

Developing Friendships:

Tips for Creating Positive Peer Interaction

By Linda K. Murphy



For many children with ASD, ADHD, or other social communication challenges, connecting with peers in a positive, sustained way, and developing true friendships can be hard!

Parents and teachers can help achieve the goal of bringing kids together to build successful peer interaction by valuing both the big moments of success and the many small moments in-between. You want kids to walk away with positive memories of being with other kids, so they will feel competent and valuable as a play partner and friend. Following is a “cheat sheet” of five guiding principles to support this end.

Tip #1: Consistency.

Believe in the power of relationships. When kids see each

other on a regular basis, relationships will strengthen and grow, and they will have the potential to develop a friendship. Consistency over time allows plenty of space for bumps and conflicts to be tolerated and ultimately worked out. If kids have a disagreement one week, it is okay, because you’ll know you will have the opportunity to help them reflect and repair their misunderstanding the next time they’re together.

In addition, as we all form more memories together over time, so we are increasing the likelihood that our positive memories together will far outweigh the negative ones. We hear often of kids having a bad experience with their peers that leads to the formation of negative memories. This, then, gets in the way of developing friendships. In natural environments,

it can be challenging for kids to independently go back and make a repair with friend, and then move on together from a place of mutual understanding. In contrast, if you have a plan in place for children to see each other on a consistent basis, no matter what, you are supporting their ability to come back and repair the relationship in the near future. You also are helping them to appreciate that all relationships have their ups and downs, which friends can handle. Actively develop resilience.

Tip for home: *Think about a regular time in the week, or every other week, where your child could be with the same friend, or potential friend, and set this time aside in your schedule as a playdate. The next tip will hopefully help this feel more manageable in your undoubtedly busy lives!*



Tip #2: Keep it short.

“Less is more.” Playdates don’t have to be (and shouldn’t be, for that matter!) marathons. One hour is plenty for many kids. “Short” is a good thing for many reasons. Importantly, your child will likely stay at his or her best as the demands of peer interaction are kept at a level that supports success. Peer interactions are hard! They place many demands on kids across areas of attention, flexibility, emotional regulation, expressive and receptive language, motor planning, sensory processing, and reading of nonverbal communication, to name a few. This is a lot! Don’t overtax your kids or have things go on so long that they end in a meltdown. If you keep it short, you are increasing the likelihood that the playdate will end on a positive note. This will help both children walk away with positive memories of their shared experience. Positive memories help kids (and parents!) to want to come back for more.

Tip for home: *When getting started, we recommend a short playdate (e.g., one hour), every week or every two weeks, over a set period (e.g., 3-6 months).*

Remember: quality and consistency are more important than length of time. We hope that once you feel comfortable keeping it short, it will be easier to fit that playdate into your weekly family schedule.

Tip #3: Use Authentic Activities.

Everyday activities provide a great backdrop for peer interactions. Let the kids help you bake a treat, make a fruit salad, or put together a simple snack. Walk, bike, or scooter to the park or around the block together. If you feel crafty, create a photo collage or sponge paint together. If you are feeling handy, get a screwdriver and invite the kids to help you change the batteries on toys or remote controls that need them. Appreciate nature together by watering flowers and plants inside or outside. These are all activities that can be done in collaboration, as you guide the children to share roles. For example, in making a cup of hot chocolate, one child could be the scooper, and the other might be the stirrer. Or, in watering plants, the children can pass the watering can back and forth from plant to plant.

Keep it simple and slow down, so that both children can enjoy the process and walk away with memories of feeling competent. It may be hard for kids to engage in reciprocal play when the context is not defined or too open, so creating or doing something that is meaningful and has a natural end result usually motivates kids to join and work together within an everyday activity. As you engage the kids in these types of activities, you can then guide them to interact in a reciprocal manner more easily.

Tip for home: *The next time you are about to do something around the house, pause to consider if it might provide a meaningful and interesting backdrop for peer interaction, and, if so, save it for the playdate!*

Tip #4: Be Open.

This means, be open to the many ways “togetherness” might look between your child and his friend. Some kids are not ready for sustained reciprocal play. Keep in mind that the simple act of being together, on a consistent basis, no matter what that looks like, is important. Even though we may think the two children are not playing, the fact that they have spent time together will likely lead to the formation of positive memories that help develop friendship. They may remember that they “went to the beach with their friend” or “walked to the playground together.” We do not have to be the ones to define what the relationship or friendship between two children will look like. It is empowering and positive to let them discover this on their own. Fade back to observe who these two children are together to allow their own story to unfold over time.

For kids who are less verbal, measures of progress or evidence of a growing relationship might be increased visual referencing towards

each other (demonstrating increased “social curiosity”), or even closer and closer proximity to each other over time. With these types of learners, we celebrate the small but important moments where they may be on a swing together or we catch them laughing together.

Tip for home: *Sit back and observe. Try to notice the small moments of connection or the quiet but important moments that indicate a relationship is forming! A shared smile. A shared laugh. Physical closeness. It is all good! Openness in the moment will support our kids to be who they are.*



Tip #5: Reflect on Memories and Make Future Plans.

Be sure to share memories playdate to playdate, so that the kids come to create their own shared story over time. Often our kids have the tendency to remember the bad parts, but, with your guidance and sharing of memories with them, you can help them remember the funny moments or the parts of their time together that they both enjoyed. You can also reflect upon important moments such as recovering from an upset,

flexibility in action, and reconnecting after a disagreement. These moments strengthen relationships over time, so make sure the kids remember them! In addition, you can make future plans. Do the two children have an idea of what they might like to do together next time? Help them think ahead about their next playdate so that they can look forward to it! It’s okay if you arrive on that day and the kids decide together they want to do something different. The important piece is to get them in the habit of thinking about their relationship in the future.

Tip for home: *Use declarative*

language to reflect on small but important moments and memories with your child. Kids may not always remember the moments that we think are noteworthy. Be sure to share memories after the fact or at the next playdate. Make simple, future plans together so that the kids look forward to seeing each other again.*

It is possible for *all* children to develop friendships and positive peer relationships. These five tips are a helpful guide in how to create fulfilling and meaningful playdates for your child. ■



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