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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Helping 3 and 4-Year-Old Children Make Friends

Parents do play an important role in helping their children develop friendships, and that role changes as the children grow. Three-year-old children build on the friendship skills that have been taught by parents, teachers and other valued adults during earlier experiences with other children. Although 3 and 4-year-old children need less help than when they were 2, they will continue to need assistance from the adults in her life. Parents can help by selecting friends with whom their children can be successful. Teachers may be able to suggest possible out-of-school playmates. Friendships with classmates outside of school offer the added benefit of helping make school adjustment easier for 3 and 4-year-old children.

Home and school emotional climates are different. It's often wise to schedule first play dates on neutral territory — a playground, park or low-keyed, child-friendly restaurant — with parents of both children present. A given pair of children may play well together at school but not at home, where they may become wild, bicker or play separately.

Children may meet at home almost as if they were strangers. School friendships are based on being playground friends or laughing-at-circle-time friends. Home and school also differ in structure and play opportunities. Furthermore, children have feelings about being on their own or the other child's home territory. One of the children has their mother or father present, but the other may not. Finally, children are always concerned: Will he or she like me? Will he or she stay my friend? Will I be able to be a good friend, or will I do something that I will feel badly about?

Parents can help their preschooler with friendship dates with adequate

preparation. Children always are more successful when they understand what lies ahead. Most children will benefit from an advance review of the ground rules. They could help plan the snack that Mommy will serve, or decide which toys and spaces are shared and which are off limits. Both children might be encouraged to think about some fun activities, and plan for how to better resolve any rough spots that may have arisen in past play dates, such as by putting away favorite toys that do not need to be shared.

Parents can help their visiting child plan for playing with someone else's toys. The visiting child particularly needs to understand about his or her parent's comings and goings. Will Mommy or Daddy stay? If not, where will Mommy or Daddy be? Many young children are uncomfortable informing a relatively strange grown-up that they are hungry, sick, need to use the bathroom, or are yearning for a parent. This discomfort can diminish children's enjoyment of their play date. Parents can assist children to feel safe and enjoy a new environment by supportively acknowledging their discomfort and helping them plan words that they could use.

The visiting child will feel safer in a new environment and more able to turn to the resident parent when his or her parent conveys comfort or warmth about the resident parent. It is also helpful if the visiting parent can stay for at least part of the play date. Parents can stay for briefer times with their child when she or he becomes four years of age, especially if the child is visiting a friend and home that she or he has visited before. However, parents should be guided by their sense of their child's readiness, rather than fixed objective rules.

The involvement of the at-home parent is generally most helpful at the beginning of the play date. The visiting child is anxious about separating from a parent and managing a new environment. The visited child, secure on home ground, may be overpowering. Parents can usefully provide structure, perhaps a cooking project that will produce a snack, a walk in the back yard to collect leaves, or a threesome building project. If parents of both children are there, parents need to be present for their children and overcome the temptation to indulge in needed grown-up talk.

As young children settle in and begin to play, parents should keep a respectful distance so they can remain available to help the children. They

can check-in frequently for a few minutes. Parents have to master the art of providing children the necessary space to work out conflicts by themselves while they remain poised to intervene if they sense things are beginning to get a bit out of hand.

Fifteen or 20 minutes is sufficient time for most 3- or 4-year-olds to play together on a single activity. Parents can then provide a snack or change of activity. It is wise for the parent to become more involved after an hour of the play date. When children get tired, there is a potential for an otherwise positive play date to end on a sour note. Some quiet, guided activities, such as reading to the children or working some puzzles, can be just the ticket.

The reunion between the visiting children and parent is a special time, an ending of a wonderful adventure involving much more than just playing. Children have worked on relating, overcoming worries about being liked, managing temptations and different rules, trusting a parental substitute, possibly coping with siblings, all without the presence of their parents who know just the right ways to help. No wonder that children are so worn out ("bored") and needful of their parent after a play date!

