basic social skill.

Developmentally very young children like to keep their possessions to themselves. As they get older and move into pre school and beyond the notion of sharing becomes a pre-requisite for playing with and forming relationships with others. Other children like to play and be with those who share their time, possessions and space with them. Sharing is the start of empathy as it shows you care about other people's feelings. It also sets up the situation that encourages other children to share with them.

TIPS:

1. Children don't need to share all their possessions. They can put away those things they don't want to share.
2. Children shouldn't flaunt or show off special items.
3. Kids shouldn't hog things which don't belong to them and which others want to use.
4. Give your child plenty of opportunities to share with others in informal play situations. Talk about sharing before moving into social situations, particularly for under fives.

SKILL 2 Keeping confidences and secrets

Kids confide in each other a lot, particularly when they move into primary school and beyond.

They expect that those kids they confide in be reliable and trustworthy enough to respect the information they have shared. Keeping confidences is the basis of respectful relationships – a skill that they will take with them through life.

TIPS:

1. Talk with children about the notion of secrets that they should keep and secrets that they can talk about. For instance, if they know their friend is in danger or behaving in a way that endangers them or others then it is permissible to share that 'secret' with others.
2. Talk about the notion of gossip and rumours with kids. Generally those who talk poorly about others or spread rumours or gossip are not held in high regard by others.



SKILL 3 Offering to help

Offering to help another child, a friend or an adult in need is a high social skill, showing concern for others.

It can also involve a degree of risk as others may reject their offer, or other children, may even mock them for their kindness. Offering to help in public generally requires kids to use their initiative, which can be scary.

Kids are more likely to help others if they are expected to help the family at home. This not only encourages helpful behaviours, but gets across the idea that kids belong to their various groups through contribution.

TIPS:

1. Expect children to help others at home, including regular chores and incidental help.
2. Create opportunities at home for children to offer to help. So rather than asking children to help, from time to time, state that you need help and ask for a volunteer.
3. Discuss with children when it's appropriate and inappropriate to offer to help. Sometimes kids can be too pushy. Not everyone wants someone to help them.

SKILL 4 Accepting other's mistakes

We currently live in a culture, that's very quick to brand anyone who makes a mistake as 'loser.'

Kids can also be very cruel, not accepting the weaknesses of others. However, those kids who genuinely accept the mistakes, errors and misjudgments of others without throwing them back in their faces are generally high up on the sociability scale. Acceptance of other's mistakes is a characteristic shared by many student leaders. In fact, students tell us that this is a quality that they admire and look for when electing their leaders.

TIPS:

1. Children can help those who struggle or don't get things right the first time.
2. Talk about the notion of persistence with children and that not everyone gets things right the first time. Mistakes should be seen as opportunities to try again.
3. Mistakes are a normal part of the learning process rather than a sign of being dumb or lacking talent. Kids overcome mistakes with practice and encouragement.
4. Discuss with your children how to encourage others when they struggle in games or learning activities at school.

SKILL 5 Being positive and enthusiastic

Children with a positive approach to life and others are usually more socially successful.

In fact, they tend to be more successful in all aspects of life. Others seek them out because they are more interesting to be around. People are naturally drawn like magnets to positive, enthusiastic people. On the other hand, negative, critical kids are often avoided by others as they are unpleasant to be around.

Positive kids generally have high self-esteem and have received plenty of encouragement and been around positive people themselves. Negative kids, on the other hand, generally have low self-esteem and have been surrounded by negative or critical adults.

TIPS:

1. If your child is a negative tracker (i.e. has a negative view of life) teach them that they can positively reframe events. That is, they can look for the good in themselves, in others and events.
2. Encourage kids to look for good in themselves and to say the good things out loud.
3. Enthusiasm is usually shown through strong body language, bright tone of voice and a smiling face. Encourage children to approach others or activities involving others with this type of enthusiasm.

SKILL 6 Holding a conversation

Holding conversations with others is a lifetime friendship skill.

Conversations require self-disclosure, which can be challenging for some children. Good conversationalists give of themselves, but also take an interest in the other person. Many children forget that good conversations are two way events, and tend to focus solely on themselves.

Children within conversations need to learn to ask good or interesting questions; to take turns when speaking and to show you are listening by making eye contact and not interrupting.

TIPS:

1. Hold conversations with your children in a variety of situations, including mealtime so they experience the conventions of conversation. They will also learn how to start a conversation by talking with you.
2. Talk about conversation starters with your children. These often involve questions that are related to the situation or that both of you have an interest in.
3. Encourage children to stay in conversations, or even start up conversations with adults. This will provide terrific experience in asking and responding to questions as well as making eye contact and showing interest.

SKILL 7 **Winning and losing well**

Playing games requires that you win well and lose well.



Put another way – kids need to learn to win without rubbing others' noses in it, and lose gracefully without throwing tantrums and making excuses. Wanting to win is natural, but they need to do so in a way that they maintain a relationship with other players so they will play again. Losing may make kids feel bad, but kids need to control their negative feelings so that others will play with them again.

TIPS:

1. Encourage children to keep their winning 'low key' and comment genuinely on the efforts of other players.
2. Winners shouldn't boast, imply that winning was easy or remark how poorly the other side played.
3. Encourage children who lose to congratulate the winner and smile. They need to put on a 'game face', rather than stomp off in a bad mood.
4. Good losers keep trying even though they won't win; don't devalue the game and don't whinge. They also help pack up the game when it's over.

SKILL 8 **Listening to others**

One way to be an interesting person is to show interest in others and what they have to say.

This means children have to listen to others and ask good questions. Good questions are generally open rather than closed. An open question requires a long answer – e.g. 'What do you like about school?' and closed questions require a single response, short response – e.g. 'Do you enjoy school?'

TIPS:

1. Talk to children about listening without thinking about what to say next. When they do this they are really tuning in to the speaker.
2. Children need to show they are listening through their body language and eye contact.

SKILL 9 Ignoring someone who is annoying you

Teasing is common in schools, just as it is in families.

It would be great to think it doesn't exist, but it does. Sometimes teasing starts out as good natured banter but ends up annoying or with name calling. Socially-skilled people have strategies to handle provocation effectively so they are not continually provoked or annoyed.

Suitable strategies include telling people to stop assertively, ignoring the annoying comments, using self-deprecating humour or moving away. Kids need a range of strategies they can use if one fails. Less socially-skilled kids who are reliant on one strategy get frustrated and can lose their temper if they haven't a range of skills to draw on.

TIPS:

1. Talk to your children about the notion of behavioural pay-offs. That is, kids will usually tease or annoy others when they can predict the pay-off their behaviour receives. So if teasing is met with a rather predictable whinge they will more than likely continue the teasing because they enjoy the pay-off.
2. Kids need to develop a range of responses, and even practise them within their family.
3. One way children can respond to teasing or annoying behaviour is to stay cool, stand tall, look the other person in the eye, use a firm voice and say, "That's enough!" or a similar, simple assertive statement. This should be practised in the mirror at home a number of times until they feel comfortable.

SKILL 10 Giving and receiving compliments

The propensity to give and receive compliments is linked to a child's self-esteem.

When they feel good about themselves they are more likely to notice and draw attention to the deeds of others and they are also more likely to accept compliments from others. Nevertheless, regardless of esteem levels giving and receiving compliments are skills that kids can learn. There are wrong and right ways to go about both.

TIPS:

1. When giving compliments kids should be genuine and don't give a compliment that's not true. It's also important not to undo a compliment by adding something negative. "Well done. You played a really great game BUT..."
2. When receiving a compliment look the other person in the eye and thank them. Receiving compliments can be really hard as children, and adults, will often say silly things or downplay it. This can make the giver feel awful. Be happy that you received a compliment, which makes the giver feel good.

SKILL 11 Approaching and joining a group

There are many situations throughout life where you need to start conversations with people you don't know.

The ability to approach strangers in social situations is a valuable skill that opens up many doors, both friendship-wise and business-wise. These skills can be learned and practised during childhood, so that it becomes second nature in adulthood.

Kids get plenty of chances to practise this when they approach others to join in games and conversations. The alternative is to hang around the edges of groups and hope to be invited in. They have to be pro-active and ask if they can join in.

TIPS:

1. Talk about when it's safe to approach strangers and when it's not safe to approach others, particularly in strange settings.
2. When looking for suitable groups to approach children should stand back and assess whether the group size is okay (not too big) and whether they seem friendly and approachable or not.
3. They should wait for an appropriate time to approach, such as a lull in the game or when someone smiles or acknowledges them. If it's a game they are joining they can ask if it's okay if they join in. If you are joining a conversation avoid taking over or changing the subject but begin by talking about what the others are talking about.

SKILL 12 Leading rather than bossing

Children generally like to be around kids who are confident enough to take the initiative, persuade and influence them.

This makes them interesting to play with and good to be around. However they resent bossiness in their peers. They don't like being ordered around and they don't like it when other children don't take their turn to be led or always want things their own way.

One way to lead others is to make suggestions but allow others to choose. Use the power of persuasion but don't insist that others play your games or follow your lead. Bossy children give orders and expect others to follow. They become critical or insulting when others don't do as they want.

TIPS:

1. Talk with your children about the difference between bossy behaviour and friendly behaviour. Bossy behaviour is unbending and friendly behaviour involves give and take and respect for the views of others.
2. It is important that children be willing to follow the lead or suggestions of others. It makes sense to discuss the give and take involved in playing together with your children.
3. Make children aware of their body language and choice of words when they make suggestions. They are polite and positive and use phrases such as 'Let's try...', 'Can we...' 'How about we...?'

SKILL 13 Arguing well – seeing other's opinions

Children enjoy being with others who respect their opinions and their feelings.

They generally like being around others who will voice an opinion and who'll argue their viewpoint. They don't like being around others who put them down and don't allow them to have their say. Children feel safe around children who respect them and value their opinions. Kids don't have to agree with each other, but they do need to learn to disagree and argue their point fairly.

TIPS:

1. Discuss with children how effective arguments rarely involve shouting, but are usually conducted with a calm voice.
2. Encourage kids to argue only about things they don't agree with, rather than just disagree with the person per se.
3. It helps if children understand some of the conventions of arguing such as 'we stick to the point', 'no name calling', 'don't criticise, and make suggestions'.

SKILLS 14 Bringing others into the group

The ability and propensity to include others in a game is a highly regarded social skill.

It shows high empathy and concern for the well-being and feelings of others. Some children like to form cliques and keep their social groups small. From a well-being perspective this is not advisable as having a broad number of friends is a buffer against rejection and social isolation. Children who include others in their games, activities and conversations are more likely to be included in the games of other children. This reciprocal effect is potent.

TIPS:

1. Discuss with children that broad friendship groups are preferable to small cliques. Their attitude and behaviour will determine the number of friends they have.
2. Talk about what it's like to be left out of games or activities. This develops empathy. Discuss with children that they have a personal responsibility to include other children, particularly those who appear isolated, in their activities.
3. When including others, sociable children will look for ways to adapt a game or activity to suit another person, if necessary.

SKILL 15 **Saying No - resisting peer pressure**

Resisting the pressure that friends and peers put on a child to behave in ways he doesn't want is a real challenge.

But it's important to get across to kids that they have a right to say NO to a peer when agreeing makes them feel uncomfortable, puts their safety and well-being at risk or compromises relationships with others including their family. Resisting peer pressure is a skill that many teenagers need. It requires strength of character as well as some techniques to enable them to save face.

Saying NO is an assertive response. Giving in is a weak response, while arguing is an aggressive response. An assertive response requires strong body language, a firm voice, strong eye contact and a calm, controlled manner. It's best practised in the mirror or during role play situations at home.

TIPS:

1. Talk with children about saying NO in an assertive way. Discuss ways to say NO without eliciting arguments and bullying. They can give a brief explanation, but they shouldn't have to justify themselves. "I'm not going to the party because I'm going somewhere else."
2. Discuss ways your child can maintain the relationship with the peers (if appropriate) even though they are not joining them in an activity. They may thank them for asking them, make an alternative suggestion, or make arrangements to join them at another time.

SKILL 16 **Dealing with fights and disagreements**

Disagreements happen in families and among friends.

The key is to make sure disagreements don't lead to friendships breaking down. It's important to get across to kids that having an argument or disagreement doesn't mean that a friendship is over. Strong friendships, like strong family relationships, withstand disagreements. In fact, they only serve to strengthen friendships.

In most arguments and fights both parties generally think they are right. This is the nature of disputes. Emotions generally run high and sometimes things are said that are not meant and are regretted later. Sometimes arguments can be solved immediately. However, often arguments are sorted out after both people have calmed down, and things are sorted out at a later date.

TIPS:

1. Draw children's attention to the nature of arguments. They are normal, and not the end of the world.
2. Adults, too, should be mindful that children can be worst of enemies one day and best friends the next so resist getting directly involved. Rather be a friendly advisor and confidant to your child.
3. Discuss with children the importance of making up so that they can remain friends. Maintaining relationships should take precedence over winning arguments.

SKILL 17 Being a good host

Social convention means that when adults have guests over we go to special efforts to make them feel welcome. The same convention can apply to children. When they have friends over to their house to play or stay, they should make special efforts to welcome them. This teaches children to be less egocentric and more accommodating of the needs of others.

Discuss with children what constitutes a good host and talk about the expectations for different events such as hosting a birthday party, having a good friend over for an hour or two, or having a few friends for a sleepover.

TIPS:

1. Discuss with children the toys and possessions they are willing to share and those that need to be put away.
2. It's also important to consider cleaning bedrooms and communal areas so that guests feel comfortable.
3. Talk with children about introducing guests to other family members, and including other family members in games and activities.



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