**What to do if your child is having friendship difficulties**

Friendship difficulties can cause huge anxiety for parents. To a certain extent it is right to be concerned if your child has trouble making friends, as friendships are fundamentally important for your child’s emotional well-being and self -confidence

* Bear in mind that all children have friendship blips from time to time
* Your child’s limited friendships are only really a problem if your child is unhappy
* Some little people are perfectly content having just one friend or spending a lot of time on their own.

Try not to make too much of a big deal about your child’s social circle (or lack of it) as they may feel they are disappointing you - which could make them more anxious and exacerbate the problem.

Instead, try to conceal your concerns, convey a confidence that things will improve and focus on following the practical strategies outlined below.

**Top tips for kids' friendship problems**

**1. Listen to your child’s worries**

* If your child tells you that other children “won’t let” them play, or shares other worries about friendships, listen and accept their feelings. Let them know that you take their concerns seriously and are on their side.
* Don’t play down fears. Instead validate feelings: “Ooh so they wouldn’t let you join in, I’m not surprised you’re feeling hurt”
* Whether your child is having difficulties with friendships because they are quiet and reserved or because they are overly boisterous and controlling, be careful of labelling your child. *Labels such as ‘bossy’ or ‘shy’ can be very self-fulfilling and may trap your child in exactly the kind of role you want them to avoid*.
* If it seems your child is being treated cruelly or being bullied by children you may wish to step in or raise your concerns with teachers or activity leaders.

**2. Be a good role model**

* Children learn from watching others so your behaviour can inadvertently influence how you child interacts with other children. For example, some children who have strict, controlling parents can find they get accused of being bossy. Or if you feel anxious in social situations, you may find your little one is also nervous.
* The plus side of this is that you can act as a very valuable role model for your child. So, show an interest in new people you meet - be polite and friendly, listen and ask questions. With friends, your partner and relatives demonstrate basic social rules like sharing belongings, being considerate and thoughtful and compromising over decisions. Combine this subtle teaching with direct guidance through role play.



**3. Practice makes perfect! Use role play**

* Use role play as a fun way to help your child learn to relate better in social situations
* Begin to teach your child how to approach a group, enter a conversation by modelling this with your child, ‘Wow Katie, that looks fun, do you mind if I play?’
* Show responses to refusal and acceptance i.e. “Great, thanks which pieces can I use?” or “OK, maybe another time”
* You can also try role playing with dolls, cuddly toys or puppets

**4. Set up (monitored) play dates at home**

* If your child is repeatedly getting into trouble with friends, it’s easy to find yourself avoiding contact with other children through fear of negative reactions from other parents. This sets up an unfortunate vicious cycle whereby your child has little opportunity to practice social skills and becomes increasingly isolated.
* Step out of this cycle by gradually increasing opportunities for positive play experiences by inviting friends over.
* Do not leave this play time unstructured. Set up the visit so it has a clear purpose and structure. Plan with your child in advance a cooperative activity that he/she and the other child would like to do together
* When your child and friend are playing nicely, praise co-operative behaviour and comment on how they are becoming good friends “You two are working really well together! You make a perfect team”
* Keep the visits brief to increase chances of success
* Monitor the play and take a break if you notice either child is getting frustrated
* If you notice disagreements brewing – take the role of the coach from the side-lines and support the children in problem solving

**5. Praise and reward social skills**

* Notice when your child is interacting nicely with other children and praise the social skills you are observing or want to see more of
* Be specific, “I noticed you waited quietly for your turn, even though you were itching to have a go; that was really patient of you!”
* Star charts can be helpful to reinforce positive behaviours – use positive language for the behaviours you are looking for, ‘Frankie waits patiently for his turn’ rather than Frankie does not grab things’

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| My Aspergers Child: Helping Your Aspergers Child to Make Friends ... | **Books and resources that may be helpful:**Self-esteem Kit – by Big Life Journal (available as a PDF)I can do hard things – by Gabi GarciaWhat to do when you worry too much – by Dawn HeubnerMy feel good book: 90 ways to feel confident and happy and be you! – by Francoize Boucher Relaxation and mindful techniques and stories |