



## Friends Summary

### Why Friends?

Helping your child grow healthy friendships is essential. Through relationships, your child develops a sense of belonging. They come to better understand themselves through their interactions with you, their teachers, and their peers. And, friendships will even affect their physical health, mental health, and wellbeing.

**Tip** These steps are done best when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.

**Tip** Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

### Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- *“How can you start new friendships?”*
- *“What does a good friend look like?”*
- *“What do you think it means to be a good friend?”*
- *“What would you like others to do to reach out to you?”* (Do they want to be included in games or fun activities?)
- *“How can you enact these qualities and actions? How can you be the one to include others?”*
- Practice actively listening to your child’s thoughts, feelings, and worries about friendships.
- Brainstorm together!
- Use your child’s reading or shows to spur conversations about friendship.
- Discuss the meaning of friendship as a whole family at a family dinner.

**Tip** Sometimes feeling the need for friends, especially when they feel like they don’t have many, can make a child feel alone, vulnerable, and different. Reassure your child that it’s normal for any person to want to grow friendships. Everyone goes through challenging times trying to find new friends.

**Trap** Your worries are not always your children’s worries. Listen closely to what is most concerning to your child without projecting your own thoughts, concerns, and feelings.

**Trap** Be sure you talk about stressful friendship challenges at a calm time when you are not stressed!

## Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Model introductions for your child during regular weekly activities. *“Hi. I come in here weekly, and you’ve helped me many times. What is your name? It’s nice to meet you. This is my daughter, Amanda. She is a big help on shopping trips.”*
- Introduce yourself and your child at new program drop offs (like the first day of school or camp). *“Hi. We are excited to start. I’m Ian’s Mom, Kathy, and this is Ian.”*
- Brainstorm ideas together for ways to start up a connection. *“Are you both interested in animals? What does he enjoy that you would like to learn about?”*
- Try out listening strategies. Good friends are skilled listeners. (See listening tool for more!)
- Make and use a talking stick.
- Practice “I-messages” to disagree kindly. *“I feel frustrated and angry when you keep playing and don’t seem like you are listening because I feel like you are ignoring me, and I believe what I have to say is important for both of us.”*
- *Follow up when your child makes mistakes to help them repair harm. Mistakes are a critical aspect of social learning.*

**Tip** Remember, children who have friendships and valued connections are more likely to want to go to school and will be more cooperative in daily routines.

## Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Provide opportunities for your child to meet and interact with other children and adults of all ages, races and cultures. Point out similarities and differences. Talk about how differences help you learn more about yourself and others.
- Use “Show me…” statements like, *“Show me how you can listen at dinner without interrupting.”*
- Recognize effort. *“I noticed how you used an I-message with your sister when you got frustrated. That’s excellent!”*
- Schedule playdates. They build connections and help your child practice the skills.
- Discuss a few simple rules with your child in advance of a playdate.
- Proactively remind. *“Remember how to do an I-message?”*

**Tip** Children have plenty of time for screens. Playdates should not be one of them if you want to maximize your child’s social learning. Adopt the motto: “Friends before screens.” Perhaps get out some novelty toys that haven’t been opened yet or some creative playthings to attract their attention and interest, put away the screens, and allow them time to work out what they’ll do.

## Step 4. **Support** Your Child’s Development and Success

- Ask key questions. *“Did you sit with someone at lunch today? Who? What did you play at recess?”*
- Learn about development. Each new age will present different social challenges.
- Reflect on outcomes. *“Remember we met Sam together on your first day of school and you are still hanging out with him? He’s become a good friend.”*

- Stay engaged. Ask yourself if you need to reteach or make changes.
- Engage in further practice. Create more opportunities to practice when all is calm and it's playtime. Role play or rehearse when needed.

## Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Notice even small successes. *“I noticed you introduced yourself to the other girl at the market. Yes! Excellent.”*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, *“Since you made a new friend this week, why don't I call her Mom and invite her to go to the pool with us?”* Encourage opportunities for fun and further connection.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Friends Summary. Ages 5-10*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.