

Question: How can I help my son who is a toddler make friends?

We want our children to be able to play and get along with others and we want others to like our child. While toddlers play differently than older children and adults, there are things you can do to promote the life skills of Perspective Taking that will help your child make friends.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley is a leader in understanding how we develop what is called *theory of mind*—becoming aware that others have different beliefs, desires and intentions from our own. One of Gopnik's first questions was: when do children understand that one person might want one thing and another person might want something else? By conducting a series of experiments, she has found that toddlers can understand that though they might like crackers, but not broccoli, for example, someone else might like broccoli, but not crackers. Understanding that others may think and feel differently than they do is critical to the life skill of Perspective Taking and to making friends. Here are some strategies you can use to help you child learn this skill.

1

Pretend with your child and role play.

Pretending is an important way that children learn to take the perspectives of others and how to be together.

- **Explain what you are doing.** For example, "I want to play with you so I am going to give you one of my toys to play with. Do you like playing with this toy with me?"
- **Ask your child to switch roles with you.** You can act silly like a baby and your child can act like the adult. This is an important way to teach your child to see how it feels to be another person and how to interact with others.
- **Pretend to have conflicts,** "How would you feel if I grabbed the toy you are playing with? What can you do if that happens? How can we solve the problem if we both want the same toy?"

2

Be a coach.

Perspective Taking involves developing the self control to put aside one's own thoughts and feelings in order to understand the viewpoints of others. You can help guide your toddler when he is playing with peers or siblings by helping him understand what another child is trying to communicate, either with their words or actions. For example:

- "I think she wants to play with that truck."

- "I don't think he liked it very much when you walked away."
- "Let's find a way to take turns with that toy because it looks like you both want to play with it."

3

Talk about your feelings, their feelings and others' feelings.

When you talk about your feelings, your child's feelings or others' feelings, you are teaching your child about different perspectives. It is important not to share too much information that young children may not understand or be able to handle, but you can share everyday feelings. For example:

- "I feel tired today. I didn't sleep well last night."

4

Ask questions.

Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis conducted an experiment where he looked at how parents read books to their children. Some parents, he found, just read the story straight through while other parents talked a lot about how the characters in the story were thinking and feeling. Thompson found that the parents who talked a lot about others' thoughts and feelings were more likely to have children at age five with better developed understanding of others' minds and better Perspective Taking skills.

You can also help your toddler develop the skill of Perspective Taking by asking questions that help him understand how another person might be feeling or what they might be thinking, in real life experiences, on television or in books. Reading books together provides a great opportunity for this. You can ask:

- "What do you think the character was thinking when she did that?"
- "Why do you think she said that?"
- "How would you feel if that happened to you?"

5

Remember that relationships take time to develop.

The Academy of Pediatrics notes that toddlers are still learning how to get along with others. Rather than truly sharing, they engage in parallel play alongside others.

The depth and quality of friendships during the toddler years are only a fraction of what they have the potential to become as your child grows. Toddlers often have interest in playing near other children, but they are only beginning to have the ability to share toys, talk about their feelings and ideas, and resolve conflicts that arise. They will need adult supervision and support.