

Friends Age 4 Summary

Why Friends?

Your child's ability to get along with and play with others can shape their experiences at the park, in playgroups, and at preschool or childcare. You can support them as they exercise their newly forming social awareness and relationship skills.

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

Tip: Intentional communication and building a healthy parent relationship will support these steps.

STEP

1



Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Each time there is an opportunity, ask your child, *"How do you feel? How do you think the other child feels?"*
 - For example, if your child is with others expressing feelings, help your child notice cues from other children's faces and body language. For example, *"She's slumped over, and her face is frowning. Do you think she's feeling sad?"*
- If your child is feeling unsure about how others are feeling -- or buried in their feelings -- consider asking questions like:
 - *"What do you notice the other child is feeling?"*
 - *"How do you know from their facial expression?"*
 - *"What does their voice sound like? How are they moving?"*
- When reading books, look at the images of children or animals and guess the feelings by asking, *"What do you think that character is thinking? What do you think that character is feeling?"*

**STEP
2****Teach New Skills**

- Read and pretend play together.
 - Use reading time and select a book of faces to help your child learn to identify the different feelings of other children. Point out how you can tell each child's feelings, and practice recreating those cues with your child.
 - After reading a story together, act out the plot and use feeling words and expressions to match how the characters feel throughout the story. This expands their feelings vocabulary and teaches them how to recognize a wide range of perspectives and feelings they might not encounter in daily interactions with others.
- Share your thoughts and feelings. Talk about what you notice, how you are feeling, and why you are feeling it. *"I am excited to see my friend because I haven't seen her in a long time. Can you tell? I have a big smile on my face."*
- Talk aloud about how you respond to your big feelings. *"I'm going to take a few deep breaths before I ask my friend for help because I am a little nervous."*
- Develop empathy. In addition to developing these essential skills that lead your child to act as a good friend, there are beliefs and attitudes you can promote to help them, too. For example, when your child points a blaming finger, saying, *"He did it!"* you may respond with
 - *"What do you think he's feeling?"*
 - *"What choice would you make if you were sad or hurt?"*
 - *"What do you think could make him feel better?"*

Trap: Don't tell your child what they feel; ask instead. Three- and four-year-olds strive for independence and may push back if you are too direct about their thoughts and feelings. You might say, *"You look angry. Is that right?"*

**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 us learn more about ourselves and others.
- When out in your community and running errands with your child, make introductions and involve your child in conversations with others, such as neighbors, the coffee shop barista, or the grocery cashier.
- Use "Show me..." statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity...". When children learn a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. *"Show me how you can introduce yourself to our new friend."*

- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements like: *“I noticed how you included your new friend when playing games at the park. That’s excellent!”*
- Schedule playdates. Playdates can become an invaluable practice for your child. They build connections and help your child practice the skills you’ve taught them. For young children, short playdates might be best so the child doesn’t become overwhelmed or too tired. It is okay for parents or those in a parenting role to be present at the playdate until the child is comfortable with the new environment.

Trap: Many children are born with a cautious or shy temperament. They might not readily warm up to strangers and may show a fear of them. Respect that temperament by not forcing interaction but modeling your kind interactions with others.

STEP
4



SUPPORT

Support Your Child’s Development and Success

- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present differing social challenges. You will gain empathy and patience by becoming informed about the developmental milestones your child is working toward.
- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements: *“I noticed how you started playing with that new girl on the playground. I love seeing that.”*
- On days with extra challenges, when you can see your child is scared of new people or situations, offer confidence in your child’s ability to face the new. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child’s ear, *“Remember how you enjoyed meeting my friend Susie. Anna is kind, too. You might enjoy meeting her today.”* If your child still seems uncomfortable meeting a new person, honor their hesitancy and do not force it. This is an excellent opportunity to model consent.
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like
 - *“You seem worried about meeting your new friend at the park. I’ll hold your hand so that you feel more confident.”* Offering comfort when facing new situations can help your child gain a sense of security and face them rather than backing away.
 - You can also offer comfort items to help your child face new challenges. *“Would your bear help you feel more confident?”*
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different friendship-building strategies can offer additional support and motivation for your child when challenging issues arise.

Trap: Do not force physical interactions like hugs, high-fives, or handshakes between your child and other new individuals. Teach your young child early that they can control their own physical space and are never obligated to make physical contact with another.

**STEP
5****Recognize Efforts**

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice. For example, when your child shares with a friend, a short, specific call-out is needed: *"You were a good friend when you shared your toys today. Excellent."*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, snuggle and read before bed after getting through your bedtime routine. Or, in the morning, once ready for school, take a few minutes to listen to music together.

Trap: Think about what behavior a bribe may unintentionally reinforce. For example, offering a sucker if a child stops a tantrum in the grocery store checkout line may teach the child that future tantrums lead to additional treats.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2024). *Friends Age 4 Summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.ToolsforYourChildsSuccess.org>

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