

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Peer Relationships



What You Need to Know

Babies are born with an innate desire to connect with others. At first, their priority is to establish a strong relationship with the adults who care for them. As children grow, they begin to show interest in and awareness of their peers, a desire to play interactively with other children, and eventually develop preferences or close bonds with playmates. Preschoolers need your help to make and maintain friendships. You can do this by explicitly teaching social skills (e.g., discussing books or scenarios), providing children with opportunities for repeated practice interacting with peers, modeling your own appropriate social communication, and by **intentionally** partnering children with peers so that they can watch and learn from other children who are successfully navigating social interactions.

Things to Consider

Play can be categorized into 4 types:

1. **Solitary:** Playing on their own and is not interested in, or is unaware of, peers.
2. **Onlooker:** Watches other children and is interested in what is going on, but does not join in.
3. **Parallel:** Plays beside another child with the same or similar toys and at times imitates others' actions, but there are few back-and-forth exchanges.
4. **Collaborative:** Playing together in a coordinated, shared activity.

Most preschoolers are *ready* to engage in collaborative, shared activities with peers, but they will often engage in the other types of play as well. Children who demonstrate challenges with social interactions and peer relationships may not engage in a variety of play. Rather, they may prefer solitary play. It's okay if they don't prefer more advanced types of play, but it is important to offer opportunities for children to see and participate in collaborative activities.

Development of Relationships with Peers

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Engage in and maintain peer interactions with adult support.	Sustain interactions with peers more often and for increasing periods of time.
Spontaneously engage in prosocial behaviors with peers (e.g., sharing, taking turns).	Demonstrate pro-social and cooperative behaviors with peers.
Frequently play cooperatively with peers.	Begin to show some preference for playing and/or develop friendships with particular children.
	Work with peers to make plans for what and how they will play together.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of peer relationships:

- ◆ Use Peer Pairing by assigning children a buddy to play with during a certain time of the day. **You** (not the children) should pick the partners. Either assign intentionally (e.g., a child who struggles with a peer who is successful) or randomly (e.g., selecting names from a can).
- ◆ Shared tasks (e.g., setting the table together, one holds the bucket while other puts trucks inside).
- ◆ Play turn-taking games to provide practice in "sharing" (e.g., tossing ball back-and-forth, bowling with one ball, one child building a tower and the other child knocking it over and then switching).
- ◆ For nonverbal children, post visuals throughout your classroom with core words or relevant vocabulary. This alternative form of communication will allow children to point to words or phrases when engaging with peers. For example, hang visuals of core words like 'yes' and 'no,' or vocabulary like 'block,' 'more,' and 'fall' in the block center.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Peer Relationships

OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe children as they interact with their peers. What type of play do you notice (see list on the previous page)? Do some children initiate play? Do they take turns on occasion? Do children show preferences for certain children? Who may need extra support?
FOCUS	Acknowledge Positive Peer Interactions Focus children's attention on positive peer interactions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I saw you and (Child) sharing the blocks to build a tower. That was such nice teamwork!"◆ "The sisters in our book are doing a nice job sharing their toys. They decided to take turns." Note: When children are engaged in collaborative play, avoid interrupting their play to provide this acknowledgment or praise as it may distract the children and inadvertently cause an abrupt end to the positive peer interaction.
SCAFFOLD I	Join in the Play Join in the play to promote positive interactions between children. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Prompt interactions: "Who wants to have a pretend picnic with me in the house area?"◆ Model how to initiate play: "I see you looking at (Child). I think you want to build with them. Let's ask them... Can we build with you?"◆ Prompt children to plan: "Who will you play with? Let's look at your friends. Point to or tell me who you would like to play with. What will you do? Look at our picture cards and point to what you would like to do with your friends today!"◆ Suggest roles or reversals: "How about you be the doctor and they can be the patient now?"◆ Encourage eye contact: Joint attention is the foundation for more advanced forms of play and social communication. Support children to make eye contact by holding toys, books, or desired items by your face.◆ Provide opportunities to participate in collaborative play: If a child typically engages in solitary or onlooker play, mimic their play alongside them and expand. For example, bring your own toy truck to the child and spin the wheels next to them, modeling collaborative interactions, "We are watching the wheels spin around and around! Hmm, I'm going to use the wheels to drive my truck to the store. Would you like to come?"
SCAFFOLD II	Provide Support During Teamwork Provide extra support yourself or through peer pairing. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Peer pairing: "This is your buddy for Choice Time. Here's a bracelet to help you remember to stay together. Where will you play today? (After Choice Time) What did you and your buddy do together?"◆ Teacher support: "Alright, you are partners in charge of cleaning up. You hold the bucket and your friend will bring you the pieces."
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.