

# Building Friendships in School Age Programs

by Joan M. Bergstrom, EdD

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## **Scene 1**

Twenty-five kids check into an afterschool program and are told to sit at their desks and work. One school ager twirls her hair. Another child throws a paper airplane at a friend. The adult reads at his desk. He reminds the school agers to sit down and study, saying, “Alexis, please remember that you have to finish your homework first before you can play with the games.”

## **Scene 2**

At 4:30 on a Friday afternoon, a group of school agers — playing “spit,” jumping rope, and singing rhythmic songs — enjoy the afterschool program. A couple of school agers are shooting baskets and playing basketball while others play with games: four-square, jacks, marbles, and bubble blowing. Indoors, another group of school agers makes props and costumes, experiments with face make-up, works on backdrop and scenery, and discusses the program’s upcoming show, “You Be the Star.”

The direction team and the production team are busy at work. The production team is in charge of all of the aspects of the play’s production, including advertising and working together to put on the play. This group is learning about advertising, producing a play, and how to get along with one another. The team is involved in tasks that foster responsibility, reliability, and group work. The direction team casts and directs the play. This team decides who says what and what props are needed. Its members develop public speaking abilities. They learn how to

recruit new members while concentrating on helping each other to be good and effective actors.

## **What Do These Scenes Mean?**

The afterschool program in the first scene simply replicates school. School agers are being asked to focus on their school work and to complete it. Some of the school agers in the first scene get productive work done, while others do little. Overall, school agers have little time for socialization and are not encouraged to play. Socialization and friendships do not develop easily in this setting.

The school agers in the second scene are having fun performing and are seizing their moment in the spotlight. They are exhibiting ingenuity, creativity, and problem-solving skills as they learn how to be friends, negotiating and establishing their own rules. The school agers reach this stage of development slowly, after many weeks of preparation. It is impossible to articulate all of the social and cognitive benefits that these opportunities provide for school agers. The opportunities for developing friendships go far beyond the mere development of social skills — they also help school agers learn lessons and skills that will be important for their entire life. This applies to all children; each child can contribute and learn from putting on a play. These opportunities have powerful influences on children’s lives.

## **Why Promote Friendship and Socialization?**

Psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson explains that during middle childhood adults beyond the intermediate

family can affect children's development. In middle childhood, a child's "psychological" task is to work on separation from home and family. To accomplish this separation, children naturally establish many connections outside of the family. They make commitments to friendships and to groups, using games, sports, and hobbies to transfer some of their attachment from home to the outside world. They become deeply involved in specific activities like sports, playing music, or arts and crafts. At this time, significant adults can enhance a child's life and introduce a child to unknown areas. (Erikson, 1963, p. 259)

School agers also intensely seek out other children with whom to develop friendships. Children this age love game playing, which becomes a way for children with common interests to get together. Some experts even call this the "gang period," because children develop such strong ties among their peers. They often want to visit at each other's houses, see each other's rooms and outdoor spaces, play with each other's toys, and go places together. As the school age child interacts with friends and peers, he or she adapts and modifies values learned in the family. Interactions with other children provide the social context in which the child sorts out what the world is like and how he or she fits into it. Children also learn to modify their own behavior in relation to other children; they understand that they are being too pompous or wild, too silly, or too shy. They learn to recognize when they seem long winded or self-righteous, and gradually adjust their ways of talking and acting so that they make and keep friends.

Out of their many friends, children often develop especially strong and intense friendships with one or two other children. Around the age of nine, children begin to prefer to spend time with one child who has similar interests or a congenial personality. Henry Stack Sullivan, a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, describes preadolescence as a time when children need interpersonal intimacy. He explains that children between eight and a half and ten often begin to experience something different in their relationships — namely, they find a "chum." With their chum, or friend (usually of the same sex), the child develops a real sensitivity to what matters to others. As such friendships develop, children naturally think about ways that they can contribute to the happiness of someone else. They begin to seek ways to make the friend feel worthwhile. Sullivan argues that in preadolescence children develop the capacity to love.

Sullivan calls the interest in a chum "spectacular" development, something which has never happened before in a child's life. With their friends, children achieve a new kind of closeness, sharing many activities and confidences that may even develop into mutual daydreams. As they spend hours and hours together, children create a shared imaginary world. (Sullivan, 1953, p. 245)

In middle childhood, children want to do and make things, to achieve, and to master what they do. On this subject, Erikson explains that a healthy personality in children six to ten years old depends on the development of a "sense of industry," which leads to socialization. "Industry" refers to the enormous interest children this age have in learning how things work, constructing and building things, and creating different kinds of products such as tree houses, puppets, and model castles. Erikson explains that when adults encourage children's efforts, they support a child's sense of industry. If adults allow children to finish their work and praise their efforts, those adults will enhance a child's natural inclination to feel pride in their activity and accomplishments as they work to achieve a group goal.

At this point, there are several ways that groups are established. An individual school ager with strong social skills and talents can be the focal point for a small group activity. The other children join the group and the leader's approval is of utmost importance. A second method of group formation begins with the existence of two peers. The group grows as others are included in the group. Groups are organized and a framework for continued friendship develops. A third method of group formation is based on the group involved in a common interest or activity. In this instance, children select friends with similar interests, such as playing soccer, playing kickball, or collecting baseball cards.

### **Helping Friendships to Develop and Fostering Them in School Age Care**

Adults can support children's friendships by creating an atmosphere where adults work along with school agers to:

- Set up an environment where lots of materials are available for school agers to play and experiment with. Go beyond the traditional interest areas. Prepare new and exciting interest areas where

- children can invent new board games, create sculpture from recycled materials, use treasures from nature to make a woven wall hanging, or practice magic tricks.
- Let school agers make up most of the rules and decide the many ways to play together. Help children make decisions about who gets to use the balls and bats and for how long. Encourage school agers to solve their own problems. Use problem solving techniques such as role playing and/or dramatic play experiences to illustrate a point.
- Appreciate the sense of group belonging and try to support the group interests. Let the children decide on how to design and decorate the space, make a logo, develop secret codes, establish the rules, create a group song, and more. These kinds of activities provide a backdrop for creating group identity.
- Allow a group of children to explore interests and create together. If the group is interested in telling jokes, set up a “good humor” club, where children can explore puns, jokes, riddles, and produce a stand-up comedy show. Invite a gag writer to be a resource.
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- Provide ample time for school agers to actively play and do things as they develop friends and acquaintances. There are many activities that school agers can pursue in great depth. Allow ample time to do things like create a model car, have a chess tournament, or learn new gymnastic skills.
- Provide construction toys and materials and arts and crafts to make three-dimensional objects, board games, and props that promote social interaction.
- Select and use a variety of play environments near the afterschool setting such as local parks or youth centers. Plan walking trips to a bowling alley, a skating rink, a wildlife center, or an animal habitat.
- Make outdoor environments as exciting as indoor environments. Use bins or light weight trunks and have them filled with active games, science materials, and art materials for sketching or doing sidewalk art.
- Recognize that some social pressures will invariably exist among school age children. Provide appropriate encouragement and support school agers who are having trouble making friends. Know that
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school agers experience tensions when they cannot make friends easily.

- Explain ideas and strategies to help school agers join into a group. School agers also need the opportunity to turn acquaintances into “chums.” Provide an area where a group that loves to do cheerleading can make new routines and cheers. Invite the captain of the high school cheerleaders to come and give a cheerleading demonstration.
- Consider having an innovative program where a group of school agers design a paper or create three-dimensional artwork together. The program could have a moderate number of rules or limits as small groups work together.
- Consider a safe environment, such as a space bubble, to give school agers a special place in which to play. In this special place, they are empowered to self-initiate activities and can make up their own rules and strategies. They can be responsible for their own space and work together. Such a space can be a microcosm in which small groups can socialize.
- Sit back, observe, and ask yourself which experiences, opportunities, and materials *speak* to your school agers and naturally encourage them to socialize in a positive way.

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