



Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller

Friendships in the Baby Room

Dear Reader,

The idea for this column came about when I attended a seminar on using friendship as a curriculum web focus at the NAEYC conference last year. Predictably, the discussion focused entirely on children aged three and older. You and I know that friendships start much earlier than that. They may look a little different, though. Since social development is so important to a person's ultimate success in life, the topic needs to be examined earlier. As always, I was helped enormously by the input of our e-mail network members who had many actual scenarios to report as well as very useful insights. Phyllis Porter actually did research on this topic, systematically observing the children in her care over a three-year span of time and wrote an article which is available on her web site: www.educarer.com/current-article-relationships.htm. Another resource that I found interesting and helpful is the Exchange Press book, *Connecting: Friendship in the Lives of Young Children and Their Teachers*, currently being updated.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Miller".

All good infant or toddler programs put *relationships* at the center of their focus. Mostly, people have worked on the important relationships of adults and children — the issues of primary caregiving and continuity of care to develop that all-important bond between the child and the caregiver. Much attention is also given to adult-to-adult relationships — staff-parent communication and mutual respect, and good staff-to-staff relationships. There remains one other kind of relationship that deserves our attention — the child-to-child friendships that form. What do these early friendships look like, how can we support them, and how do they impact the child's development?

If we believe that it is important for children to learn to relate comfortably to others and not be *loners* in our society, we should think about *pre-friendship skills* in the same way that we think about pre-reading or pre-math skills. Infants and toddlers are already capable of demonstrating friendly behaviors. Some of the behaviors are there by instinct. Others are learned through sensitive *coaching* from the important adults in children's lives.

Infant Friendships

Infants start with a basic instinct of being extremely interested in faces, and they are particularly attracted to the faces of other children. Very young children who are not yet mobile will look with interest at the actions of other babies. As in the photo on the preceding page, infants lying next to each other on the floor may reach out to investigate each other. They will occasionally hold hands or coo at each other with great delight.

What supports this is giving children lots of floor time lying side by side, an arm's distance apart with an observant caregiver nearby. You can help them touch each other gently and comment about who they are seeing. When you see their eyes light up at the sight of another child, you can say, "There is your friend, Susie." Some infants seem genuinely *attracted* to each other and light up when they see each other. They often feed off of each other. If one begins to talk or scream, the other one does, too.

Once children become mobile, when they see a *friend* with whom they are familiar,

infants initiate smiles; and you can see them start to move toward each other. They often come and play together with the same toy. Some of the children will *kiss* each other and play with toys that are close to their friends.

For example:

- An 11-month-old child was crawling and looked at a 9-month-old. When they each had eye contact, they smiled at each other and laughed. His smile and eye contact seemed to say: “Come and play in the tunnel with me.” He began to crawl towards the slide/tunnel and so did the 9-month-old.
- Two 11-month-old boys were playing on the mattress and were crawling on top of each other and laughing. They would crawl off and onto the mat and over the pillows.
- An 11-month-old boy, while sitting next to a 7-month-old girl, put his arm around the girl and kissed her on the head and smiled. He looked at me and did it again.

Such interactions require that the children have *access* to each other and are not confined in restrictive devices such as swings, infant seats, bounce seats, sitting rings, and the like. Rather than keeping babies *from* each other using these devices, interactions require an adult close at hand, allowing children to see and touch each other. The adult needs to teach a gentle touch from a very young age and help children to investigate other infants in a friendly way.

Toddler Friendships

How do toddlers and twos demonstrate friendship? We associate toddlers with noise. And strife. And fighting over objects. “Mine!” Probably because those

are the situations that call for our attention and intervention at times. But we also see lots of joy and empathy and hugging. They dance together. You see children develop definite preferences for other children. They seek each other out, wait for the other to arrive in the morning, are upset when a friend doesn’t show up. Their friendship may start with eye contact and smiles. Toddlers often seek to sit next to a favorite friend at the lunch table or at story time. They may greet each other with hugs and jump up and down.

A typical social beginning for a toddler is to hand something to another child. It is a gesture that says *I want to interact with you*. Sometimes we see the opposite — a child grabs something away from another child to *play with him*. Not all attempts are successful in gaining friends. The adult needs to *coach* and help the two toddlers figure out how to play together.

Something we see even more often is toddlers imitating each other. One child starts doing something silly, laughs loudly, and makes eye contact with another child. The second child imitates the action, also laughing. They may be joined by other children. Three children and a teacher are sitting on a log in the yard. One boy laughs and falls backwards, feet in the air. The other children, and the teacher, join in.

Most early social interactions are non-verbal: eye contact, smiles, handing something, imitating each other, making funny noises. But gradually language creeps in and allows an even wider range of interaction.

Twos

Twos, with their more advanced verbal skills, draw one another in with language, and dramatic play starts to become more important. With occa-

sional adult support so children know how to *do* socio-dramatic play, they gain skill at creating their own scenarios and taking on roles. Most twos will *parallel* play dramatic play, all taking on the same role and doing the same thing. They get ideas from each other and elaborate their actions, but they generally do not interact from within their roles. One network member watched 2-year-olds set up dramatic play where they were all doctors and they all examined a patient or a baby and discussed what to do, thus differentiating roles and interacting within their roles.

Empathy

Part of friendship is empathy. Infants seem to have this by instinct. We are meant to be *social* beings and therefore respond to the mood of the group. Any infant teacher will tell you that one vigorously crying baby will lead to a whole room of crying infants.

Later we see comforting behaviors. An 18-month-old will give a crying 10-month-old his pacifier or favorite toy. We adults do things for our friends because it makes both of us feel good. The 10-month-old stops crying and the 18-month-old is probably praised by the caregiver for being such a good helper and *such a nice friend*.

The interesting thing is that children learn empathy from how they themselves were treated. A child who was never comforted or treated with kindness is not likely to comfort other children in distress, even though she may feel that reflected distress herself. The *feelings* of empathy are there by instinct, but children learn what to *do* about it from the caring adults around them.

The other side of this is how children take on other moods of the group, such as aggression, or fear, or joy. We are, as

humans, *tuned in* to the moods of those around us. Especially fun to watch is the phenomenon of *group glee* when a whole group of children breaks into spontaneous laughter, without really knowing the cause.

Adult Role Models

It's impossible to overstate the importance of adults modeling friendship behaviors. Toddlers are such imitators of adult behavior. They learn how to act from us. So teachers and parents should be conscious of the way they interact with other adults — their friends — and how they greet people, comfort people, instruct and correct people. Polite, considerate, friendly behavior, rather than bossy, overbearing, and overpowering behavior, should also be demonstrated when interacting with children.

Friendship Rituals and Routines

There is much that can be done in the everyday operation of the classroom to teach and encourage friendly interactions between children.

- Talk about “our friends.” Use the word *friends* when talking with the children. “Would you like to play with your friends?”
- Use names a lot. Say their names when you address them and when you talk about the other children.
- Have photographs of children and their families where children can see them and have access to them on a low display board, in a photo album or scrapbook, laminated onto cards children can carry around. It makes them feel like a valued member of the group and helps them learn each other's names.
- You can have several photos of each

child, taken at different times so the photos look different, and let children sort pictures of each child into separate piles. “These pictures got mixed up. Let's put all the pictures of Caitlin here, and the ones of Ned over here.”

- Create a *Who's here today?* ritual. You can back children's photographs with felt or Velcro. Pick up one at a time and ask, “Who's this?” The children will name the child on the photo. That child can then put his or her photo on a board. Be sure to also ask, “Who's not here?” See if 2-year-olds can name children not present without looking at the remaining photos. Then also show them the remaining photos.
- Create a simple game of clapping for each other for no apparent reason. Toddlers love to clap. “Yea, Hanna!” How wonderful to be applauded for *just being!*
- Mealtimes give wonderful opportunities to encourage friendship. You are all sitting together, doing the same thing, something you enjoy. For adults, it's the proverbial *breaking of bread*.

Build Friendship Into Your Environment

With infants, as stated above, the most important thing to be conscious of is *access*. The children should be able to see each other, make eye contact, smile, touch each other, be drawn to each other, and be able to act on that. This requires an adult on the floor to support friendly play. You can set up opportunities for infants to play with each other. It can be as simple as sitting on the floor with a small baby nestled in your lap close to other children who are playing with toys and can come over to you and the baby. A game of peek-a-boo with

scarves is sure to get interest from several children who will laugh together as you in turn cover one child's face and then another's.

Create small spaces where two children fit comfortably. Larger groups can be overwhelming. Friendships start as dyads. One fun thing to do in a toddler room is to place a toy shelf on the floor on its *back*, open spaces up. Children love to sit in the spaces together. See what other *nooks and crannies* you can create.

You might consider having several smaller tables where children can sit and eat together *restaurant style* rather than as one large group table.

Develop Activities for Two

Make a collection of activities that are more fun to do with someone else than alone. Rocking in the rocking boat and rolling a ball back and forth are good examples. Two children might share one large piece of finger-paint paper. Singing together is another example, or blowing bubbles. This type of activity helps children to learn about the advantages of positive social contact.

Through all of this, adults must stay handy to smooth social attempts, avert conflicts, and help children move along the progression from solitary play to parallel play to associative, interactive play. The adult can encourage children and suggest ways they can successfully be together. “Matt, Eric likes that book. Show him the pictures.” Matt is 20 months and Eric is 19 months old. They sit together and turn the pages, upside down, of course, but it shows friendship between these two boys.

Nurture Children's Friendships

Children who develop preferences for others in their group in infancy often

Thanks to the following e-mail network members for sharing ideas and scenarios:

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keep these preferences as they grow. One good practice is to transition children to older classrooms in friendship groups. It seems to help young children to have a *friend* nearby and at hand in the process.

Conclusion

All respondents agree that there is such a thing as friendship in the infant, toddler, and twos rooms. How do these friendships impact the child's development? So far, the *recent research in brain development* has not identified a *window of opportunity* for friendships. But we have to believe that if children have early successful experiences in developing close social relationships, the disposition to be friendly will be reinforced and will help build their social relationships of the future.

Karen Miller's newest book is *Simple Steps: Developmental Activities for Infants, Toddlers, and Twos* (Gryphon House). Other books by Karen include: *Ages and Stages*, *Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*; *More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*; *The Outside Play and Learning Book*; and *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers*.

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, and good ideas — as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers — to:

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