

## Friends Age 6 Summary

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### 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 interactions with you, their teachers, and their peers. Friendships will even affect their physical health, mental health, and well-being.

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

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



**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 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 books or shows to spur conversations about friendship.
- Discuss the meaning of friendship as a family at 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 typical 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 assuming your child shares your same thoughts, concerns, and feelings. For example, you may be worried that your child only has one friend instead of a large group of friends like you did as a kid. Realize that your child may only need one good friend to be happy and understood.

## STEP 2 Teach New Skills

- 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!)
- 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 with friendships and valued connections are more likely to want to go to school and 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 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 a few new toys 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

### 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

### Recognize Efforts

- No matter how old your child is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your child's efforts. It is essential to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three parenting behaviors have different impacts on your child's behavior.
  - Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *"You invited that child sitting quietly alone at lunch to join your table. I love hearing that!"* Recognition can include nonverbal acknowledgment such as a smile, high five, or hug.
  - Rewards** can be helpful in certain situations by providing a concrete, timely, and positive incentive for doing a good job. A reward is determined ahead of time so the child knows what to expect, like *"If you introduce yourself to someone at swimming lessons, we will stay and swim extra time after your lesson."* (if you XX, then I'll XX). The goal should be to help your child progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a child's internal motivation.
  - Unlike a reward, **bribes** aren't planned ahead of time and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role is in the middle of a crisis (like in the grocery store checkout line and your children are arguing. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to buy a sucker if the children stop arguing). While bribes can be helpful in the short term to manage stressful situations, they will not grow lasting motivation or behavior change and should be avoided.

- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, if your child talks to a new classmate, offer a playdate or a special after-school snack. If your child can help a friend feel better, recognize their effort.

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