**Supporting Friendship Skills**

**WHAT IT IS:**  
Supporting Friendship Skills is helping children to make and keep friendships through teaching social skills and peer pairing. This includes teaching children—through the use of books, puppets, and other materials—basic social skills in the classroom such as initiating conversations and sharing. Peer pairing is purposely setting up interactions between a child who is struggling to engage successfully with other children in the classroom and a peer in the classroom who does this well.

**WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:**  
**Teaching Social Skills:** During Circle Time, the teacher reads a book about friendship skills, including how to avoid and handle possible conflicts with friends. They discuss the book and share stories of times when they were a “good friend” to someone. Then the teacher poses possible problems, such as two friends being really angry because they both want the same toy, and asks the children, “What could they do?” They discuss ways to calm down and solve the problem as friends.

**Peer Pairing:** During Center Time, Noel wanders around the room and can’t seem to successfully join in play with the others. His teacher asks Nathan (a classmate who is successful with peer interaction and eager to help others) to be Noel’s “buddy.” She gives them matching necklaces, explains, “I would like for you to play together today during Center Time. You will decide together what to play with and then share.” After they play, the teacher provides specific labeled praise to the children to reinforce skills such as turn taking and friendly talk.

**WHY IT WORKS:**  
Children learn social skills and how to make friends through repeated practice as well as from watching other children. Intentional teaching of social skills helps children understand what is expected of them in social interactions and provides a safe place for them to practice these new skills. Peer Pairing works because a child is able to watch and learn from another child who is successfully navigating social interactions, including resolving small disagreements.

**WHEN IT MAY BE USED:**  
Supporting Friendship Skills should be used for a child or children who are struggling to engage with other children in the classroom. For example, children who tend to argue with peers, play alone, or move quickly between groups. These strategies are often used for a specific child but are great skills for all children to learn. For example, Peer Pairing works well as a targeted strategy for children who struggle in their peer interactions and it can also be implemented classroom wide to promote social skills that all young children need to learn (for example, sharing). These skills can be taught both formally (planned, consistent whole group or small group activities) and informally (for example, children are having trouble getting along in the block centers so their teacher decides to work on “sharing”).

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WHAT ARE THE STEPS/TO-DO’S:

Strategies for developing friendships.

- Use books and social stories to introduce social skills (sharing, taking turns, asking nicely, using kind words, joining play).
- Model friendship skills with puppets or videos.
  - Prime children to use friendship skills before play begins.
    - Prior to play, ask, “Who are you going to play with? What toy will you share?”
    - Practice before play. For example, role-play asking to join in play or share a toy.
- Suggest play ideas.
  - Suggest new ways to use material or expand the play to include others or role-reversals. For example, “How about you be the doctor and he can be the patient now?”
- Use direct modeling.
  - Join in the play! Directly model desired play partner behaviors.
- Provide specific, labeled praise (for example, “I like the way you were taking turns with Joe”) shortly after play has ended. Do not interrupt play to provide reinforcement as this may disrupt the play interactions and so inadvertently cause an abrupt end to the positive peer interactions.

Peer Pairing
1. Identify a child who is strong in specific skill area and pair them with the target child.
2. Give matching stickers/necklaces/etc.
3. Provide praise to buddies who are playing together.
4. Ask children to reflect on their time with buddies.

Class-wide
1. Identify a time of day or activity that involves cooperation.
2. Select Peer Partners.
  - Either be intentional about your pairing (i.e., plan out who would benefit from working together and assign) or choose at random. For example, create a “Friendship Can” with each child’s name on a card inside and have the children pull from the can to find out who their partner will be.
  - Children should not pick their own partners. When children select their own partners they tend to play with the same students repeatedly (not expanding friendship skills in new situations). Also, children who are struggling with peer interactions are often not chosen by their more successful peers resulting in pairs where both children are lacking social skills.