
Supporting Children's Peer Relationships During COVID-19

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INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the "Supporting Peer Relationships" professional development webinar from the University of Virginia. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

Goals

- ◆ Understand the importance of peer relationships in preschool.
- ◆ Explore intentional teaching practices to support children's peer relationships in any learning format.
- ◆ Reflect on your current practices and plan to use concrete strategies to support children's peer relationships.

Activity

- ◆ Watch the webinar.
- ◆ After watching, use the questions below to reflect on how you can support children's peer relationships.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support children's peer relationships.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What caught your attention in the webinar? What made that fact, idea, or example meaningful to you?

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- ◆ Think back to a memory of your earliest friend.
 - How did you meet that friend? What made you feel connected to them?
 - How did that friendship foster a sense of belonging within your family, school, or community?
 - Imagine if that friendship had never existed. How would your life be different now?

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- ◆ Consider the peer interactions that your students experience outside of your classroom every day. For example, some children may attend multi-age group childcare settings while school is virtual. Other children may be the only child at home with a working parent or may regularly interact with siblings and cousins.
 - Why is it important to learn about children's care environments when planning to support their peer interaction skills?
 - How could you find out more about their experiences so that you can best support families and caregivers in nurturing children's peer relationships?

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- ◆ Virtual, hybrid, and physically distant learning add new barriers to supporting children's peer relationships. Teachers can use two effective practices to overcome these barriers:
 - Helping children connect to each other
 - Teaching friendship skills
 - 1. Pick a strategy and share how you have used it in the past. How have you adapted it for this year?
 - 2. Based on the needs of the children in your classroom and your current learning environment, plan to use a new strategy to support children's peer relationships.
 - How are you going to remember to do this?
 - When will you use this strategy?
 - How will you modify this strategy to work in your current learning environment? To support and meet each child where they are?
 - How will you adjust your strategies when or if your school changes its learning format?
 - 3. Regularly check in on your plan. Assess its impact on children and adjust as needed, using the examples provided on the last page of this guide.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To learn more about how COVID-19 may be affecting how we support children's friendships:

- ◆ **Source:** STREAMin3 Curriculum Model
- ◆ **Guide:** Family Guide Peer Relationships
- ◆ **Link:** <https://virginia.box.com/v/family-peer-relationships>
- ◆ **Description:** This guide provides families and caregivers with ideas, resources, and activities to help support peer relationships outside of the classroom.

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- ◆ **Source:** Sesame Street
 - ◆ **Video:** "Julia and Elmo's Video Playdate"
 - ◆ **Link:** <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/subtopics/especially-for-families-of-children-with-autism/>
 - ◆ **Description:** Following COVID-19 health and safety measures can be especially challenging for children with autism. This site offers resources to help children with autism connect with others during this time.

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- ◆ **Source:** Connecticut Children's
 - ◆ **Article:** "...Five Ideas for Social Connection and Quarantine Playdates"
 - ◆ **Link:** <https://www.connecticutchildrens.org/coronavirus/is-your-child-missing-friends-due-to-covid-19-here-are-5-ideas-for-social-connection-and-quarantine-playdates/>
 - ◆ **Description:** Ideas for families to help their children maintain and cultivate friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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- ◆ **Source:** Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center
 - ◆ **Video:** "Promoting Social Skills in a Virtual Classroom"
 - ◆ **Link:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK200OR3MC4&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=ECTACenter
 - ◆ **Description:** Ideas for teachers to help children with disabilities maintain and cultivate friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic.



HELPING CHILDREN CONNECT TO EACH OTHER

- ◆ **Build a sense of community using songs or chants** - Select a song that you and the children sing every day to help them feel like a part of a group.
- ◆ **Play games** - Playing a name game, like “Name Movements” or a “Who is Missing” game, can help children remember each other’s names and feel connected to the group. Prompt and support children to repeat names or identify children who are not present to help build peer relationships.
- ◆ **Class photo** - Take a screenshot of your virtual classroom when everyone is logged in as a “class photo.” Or create a digital yearbook with photographs of children on each page so children can recognize their peers and learn more about them.
- ◆ **Small group and partner activities** - Host virtual play times when a few children log on and color together or play with playdough at the same time. The goal is to provide unstructured time for children to interact together without a set agenda.
- ◆ **Acknowledge and accept similarities and difference** - Point out ways that children are similar to foster their connections. You can talk about things they have in common or their favorite things. As children share their interests, you can also help them embrace their differences and look for/appreciate diversity within their community.



TEACHING FRIENDSHIP SKILLS

- ◆ **Book readings** - Select books where friendship skills are on display. Point out the friendship skills that are shown in the book. For example, “The kids in this book are doing a nice job sharing their toys. They decided to take turns.”
- ◆ **Modeling with puppets** - Model turn taking, listening, or welcoming others into play with two puppets. Or have children join in to role play as the second puppet as you act out friendship scenarios.
- ◆ **Super friend routine** - This routine was developed by the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. This routine uses a social story and visual cues to teach and acknowledge positive prosocial behaviors between peers. After you read the story and cue cards, you can regularly prompt children to notice “super friend” behaviors and model by saying things like “Wow! You were a Super Friend because you were sharing.”
- ◆ **Encourage peer conversations** - Provide opportunities for children to ask their peers questions, such as, “What is your favorite food?”

CHECK-IN ON YOUR PLAN

- ◆ **Set a reminder!** Build in time bi-weekly to check in on your relationships with each child and consider how you’ve been using these practices. If they aren’t working, consider why and ways to adapt.
- ◆ **Find a buddy!** Sharing goals with a co-worker and checking in with each other can help keep us all on track.
- ◆ **Keep a journal** and make a quick entry when you try out a new practice. Note how the children react.
- ◆ **Record yourself** (live or video) and observe your interactions with children. Take note of how often you use these practices and how children react.