

# Learning Issues

## Friends — Who Needs Them?

By Tom Nicholson

**B**y two or three, children are already making friends. Can you remember your first friend? I recently came across a photo of mine, a boy called Lyndon who lived a few houses down the street. He was my playmate even before I went to school.

It's funny that I still remember his name even though I've not seen him since I was six, when my family moved. We were only a few streets away, but it put me into a different school zone, and that made all the difference.

Children's friendships are like that. Children tend to have friends that live nearby, so they don't have far to go to play together. Friends also help each other, and are nice to each other. Once children go to school, they will have school friends that may not live nearby, but they see each other at school, so proximity isn't a problem. Once children have bicycles, they will cycle long distances to visit their friends.

Parents can influence children's friendships. By living in a certain suburb, they determine to some extent the pool of likely friends. Parents also introduce their children to other children they think will be nice friends. When people reflect on how they met their friends from primary school days, they mostly say they met at school, or lived nearby. But occasionally someone will say they met their best friend at church, or through friends of their parents, or even at a birthday party.

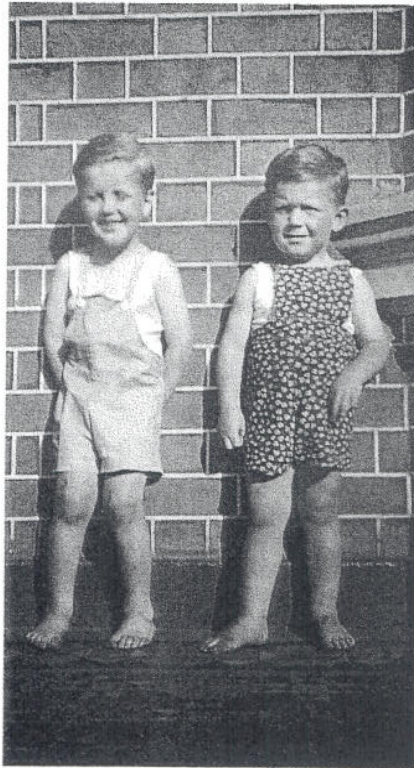
These are friendships that have been partly influenced by parents. Parents may also coach their children in how to be a friend. It turns out popular children often have parents who give them good advice in how to make friends.

There is a chemistry to friends. They are somehow in tune with one another. The essential characteristic of friendship is reciprocity — that is, giving as well as taking, helping each other. Another characteristic is commitment. Another is a sense of equality, each friend seeing the other as no more or less in status. It seems that a friend is like a security blanket, a support system. A friend can help a child to face new adventures that are slightly scary.

**W**hat are the job specifications for being a friend? This depends on your age. As you get older, the

specifications seem to become very strict. I'm not sure if it's harder to make friends as you get older, or whether your criteria are more strict, so you are more fussy about who you want as a friend.

Preschoolers often invent imaginary friends. An imaginary friend is an invisible character, who has a name and is talked about to others. It is real to the child, but not to others. A stuffed toy can be an imaginary friend, as long as the child treats



the toy as if it is a real person. For example, the cartoon strip Calvin and Hobbes describes the adventures of a five-year-old who has a small, stuffed tiger. In Calvin's mind, Hobbes is a real tiger and he treats Hobbes like a real person.

Imaginary friends are actually quite common with at least one in three children having them. Are children with imaginary friends disturbed? Quite the opposite, actually. Children with imaginary friends tend to be sociable, creative, forthcoming, with lots of real friends. Some parents even set an extra place at the dinner table for the imaginary friend, dry them at bath-time, leave the TV on while the family is away so the imaginary friend doesn't get bored, and take them on outings.

But many preschool children have real friends as well. Up until age seven, the main duties of friends are to play games together, help each other, and be nice to each other. Common activities bind them together. From eight to 12 the main characteristic is that they are psychologically similar to each other.

I once asked a bunch of seven-year-olds some questions about friends. I asked, "What does a friend look like?" They immediately started describing each other: "Short brown hair, undercut, purple tracksuit with blonde hair", and so on. I asked, "How do you make friends?" They said things like: "bump into them", "walk up to them and talk to them", "ask them to play with you", "ask them if you can be their friend", "go to their house." I also asked, "What do friends do?" I got replies like, "they help you", "they are kind to you", "they are funny", "they cheer you up", "they play with you", "they care for you."

Older children, between eight and 12, also specify that a friend is someone you can trust, who will not tease or gossip about you. And during teenage years, the specification is that a friend must also understand you, though boys are much less likely to talk about personal problems with their friends than girls are.

Some children don't have friends. But these are children who for some reason have been rejected by their peer group, or else are neglected in some way, so they are effectively left out. I once asked a boy who had got into trouble at school, "Do you have any friends?" and he replied, "Friends? Who needs them?"

Children who are not so well accepted by other children can still have friends. Researchers have found these children may not have what we think of as really good friendships, but they often have a kind of friendship that suits them.

Most studies, however, have found children do need friends. There are advantages to friendships. Having just one friend can reduce feelings of loneliness. A friend can provide security and social support, and can even reduce the likelihood of being picked on at school or teased. Friends are nice to have, they are helpful to children's social development and, especially important, their happiness at school. ■