Making Friends

Fred understood that helping children learn to get along with others takes time and support from the caring adults around them. He wanted children to know that even good friends can sometimes disagree and have conflicts, and that finding a way to compromise can help them continue to enjoy playing together.

One of life’s greatest joys is the comfortable give and take of a good friendship. It’s a wonderful feeling not only to have a friend, but to know how to be a friend yourself.

Early Friendships
Some children are naturally sociable, and from early on seem to love to have playmates. Other children are more private and seem content to do things by themselves. Not wanting to play with others or clinging to a parent may be their way of saying, “Instead of getting to know those other people right now, what I need is more time to get to know me!” Many young children aren’t ready yet for certain kinds of sociability.

When children do make their first social connection, it’s usually side by side. They might play next to each other in the same area or with similar playthings. They may just watch each other or imitate each other. That’s how friendship begins — with the understanding that “you’re someone else and I’m someone else.”

“My Best Friend”
The ability to play with another child comes later, along with the growing delight (and frustration) of sharing ideas. Friendships become “give and take,” filled with ups and downs, as children learn to compromise, cooperate, and work through differences in feelings and styles.

Those early friendships tend to be temporary — “of the moment.” When a child refers to someone as “my friend,” that usually means “we’re playing together right now.” Being named “my friend” — or better still, “my best friend” — is so important to children that when things aren’t going well, the most powerful threat they can think of is, “You are not my friend any more.”
That’s usually just their way of saying, “I’m really angry that you won’t go along with my ideas.” The conflict is often forgotten after a short time, and the two friends are back together again.

The Work of Friendships
Young children have much to learn about sharing toys and sharing ideas, and that kind of learning happens over a long period of time. It takes years for young children to begin to see things from someone else’s point of view, and to learn about managing all those complicated feelings, like anger, love, disappointment, frustration, and jealousy.

When young friends have a chance to deal with those feelings, they can often learn that an important part of friendship is working things out after a disagreement and finding that their relationship is even stronger than before.

Helpful Hints
- The first playdate between two children could be a short get-together, like a picnic or snack. The two children might make something simple together for the meal. It can take a while for some children to feel comfortable at an unfamiliar home, and so you may want to invite the child’s parent, too.
- When a friend comes to play, suggest activities that are less likely to create conflict, like making a long paper chain or playing with things that are easily shared, like play clay, blocks, craft materials, construction paper, crayons, and paints.
- You might want to stay nearby or at least within ear range when new friends are playing together. Children’s conflicts can erupt suddenly, and it helps if you can step in early. Just your being nearby will probably keep the players’ “comfort level” high.
- When there are disagreements, let the children know that you understand that sometimes friends just don’t agree on certain things. Even people who like each other a lot can agree to disagree. Encourage the children to think of ways to work things out so that neither one loses. Learning to come to a mutual “win-win” resolution will serve them all their lives.
- If you can remember a time when you and a childhood (or adult) friend disagreed or had a dispute, tell your child how you worked things out. It helps children to hear that their parents have had to work hard at resolving conflicts, too. That shows them what value you give to maintaining good friendships.