

Friendships

Friendships play an important role in a child's school experience. Friendships are important in the development of someone's self-identity.

Key messages

- Quality friendships are important for the development of social and emotional wellbeing.
- Parents can assist their child who is Deaf or hard of hearing to develop and maintain friendships. This includes working together to find solutions for social difficulties their child experiences due to their hearing loss.

Why is friendship important?

Children who have quality friends:

- Feel happier at school
- Are less likely to be bullied
- Are able to cope better if they are bullied
- See their classmates as friendly and caring
- Develop positive attitudes to school and learning

Source: Rubin K.H., Coplan R.J., Bowker J.C. Social withdrawal in childhood. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 2009 ;60:141–171.

“Friends cheer me up when [I am] down” – Student

How do I talk about friendships with my child?

A friend is someone you like and who likes you. Explain to your child that there are lots of different types of people they may meet or know. They will have different relationships with these people. Discuss the different types:

- Acquaintances: People they may not know very well, but have met or had contact with a few times
- Friends: People they play with, go to school or do activities with – schoolmates, classmates, team mates
- Family friends – People who are good friends with your whole family
- Good friends/close friends – People you spend a lot of time with – your friendship group
- Best friends – Special friends you bond with and trust

Adapted from Friendly Schools – Friendly Schools and Families communication sheets

Think about – Am I up to date with what I know about my child?

- Who is/are my child's best friend/s?
- What groups does my child mix in?
- Who does my child play with at school?
- With whom and where does my child mix with children outside of school?
- What opportunities do I provide for my child to mix with other children on a regular basis outside of school?

Helping your child to make friends

Ideas – how to help your child to join in

Parents can help their child to learn how to approach other children and ask to join in their conversations or games. This can lead to new friendships and social activities. Sometimes children who are Deaf or hard of hearing will just 'hang around' the other children and watch. This may lead to them being invited to join. However, in some situations, other children may not realise they actually want to join in the activities of the group. Sometimes they may need to go and ask to join in in a friendly and polite way to let the children know that they are interested in being part of the group. Be aware that other children who don't know your child may not have experienced meeting a Deaf or hard of hearing child and may feel unsure of their abilities or limitations. Let your child know that it takes a bit of time for everyone to get used to each other.

“Not being able to hear what my friends are saying, them laughing about it then saying it doesn't matter” – Student

Actions to help your child to join in

Talk to your child about how to approach another child or a group:

Steps to joining in:

- Look for other children who seem friendly and are either by themselves or in small groups
- Stand and watch them for a while and find out who they are and what they are doing
- Wait for a good time to ask to join in e.g. a break in the game or a pause in the conversation
- Smile and introduce yourself and ask them if you can join in
- Making a positive comment about what they are doing sometimes helps to get conversation started
- If they let you join in, start doing what they are doing and try to fit in with their activity or conversation
- Try to learn the names of the other children, get to know them a bit and tell them about yourself

“The West Australian Foundation for Deaf Children recognises Telethon Kids Institute, Telethon Speech and Hearing and School of Special Education Needs: Sensory for their work on the Telethon Belong Project and production of these Belong Resources.”

Helping your child to maintain good friendships

Having skills for maintaining friendships is very important for children who are Deaf or hard of hearing as their friends need to be able to understand and adapt to their circumstances when communicating with each other. Children may feel that they are not part of the group due to communication difficulties. This may affect their social behaviours and they may become withdrawn or overly assertive. To maintain a healthy relationship, your child and their friends need to develop an honest and respectful relationship where both parties take into account each other's needs.

Source: School of Special Educational Needs Sensory, Deaf Children Australia 2012

“To have understanding friend[s] is great because they know I feel different to everyone else sometimes” – Students

Talking about how to be a good friend

To build a healthy friendship that lasts over time you can encourage your child to:

- Talk – Be open about their hearing loss and explain how their friend can make communication easier for them both. Let their friend know when they have not heard them properly.
- Listen to what their friends are saying and ask questions to make sure they understood correctly.
- Share the conversation, so they each get a chance to be listeners and talkers.
- Use their manners – say please and thank you. Friends are pleasant to each other.
- Think of themselves as being a friendly person, look friendly and be friendly and others will find them friendly.
- Be helpful – do things for their friends to make them feel they care.
- Be aware of others' feelings – think before they speak. (Sometimes it is a good idea to keep their thoughts to themselves rather than upset people's feelings.)
- Be honest with their friends about their feelings, e.g. “I don't feel happy about doing that” I am really excited about doing that with you....”
- Try to understand other people by thinking about things from their point of view.
- Try not to argue and get upset if their friend doesn't agree with them about something. He/she has the right to his/her opinion.

Adapted from Friendly Schools – Friendly Schools and Families communication sheets