

Figuring Out Friendships Social Skills Add Up in Kindergarten

by Erin Mantz

Do you remember your friends from kindergarten? Perhaps you can picture some faces, recall some names — or you may not remember them at all. Yet, those first school friendships set the stage for future ones, and taught you everything from social skills and sharing to tag and a sense of right and wrong. They taught you how to play.

If "play is the work of childhood," as noted by Dr. Neal Horen, child psychologist and Director of the Hoya Clinic at Georgetown University, then kindergarten friends play a critical role in our children's development. As first friends engage our kids in play and encourage social interaction, they develop skills for life.

Schools today may implement more security measures and assign more homework than in our day, but some things about kindergarten remain the same. Research into early childhood friendships emphasizes that these friends have an enormous impact on children's school engagement, performance, sense of happiness and more. In fact, research specifically with kindergarten teachers found that a child's ability to get along with friends, empathize and use self-control is a better predictor of school success than knowledge of the ABCs. Other studies show that children who experienced a rewarding friendship before a sibling was born were likely to have a better relationship with their new brother or sister.

Ready for Kindergarten, Ready for Friendship?

Your little one may seem wise beyond his years (especially compared to when he was 4!), but 5-year-olds are still developing socialization skills and learning to interact with people. They are also just beginning to deal with conflict. According to Kathleen Marshall, a professional school counselor at Oakton Elementary School in Oakton, Va., sharing and functioning as part of a group are among the most common challenges kindergarten friends face. "It's almost as if they will let someone enter their little world." Dr. Horen echoes this point. "Kids are not hard-wired to be good sharers. They learn it early on — from family members, preschool classmates and play dates. The kids that do well socially not only have the skills, but know how to apply them."

Five-Year-Old Friendship Factors

The kindergarten play date circuit is alive and well in Potomac. For many 5-year-olds, that's where school friendships carry over into each other's homes and offer one-on-one interaction — and all the challenges and skills that come with it. How *do* 5-year-olds become friends — or even get to the play date point — and why? Kindergartener Jed Langer's friendships are predominately based on a shared interest in sports or a similar sense of humor. Mom Deb Langer says that while his friends share these similarities, their temperaments may differ. "Sometimes Jed can be the shy one and his friend might be more outgoing, which is a good balance. Other times, Jed is outgoing and draws out a

shy friend. It's an innocent time in their lives. They are sort of blind to differences, which is great." Her biggest challenge on play dates is knowing when to end them. Five-year-olds can quickly get tired or edgy after a long school day.

McLean mom Robyne Davis is the mother of 7-year-old Cayla and 5-year-old Mason. She's also a licensed professional counselor, so she assesses her kids' friendships with a unique perspective. She sees Mason, currently in preK, gravitate to friends who share his interests — Star Wars, Legos or baseball — but the boys' personalities often differ. On the other hand, first-grader Cayla seems to choose friends who have temperaments like hers; one girlfriend may mainly love soccer and the other art, but they still like to play together. This held true for Cayla in kindergarten, and it holds true today.

Last year, faced with half-day kindergarten, she and other neighborhood parents made an extra effort to arrange play dates. It was more about the parents getting together; moms who crossed paths or became friendly made play dates accordingly. (Many moms would admit this: If you like a certain mom, it might be her kid that's first on your list for a play date invite!) But with Cayla now in first grade, Robyne marvels at how parental involvement in forging friendships decreased. Cayla has chosen and made close friends with children whose moms Robyne may not even know. "Like adults, kids tend to click with other people. You can't force friendships to happen," Robyne says.

"Teaching" Friendship Skills

In Rachel Ginsburg's kindergarten classroom at Bells Mill Elementary School in Potomac, many students have happily discovered a new world of people their age — people they can really communicate with. Ginsburg gets a first-hand look at how the seeds of friendship are planted and how they bloom. Why does one kid seek out another as a friend? "It can be as simple as they both happened to bring the same show-and-tell to school or they were assigned to sit next to each other at the table," Ginsburg says. One kid may then ask the other to "come to the writing center" or "sit next to me." They seek out chances to be literally next to each other and establish closer physical proximity. She purposely mixes up student table seating assignments to expose the kids to different classmates.

She also takes an active role in teaching students about friendship, working friendship themes into class discussions, books, circle time, more seating logistics and curriculum activities. If Ginsburg's initiative is indicative of other area kindergarten teachers, parents can be assured and inspired that teachers are thoroughly addressing and encouraging friendship skills and understanding. "I match kids up for 'buddy work' in math, mixing it up so the same kids aren't chosen or left out all the time. Other times, I let my students choose their buddies." Ginsburg's "VIP of the Day" program spotlights each child. The class interviews him and learns about his likes and dislikes, and creates a poster for him based on the discussion. Questions they ask may be as simple as "Do you like barbeque chicken?" or "What do you like to play outside?" but the answers can reveal similar interests among several children.

Some parents may feel out of the loop of the kindergarten classroom, but there is so much they can do to encourage friendships. Kindergarten orientation — often held during the spring the year a child starts — can be an excellent place to meet other families. Some PTAs create a kindergarten directory so parents can arrange play dates during the summer. Once school begins, parents can continue to set up play dates throughout the year. They can also identify an activity the child likes to do — such as art or basketball — and sign him up for a class. His confidence in that activity may also give him confidence in socializing with other kids in that group or team. Some people recommend parents and children gather informally with other parents and their kids after school, at the park, or in another low-key environment.

Inevitably, every friendship, at any age, may hit some bumps in the road — and 5-year-olds are no exception. Parents need to talk with their kids and keep lines of communication open, so their children can come to them with problems (real or perceived). Hold some play dates at your house so you can observe the kids in action. However, experts caution parents to be very careful about making every decision for their kid. Be aware of your child's needs. If you sense something in the friendship may harm your child, it's certainly time to get more involved. Watch for warning signs. Is a certain friend always in trouble, suddenly acting out, weakening your child's confidence or being too rough? Figure out the circumstances. For instance, the troubled friend may be dealing with a medical problem or parents' divorce — not purposely being a "bad kid."

Friends Can Impact Students' School Satisfaction

Kindergarten-age boys and girls are affected differently in school by the types of friendships they develop, University of Illinois researchers found. Boys who perceive that they have higher levels of conflict (engaging in arguing, being bossy, rejecting others or other contentious behavior with a friend) in their school friendships tend to show higher levels of loneliness at school. They also exhibit a variety of adjustment difficulties in school, including dissatisfaction with school and lack of involvement. Girls in the same situation do not show the same tendencies. Even though boys and girls experience similar amounts of conflict in their friendships, it may be the case that girls resolve conflicts more quickly or satisfactorily than boys. The findings also reveal that children who believe their friends give them personal support and help in problematic social situations tend to view their classroom as more supportive and enjoy being in school more when their friends are there. Children with friends who help them appear to like school better as the year progresses.

When all is said and done and kindergarten "graduation" is upon them, do the kids' friendships last? Dr. Horen explains it this way: "It depends what a child is getting out of the relationship. Like all people, there is something they've been getting out of it. Once that's gone, they may move on." Kindergarten doesn't come with a grade or degree in friendship, but it should get the credit for igniting a lifelong love of friendship.

Right To the Source **Kindergarteners Define the Word "Friend"**

We've heard from the experts. Then, we asked six kindergarteners "What is a friend?" Their answers were amazingly similar — and basic!

- "Friends are kids you play with on the playground. They help you feel better when you are sick and come to your birthday party." -- *Teddy*
- "A person that you play with a lot." -- *Max, Ben and Isaac (each one answered this separately)*
- "Someone who is like your best friend. It's someone you like very much and play with all the time." -- *Hannah*
- "When he is a guest at my house, he gets to pick what game to play or go first. Someone I can talk silly with and play fun games with." -- *Jed*

Furthering Friendships: **Three Tips for Parents of Current and Soon-To-Be Kindergarteners**

Kathleen Marshall, Professional School Counselor at Oakton Elementary School offers some sound advice:

- Sign your child up for a team sport or group class, based on one of his interests, like art, soccer or T-ball. This will help him get used to doing something in a group — a skill he'll need in the kindergarten classroom.
- Talk to your child prior to play dates and before conflicts arise. Remind him how to share and take turns (role playing can work wonders). Create a special reminder signal that you can give him if the play date is at your house.
- Don't jump in too soon. Teach your child the skills he'll need, and let him get comfortable putting them into practice.