OCTOBER 2026

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The Mind Hub

By

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Topic: Friendship, Belonging & Healthy Relationships

While academic success is important, research consistently shows that a child's sense of belonging at school plays a significant role in their overall wellbeing, motivation, and achievement.

Friendships help children develop social skills, confidence, empathy, and resilience. Positive relationships with peers and trusted adults can provide support during difficult times and contribute to a stronger sense of belonging within the school community.

This month, we explore the importance of healthy friendships, signs of positive and unhealthy relationships, and ways families and schools can support children's social development.

What are healthy friendships?

A healthy friendship is a relationship in which both individuals feel valued, respected, and supported.

Healthy friendships often include:

- Trust
- Kindness
- Respect
- Shared interests
- Honest communication
- Mutual support
- Acceptance of differences

*1Note: The quotes and sample dialogues included in this newsletter are intended as examples only. Feel free to adapt the language to fit your own voice, your child's age, or your classroom environment. What matters most is the intention behind the words, not the exact phrasing.

Friendships look different at different ages. Some children enjoy having one or two close friends, while others prefer larger social groups. There is no "right" number of friends; what matters most is the quality of the relationships.

Why Friendships Matters

Positive friendships contribute to many areas of development.

- Emotional wellbeing: Children who feel connected to others are more likely to experience positive emotions and lower levels of loneliness
- Confidence and self-esteem: Supportive friendships help children feel accepted and valued
- Social skills: Friendships provide opportunities to practice communication, cooperation, problem-solving, and conflict resolution
- Develop resilience: Children often cope better with challenges when they have supportive peers and trusted adults around them
- School engagement: Students who feel connected to their school community are generally more motivated to participate and learn

What is a sense of belonging?

Belonging refers to feeling accepted, included, and valued by others.

Students who experience a strong sense of belonging at school often feel:

- Safe
- Connected
- Respected
- Supported
- Comfortable being themselves

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A sense of belonging can come from:

- Friendships
- Positive relationships with teachers
- Clubs, sports, extracurricular activities
- Feeling represented and included within school community

Belonging is a basic human need and plays an important role in mental health and wellbeing.

Recognising Healthy and Unhealthy Friendships

Healthy Friendship	Unhealthy Friendship
Both children enjoy spending time together	One person controls the other
Disagreements are handled respectfully	Frequent put-downs or teasing
Both feel listened to	Exclusion as a form of punishment
There is mutual kindness and support	Pressure to do things that feel uncomfortable
Boundaries are respected	One-sided effort or support

It is important to remember that occasional disagreements are normal and can provide opportunities for learning and growth.

Supporting Children's Friendships

1. Encourage Social Opportunities

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Clubs, sports, activities, and community events can help children meet peers with similar interests.

2. Model Healthy Relationships

Children learn from observing adults. Demonstrating respect, empathy, and healthy communication provides powerful examples.

3. Talk About Friendship Skills

Discuss:

- Listening
- Sharing
- Compromise
- Empathy
- Respecting differences

4. Help Children Solve Problems

Rather than immediately stepping in, guide children through age-appropriate problem-solving conversations.

5. Validate Feelings

Friendship difficulties can feel very significant to children. Listening without judgment helps them feel understood and supported.

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❖ **FAQs**

1. *Q. Is it normal for children to have friendship difficulties?*

   A. Yes. Friendship challenges are a normal part of development. Through these experiences, children learn important social and emotional skills.

2. *Q. What should I do if my child says they have no friends?*

   A. Start by listening and gathering information. Explore opportunities for connection through school activities, clubs, shared interests, or structured social opportunities. If concerns persist, consider speaking with school staff for additional support.

3. *Q. How many friends should a child have?*

   A. There is no ideal number. Some children thrive with one close friend, while others enjoy larger social groups. The quality of friendships is generally more important than the quantity.

4. *Q. Should parents get involved in friendship conflicts?*

   A. It depends on the situation. Minor disagreements often provide valuable learning opportunities. However, adults should become involved when there are concerns about bullying, safety, repeated exclusion, or significant emotional distress.

5. *Q. How can schools help students feel a sense of belonging?*

   A. Schools can promote belonging by fostering inclusive classrooms, encouraging positive peer interactions, celebrating diversity, and creating opportunities for students to participate in school life.

Final Thoughts

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Friendships and a sense of belonging are important foundations for children's emotional wellbeing and success at school. While social relationships can sometimes be challenging, they also provide valuable opportunities for growth, learning, and connection.

As parents, educators, and caregivers, we can support children by encouraging kindness, empathy, inclusion, and respectful communication. By helping students build healthy relationships and feel that they belong, we strengthen not only individual wellbeing but also our entire school community.

Every child deserves to feel seen, valued, and connected.

If you have any concerns about your child's stress levels or would like further resources, don't hesitate to reach out to the school psychologist.

- The Mind Hub, by Marina Stavrou



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