



Everyday learning about



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# Friendship

Marie Hammer and Pam Linke

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The *Everyday learning series* has been developed to focus attention on the everyday ways in which children can be supported in their growth and development. It is for all those who are involved in children's development and learning, including early childhood professionals in all children's services, parents, grandparents and others with an ongoing responsibility for young children.

## **The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.**

- Early experiences set the pattern for all later learning.
- Early experiences and relationships affect how children feel about themselves, how they get on with other people and how they join in and enjoy life.
- Every experience has an impact. Babies and young children are learning all the time, regardless of whether we think we are 'teaching' them.

Research has shown that a strong foundation in these years starts children on the pathway to:

- being able to relate confidently and effectively with others;
- mental and emotional health; and
- making the most of each child's abilities in education.

## **Babies and young children are learning all the time.**

This research also shows us what kinds of experiences and relationships babies and young children need, to get the best start for living and learning.

What matters is how they are learning and what they are learning. Learning takes place in relationships. If the earliest relationships are warm and loving, babies and young children have the best chance to make the most of the opportunities in their worlds.

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- are warm and caring;
- know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them;
- take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed; and
- are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

## **There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.**

Living is learning and children learn through living. These books are a guide to how young children learn and how best to help them at the different stages of early childhood. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests.

Adults watch and listen and provide opportunities and support to build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences.

# Introduction

## Everyday learning about friendship

We all enjoy being part of a group and the interactions we have with people close to us. Being accepted by others and feeling liked is important to our wellbeing and it is no different for children. As children grow and develop they will be part of a variety of groups: from the family, to child care and preschool, to the classroom and neighbourhood. Being successful in these groups is an important part of the learning and understanding that children experience as part of growing up.

From birth onwards children gradually get to know other people in their world. New babies need to get to know their parents or close carers first. As they grow they get to know their family and relatives, then friends of the family and their children, and then other children where they make their own friendships. All of this takes time and it is not until they are in their primary school years that children really understand what the 'give and take' of friendship is all about.

## Why are friendships important?

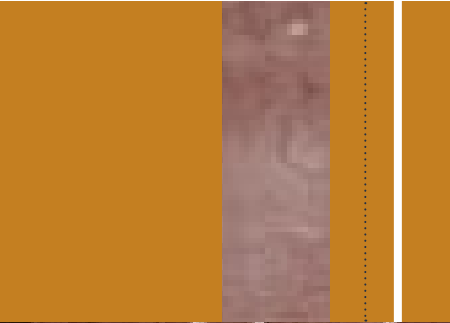
Friendships are important for children in many ways and as children grow older they become more and more important.

- As they make friends they learn how to participate in relationships.
- Through watching and joining in with others, children learn many things such as:
  - ways to care for themselves and others;
  - how to play different games;

- how to work within rules; and
- feeling worthwhile, and building a sense of belonging to the community they live in.

Some of the things children learn through friendships and relating to other people include learning to:

- develop a sense of individuality and worth;
- learn about themselves in their culture;
- 'get along' with other people outside their own family;
- predict how another person will react to what they do or say;
- recognise and respond to other people's feelings;
- develop the skills to build relationships;
- trust other people;
- understand how to talk and listen to others;
- work out how to negotiate when there are differences;
- solve problems and resolve arguments; and
- develop good ways to learn from being with others and doing things together.



We know children start learning from their earliest relationships, so having good early relationships is important to their learning, as well as to their happiness. Social and emotional development has been shown to be the most important aspect for children as a foundation for all their other learning. Important elements of this development are for children to:

- feel secure;
- be accepted by other children;
- be able to trust adults;
- be willing to try new things;
- communicate well with other adults;
- express their needs so other people understand them; and
- make friends.

If children are feeling anxious or uncertain with other people, this can distract them from exploring and learning about their world.

### **How do children learn to be a friend?**

To make and keep friends and to live with others in the world we all need social skills. So what are social skills? Social skills are the ability for children to relate to others and to the communities they live in, in ways that meet their own and others' needs. These skills vary according to the child's cultural context.

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Children learn how to behave and get on well with others according to the customs of their community. In cultures where getting along with others in the group is more important, babies often have more people to relate to and quickly develop the skills they need to do this in more complex ways than would be expected of children in Western cultures (Rogoff, 2003).

One very important way for children to learn about friendship is through watching and copying those close to them. Children watch those around them. They try out things they have watched others do and practice these things to learn how to relate to others.

Young children need to learn the basic skills of relating to others such as:

- taking turns;
- listening to others; and
- describing their own needs and feelings.

These skills are practised with the trusted adults in their lives. Children need to:

- develop trust in others—their families first, then other adults and carers in their early lives;
- have a belief in themselves and their ability to be able to cope and make things happen; and
- have a sense of confidence, self-esteem (feeling OK about themselves) and optimism.

For this to happen in the early years, children need opportunities to succeed, people who love and like them, and people they can rely on to provide what they need for comfort, security and health.



# Babies

## Development—what babies may do

Babies are learning about relationships from the time they are born. Very young babies will try to make contact with their carers by body movements, by looking at them and by crying or making little noises. In their awake and alert times, they can also respond to your voice and face and movement.

From the earliest days and weeks babies will:

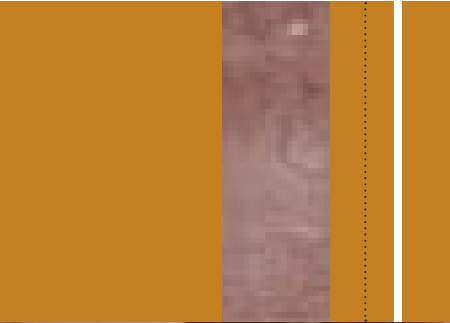
- try to relate socially to their carers;
- pause during feeding to look at the parent or caregiver; and
- make small noises or smile to get the parent's attention.

Then later when they see parents or carers they will:

- smile;
- reach out;
- look excited; and
- make more vocal sounds.







And after the first six months or so they will:

- remember you when you aren't there—so they may cry when they need your comfort or when you leave them;
- follow you if you move away from them;
- hold out their arms to be picked up; and
- enjoy playing social games with you.

At first glance it may seem as though babies are playing their own games near other babies without any real interaction but when you watch babies carefully you notice that they change what they are doing and watch for responses from each other. They may:

- reach out to touch other babies;
- look closely at other babies' faces and gestures;
- use these cues for what to do next; and
- use their own social signals such as smiling and crying to communicate with the other baby.

As babies reach out to touch each other, they are learning about friendships. It is important when babies play near each other that adults are close by to support them and give help when it is needed. The adult can support the baby by showing how to treat others e.g. by saying 'Just touch her gently'.

## What to do . . . ?

In order to get along with others, children first need to feel good about themselves. You need to feel that you are a likeable person to have the confidence to reach out towards others and to make the moves towards friendships. It is part of being a confident community member.

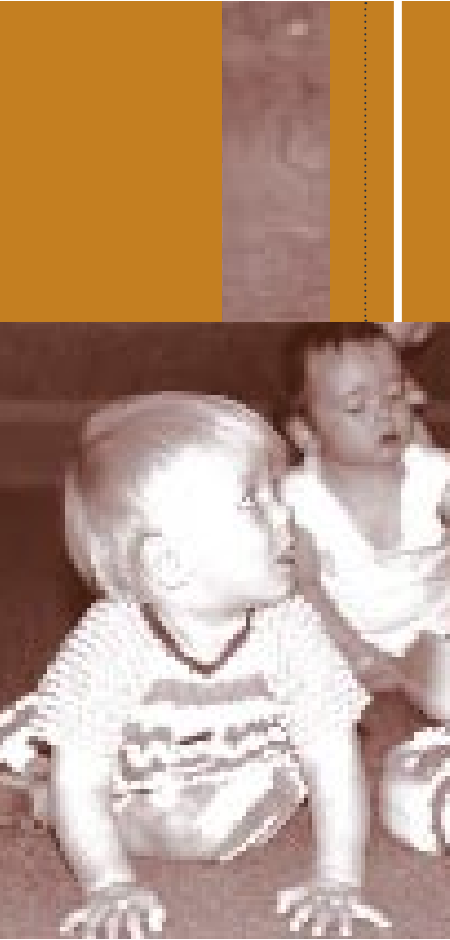
In this earliest stage of childhood the baby needs the important adults in his or her life to be warm and responsive in their care of the baby and warm and friendly to each other. Babies are very sensitive to the atmosphere around them and need adults to respond to them in a gentle, caring way.

Early caring for babies is the key building block for social development, including friendships. Warm care makes the baby feel secure and comfortable. Having needs met reduces feelings of anxiety and worry, and helps the baby to develop an awareness of other people around him/her. Babies who enjoy warmth and affection in the family are more likely to be open to making positive social relations with others, building on the good feelings they have already experienced.

Warm care can also promote better learning of social skills because the good feelings that come from feeling cared for and secure help the baby to be able to manage the ups and downs of relating to others. The caring adult provides the baby with a role model that the baby can copy. When adults behave in positive ways in their own relationships, then the child is probably going to follow and do the same things.

### **Taking turns—the beginnings of social relationships**

Parents and carers can help by taking turns with the baby. If the baby makes a little noise, puts out her tongue or opens her mouth wide, the parent can copy what the baby has done. This says to the baby, 'I heard/saw you', and 'I want to have a "conversation" with you'. Then if you wait, the baby is likely to respond



again and so you have a beginning relationship. It is important to notice when the baby is tired and gets agitated or looks away. This says, 'I need a bit of a break from the conversation'. All of this helps the baby to develop a sense of trust and leads to the beginnings of being able to relate to others.

Responding to the baby's signals is a really important way of helping their social development:

- if your baby smiles at you, she needs you to smile back;
- if she cries, she needs you to comfort her; and
- if she is 'talking' to you by signs or little noises or beginning words, she needs you to show you are interested and not to look away.

As babies grow and learn, these signals become more complex and varied. As they grow, babies quickly grasp the idea of cause and effect: 'When I do this ... then I get that ...' and so they add new ideas, words and actions to what they can do.

The first step in learning to talk is babbling. Join in the 'conversation' and enjoy taking turns in 'talking' with your baby. Taking turns in babbling and imitation games encourages understanding of both people having a turn in talking and listening: the beginning of the rules of conversation.

### **The beginnings of friendships**

Mothers' and babies' groups, baby massage classes, parent coffee mornings etc. are all good places for babies to see and begin to relate to other babies. The key to successful social gatherings with babies is that the adults enjoy them too and that they are welcoming, supportive and enjoyable.

## Helping your baby learn about being a friend

- Involve your baby in social activities.
- Babies will enjoy facing the group and being able to reach out to others while still safely near their familiar adult.
- Allow your baby opportunities to explore without your intervention or direction but watch for when she needs support or help and be ready to enjoy her achievements with her.
- Visit a range of places where people gather to meet, talk and eat together. Your baby will watch and learn new social signals.
- Don't go too fast for your baby. Babies develop at different rates and pushing them to be involved before they are ready is likely to overwhelm them and set them back. Watch for their signals of when they feel comfortable.
- Interactive games such as 'Peek-a-boo' help babies to understand facial expressions and the importance of eye contact in social relationships.
- Reassurance and encouragement while dancing gently with baby, playing nursery rhymes and singing with baby will help him/her to feel confident and enjoy exchanges with others.

Telling babies they are doing well, that you love them, and encouragement all help them build positive feelings about themselves and about you, which provide them with a strong base from which to learn about others.

# Toddlers

## Development—practising being friends

Toddlers move further into the social world outside the family as their physical skills and independence grow. This is a time when children are learning who they are and wanting to reach out to others to join their games. It is also a time when you will see children copying things they have seen you doing, such as caring for a baby, for example feeding the doll and putting it to bed.

Toddlers' language and understanding grows very quickly and they now can clearly let adults know what they are feeling and wanting. Toddlers want to explore the world but they still need your comfort and help very quickly when things go wrong. They can become quickly frustrated when what they want to do doesn't quite work out the way they thought it would.

It is easy to forget that toddlers still need to learn about other people and social relationships and that they need help to understand how others are feeling. Adults and older children teach toddlers how to behave with others by what they do themselves. Toddlers love to copy their parents and to please their special adults, even though sometimes their efforts don't quite work out.

Toddlers are interested in everything around them. Important adults help them to develop their skills as they make the time and places for them to play. A toddler engrossed in a play activity will get up and follow an adult as he/she moves away from the play. This is because it is the person they know and love, rather than the playthings, that is important to the toddler. Toddlers enjoy playing with adults and need to know that you are near, even when they play alone or near other children.



Learning to wait and take turns does not come easily to toddlers. Adults can help them to do this by being with them, helping them find something to do while they wait and letting them know that their turn will come soon.

## Toddlers and other toddlers

Toddlers respond to other children in different ways. They may ignore them or see them as an object of interest or someone to play with—sometimes roughly, hitting and pushing them. As they get used to the new person they play beside one another—splashing water, throwing sand, laughing together and sharing a game for a short time. Playing together is a new skill for toddlers and involves lots of new learning that takes time.

## Things to do

It takes a long time to learn how to get along together and toddlers need some adult help when things become a bit complicated. Adults can show children and tell children how to manage the difficult things: like wanting something someone else is playing with, getting pushed, not being included etc. It is important to remember that these experiences are new for toddlers and they can get frightened, frustrated or overwhelmed without adult reassurance.

If you are friendly, the child you are caring for is likely to be friendly too, while still needing help with the basic skills. Sometimes toddlers can be aggressive to other children and, if an adult smacks the child for hitting, this can teach the child aggressive behaviour. Distraction and redirection are more effective ways of helping children to learn to deal with frustration.







- Interesting materials such as sand, water, clay and dough are ideal for toddlers learning to do things together in very small groups. There should be enough of the same things for the toddlers not to have to share at first, so organise plenty of play dough, and enough similar buckets and spades for the sand and water.
- Toddlers also enjoy dress-ups and use these to play out social situations and things that people do together.
- Close adult support helps toddlers to learn about what to do in different situations. Skills such as politeness, knowing when to speak and when to listen, and turn-taking are developed with adult help.
- The key to successfully supporting toddlers in learning about getting along with others relies on adults following the child's lead and knowing when the child can manage and when she needs you to intervene because things are getting too much for her. Adults can also name feelings for the toddler and demonstrate to the children how to be gentle, listen to others and recognise others' feelings. Adults need to remember that toddlers can get frustrated and offer alternative activities when there is conflict.

Some useful ideas to help toddlers relate well to others include:

- playing with them—where the adult plays alongside the child and follows the child's lead;
- meeting a new child together, so the toddler can learn from the adult's reaction;
- sharing interests with a new child—the adult talks about things the two children have in common, e.g. 'Tommy likes to play with cars too';
- showing the toddler how to act, e.g. 'Let's ask Kim if you can have a turn with the swing'; and
- staying close at hand when toddlers are together.

# Preschoolers and early school years

## Development—having friends

Friendships become clearer and children show a liking for particular children as they grow towards school age. By the time children are three or four years of age they are more interested in playing with other children rather than by themselves. In the early years of school, playing with the same group of friends takes up most of children's spare time.

At this age friendships may not last; often children become hurt when a friend doesn't want to play with them. They may need support in coping with the hurt and perhaps in finding another playmate.

Different children go about making friends in different ways. During the preschool years friendships are often made around wanting to play the same games. Children enjoy imaginative games as they copy and learn to make sense of what the people in their world do and say. These games include lots of new skills: from being a leader or helper, to other roles for children who like to be near others but still don't want to be in the centre of the play. These children often play the part of the baby or pet in the games.

In the preschool and early school years, girls and boys often play in same-gender groups. Preschool and young school children often make up rules; when these rules are broken then the friendship is finished. It usually begins again when new games are invented and a fresh start is begun. Making up the rules is as important as the game itself and is part of children's learning about things like 'right' and 'wrong' and 'fair' and 'unfair'. They also learn important negotiation and leadership skills in this kind of play.



Starting school can be a testing time for children's friendships, where circumstances may move children to different areas, even different classrooms. Children need adult support during these transition periods as they establish and/or re-establish friendships. Studies have shown that children make new friends when they begin school and that these friendships are based on children's experiences in preschool. Children tend to form new friendships that are similar in pattern to their preschool friendship experiences (Dunn, Cutting & Fisher, 2002).

Once children start school, they spend more time with their friends and their circle of friends gradually increases. Generally seven-year-old children can name four friends, while 12-year-old children name seven or so (Bee, 1997). However there are no hard and fast rules about this and, if children are happy in their relationships with others, it doesn't matter if they have less or more friends in their group.

Being able to have friends is very important once children start school and most children will have some times when they feel rejected by others. This can be a disappointing time—as arguments occur and friends are uninvited to birthday parties etc. If children come home from school distressed about this they need to feel that they are being understood. If this seems to be happening often, it is also a good idea to check what is happening with the teacher. It may be that the child has difficulty with relating to other children and needs help, but it is more likely to have been something that happened on the day and will be repaired the next day.

### Things to do

To help children develop their friendships, it is useful to encourage play opportunities in small groups of two or three children so that they can develop a sense of social awareness and can feel safe enough to speak out. Like adults, some children can be put off by lots of people and may withdraw from large groups.

The imaginary world of pretend play is a way of learning about others' feelings and how they react—an important part of friendship.

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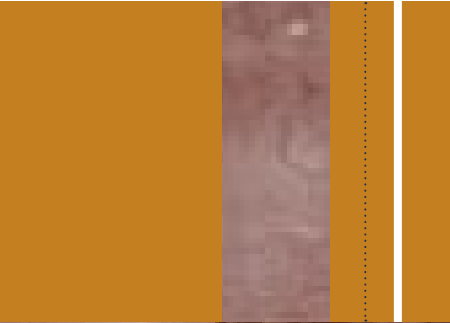
Pretend play helps children to understand and learn about sharing and taking turns. We need to remember that sharing and taking turns are hard things to learn and not to expect too much of children. Special, treasured possessions should not have to be shared, just as adults do not share a special piece of jewellery or car for example. Whilst the monetary value is different, the preciousness of some things is just the same for children. Sharing with friends is as much about learning when not to ask for something as it is about cutting a biscuit exactly in two.

Some play ideas to help with friendships:

- Gather old clothes for dress-ups and household items as props for pretend play.
- Help make cubby houses, from a box or old sheet over a chair, to allow children some privacy to act out their imaginary worlds freely.
- Arrange play opportunities with just one or two friends, as these are the best ways to learn about others' feelings and reactions.

## Imaginary friends

It is quite common for children of about three or four years of age to have an imaginary friend. This may be another child or could be a magical person or an animal. Sometimes the imaginary friends change as the child grows older. Often children who have imaginary friends are only children, or oldest children in the family; but having an imaginary friend does not mean that your child is lonely. They are usually creative, imaginative children. As the child grows older, the real world takes over and by the time the child is going to school the imaginary friend usually just quietly disappears.



## Giving your child some help with making friends

As children spend more time with their friends, they are less reliant on adults to help them to understand others' feelings and needs and they learn a lot about this from friends. There is still a place for conversations about friends and suggestions of strategies for playing with friends. If a child is having difficulty, it helps if the adult watches how they join in and play to see where they need help. Some children are helped by having something to contribute to the game rather than just asking to play, e.g. 'I could be the uncle' or 'we could use my ball'.

Sharing imaginative play and being able to communicate with each other is one way that helps children to develop friendship skills. These skills require practice and are not things adults can do for children. Adults can, however, help children to learn the skills if the relationships are out of balance or if a child is continually unable to cope with any of these things.

Children differ greatly in their ability to understand others' feelings and still rely on trusted adults to help explain why friends become angry or distressed and what to do to comfort them, cheer them up, or make them laugh. Conflict between friends will happen; it's how you manage it that matters. Honesty is important to help children learn from mistakes rather than always blaming others. It is also important to allow children opportunities to work out their own differences, no matter how tempting it is to 'fix things up' for them—as long as the children are safe.

## What to do when ...

### ... your child says she has no friends—how do you manage this?

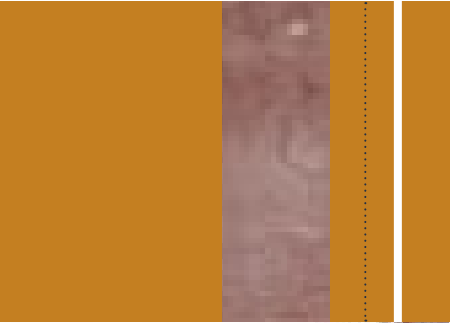
The first thing is to let your child know you have heard how she feels and not brush it off. Then you could get her to tell you about what happened that made her feel that way. If it is just an occasional situation you could remind her of times she has been happy with her friends and get her to tell you about that. And together you might work out what she could do tomorrow to find someone to play with. (Try to help her use her own ideas, but children may need suggestions.)

If children have ongoing difficulties with friendships they need adult help because this can be very distressing for them. Help in the early years of friendships will assist them in forming lasting friendships. Check first with the teacher/child care worker, who will most likely know what your child's friendship problems are—this is a good starting place. Then depending on the situation you might:

- ask one friend over to play and make sure there is something to do that the friend will enjoy;
- try joining in the play alongside him, even playing out situations so he can practice what he could say and do;
- you might help him join a club or interest group if he is old enough; or
- ask the teacher to help link him with other children at school.

### ... your child is not invited to a party

- Again, the starting place is to listen to how your child feels and let him know you understand. It can be very hard when you are young not to be invited to a party. You could talk about possible reasons why



he might not have been asked e.g. maybe the child's parents put a limit on guests or maybe your child is not a close friend of the party giver.

- To respond appropriately you need to know a bit about the context, e.g. was your child the only one not asked, was he a best friend etc.?
- Depending on how upset your child is, you might find something else that your child will enjoy to do instead on the party day.
- If it happens a lot then you need to observe how your child relates to others and give him some help in making friendships (see above).

#### **... none of the children greet your child at preschool/school**

- You need to think about whether this is a problem for your child or for you. If your child is not worried maybe you don't need to do anything.
- You could check with the teacher how your child is getting along with others.
- You could show and talk to your child about how to greet other children. For example, you could greet some other children when you drop her off, take an interest in what they are doing and include her in the conversation.
- If your child is worried, you could talk to her about things she could say to greet other children and even practise with her.

#### **... others talk about 'when I went to your place' but your child has not shared in this.**

- Listen to and show you understand your child's feelings, e.g. 'Were you wishing that you went to... as well?'

- Talk with your child about the different things different children do. Your child will be able to give you ideas about things he does that others don't do.
- Make sure your child has opportunities to do things with other children out of school time.

When any of these issues arise they can make parents worry. It is important to let your children know that you understand their feelings but not to let them think that you are too worried yourself. If you seem very worried, they will be thinking 'it must be really bad if Mum or Dad is so worried about it'. This can make their problem worse. So, much as you would like to know, it is usually best not to ask every day, 'Did you have someone to play with today?', but to wait for them to tell you.

## Friendships and feelings

### Understanding feelings

There are many different ways to express feelings. For example, if young children feel angry they are likely to express it physically by hitting or pushing, crying angrily, or having a tantrum. As they grow in understanding they may express it in words, do some activity such as going for a run, express it through painting or writing, try to deal with the cause, hide it and try to cover it up, or withdraw from the situation. Obviously some of these ways of expressing feelings are more helpful in developing friendships than others. Adults can help children to see that feelings are a part of being human by being open about expressing their own feelings.

### Learning about and dealing with feelings

Learning about their own strong feelings and expressing them in ways that are acceptable to other people is important to children being able to form good relationships with others. The first step in teaching children to deal with feelings is to show them that the adults in their lives can cope with their own feelings in ways that





are not hurtful to themselves or others. So when infants or young children are out of control, they know that the adults in their lives will neither leave them nor retaliate.

Adults also teach children ways to understand and express their feelings.

- They teach children to talk about feelings by giving the feelings names.
- They distract young children by offering them an alternative when they cannot have what they want.
- They teach children the words to tell others how they feel.
- They teach children to be aware of the feelings of other people by putting their own and other children's feelings into words.
- As children get older, adults can teach them to stop and think before they act and give them ways to work through solving problems and negotiating with others.
- By offering choices, we teach children to look at the consequences of the different ways they may act as well as show them that they have options.

Learning about feelings takes many years and, like adults, children won't get it right every time.

The earliest relationships set the pattern for all future relationships, including friendships. Babies and young children who expect to be liked and safe behave in ways that get that response from others. Babies and young children who expect the world to be frightening or unresponsive may be fearful and anxious as they go into the world, and the world may not respond to these messages in a positive way. If babies learn that they are safe and secure—because their needs for comfort and care are met, they are loved and lovable because adults respond to them and enjoy them, and they are capable because they have opportunities to make things happen—then they will expect the world to be a friendly, interesting place to be and they will go into the world with that expectation.

## Resources

### To read with children

Firmin, J. (1995). *What is a Friend?* New York: Weston.

Kolar, B. (1999). *Do You Want to Play?* New York: Dutton Children's Books.

Lewis, K. (1997). *Friends*. Cambridge, MS: Candlewick Press.

### For adults to read

[www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com). *Imaginary Friends*.

Thompson, M., & O'Neill, G., with Cohen, L. (2001). *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*. New York: Ballantine.

Faber, A., & Mazlish, E. (1987). *Siblings without rivalry*. Avon.

## References

Bee, H. (1997). *The Developing Child* (8th edn)., U.S: Addison–Wesley.

Dunn, J., Cutting, A., & Fisher, N. (2002). Old Friends, New Friends: Predictors of Children's Perspective on Their Friends at School. In *Child Development*, March–April, 73.

Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. London: Oxford University Press.

Schaffer, H. R. (1996). *Social Development*. Oxford: Blackwell.



The *Everyday learning series* has been developed to focus attention on the everyday ways in which children can be supported in their growth and development. It is for all those who are involved in children's development and learning, including early childhood professionals in all children's services, parents, grandparents and others with an ongoing responsibility for young children.



All those concerned with the development of young children like to see them happily enjoying friendships. In *Everyday learning about friendship*, Marie Hammer and Pam Linke explore how parents, carers and others involved in the lives of young children can support and encourage them as they extend their circle of friends. From their earliest days as part of a new family to their broadening horizons at preschool and the early days of school, this book will provide helpful ideas and guidance to assist children to become confident, self-assured members of society.



*These books are ideal for carers: always positive, very reader-friendly, giving a brief explanation of child development and activities that use readily-available resources. The layout is beautiful and the photos show everyday situations.*

Debbie Tuckey, Co-ordinator, Camden Family Day Care.