

## *A New Vision of Friendship*

**T**HE TERM “MY NEW BEST FRIEND” popped into our culture only eight years ago as the title of a British comedy series. (Didn’t we always use this phrase?) The popularity of the phrase, now the name of a motion picture and book, offers an insightful, positive perspective on relationships in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Last year a *New York Times* article explored the idea that, with the modern tendency of children to socialize in groups, finding an enduring best friend for your child is an antiquated concept. The article didn’t imply that close friendships will ever be out of date, only that the romanticized ideal of Tom Sawyer–Huck Finn exclusivity may no longer be the trend.

The image of a “best friend” often comes up in preschool. Children today typically spend a good part of their time in group settings, and it’s easy to think every child should have a bosom buddy. Preschoolers *are* drawn to each other, but as two- or three-year-olds, they have to shore up their self-control to learn to play next to each other in respectful ways. As they grow older, children often make friends with classmates, and those relationships provide as much hard work as they do fun. Learning to negotiate, make mutually satisfying decisions, and cope with hurt feelings “stretches” children and sometimes stresses them.

Since we all want our children to be loved, parents often express concern about whether their child has a friend. If a child doesn’t have a best friend by kindergarten, they sometimes worry that all the friendship slots will be taken and their child will miss the brass ring. It also causes natural parental anxiety when preschool children report “No one played with me” today or “I don’t have any friends.” However, it’s helpful not to panic. To understand the context of these comments, one would have to observe the struggles of children negotiating ideas. “I don’t have any friends” frequently means someone wouldn’t do what I wanted. Ask your child’s teacher about the dynamics of classroom play.

The term “my new best friend” suggests a more relaxed, open quality to relationships that changes with our needs and our development. The beauty of children growing up in groups is that they learn to appreciate many different people and to pay attention to the potential that others might feel excluded. Children can feel the satisfaction of being part of a group and helping each other. On the other hand, with so much time with other people, parents and teachers are wise to provide children with opportunities for quiet and solitude. That’s one way we can nurture their abilities to be their own best friend—and enjoy their own company.

Instead of fixing a pattern by saying “You have a best friend,” it’s nice to comment on a child’s ability to play with lots of people and to make new friends. The art of friendship requires life-long learning, so let’s resolve to give children all the time they need to discover the most rewarding ways of relating to others. I still remember the comment of a wise friend. When asked if someone was her “soul mate,” she looked a little confused and said, “Aren’t we all?”

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