opening extract from

Making Sense of your Child's Friendships

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Introduction

Undertaking the research for this book produced several surprises for me. I had already seen from my own experience as an active mum and step-mum for more than three decades that friends are desperately important to most children, most of the time. Having written previously about eight- to twelve-year-olds, the tween age group, I felt I understood a great deal about the ups and downs of children's close and not-so-close relationships at an age children become noticeably hungry for friends. I remember those roller coaster friendship years so well! What I hadn't fully realised was that what children want, or get, from their friends, and how important friendships are to them, changes in specific and important ways well before the tween years – indeed throughout childhood. While researching for this book, I realised that even babies can show delight when they're with particular children they see frequently. I also learned how some children say they need friends as much to protect themselves against being bullied or picked on as a way to have fun and feel accepted within their social group.

When my eleven-year-old stepson and nine-year-old step-daughter came to live with me and their dad, having spent two years in the United States with their mum and step-dad, the friends they made at their new school were central to helping

them adjust and settle into an unfamiliar place. My own two children who arrived shortly after, also a boy and a girl, had very different patterns of friendship from each other and from the older two. Not having access to either mobile phones or social networking sites until well into their teens, their lives were in many ways easier compared with today's children, whose access to text messaging and computers has big downsides as well as major upsides. The possibility of cyber bullying, for example, was not something I had to contemplate until my daughter was at least fifteen. I hear so much from anxious parents about the amount of bullying that takes place in school and can continue after school, online. I was aware with my daughter that the pressure to have ever more glamorous birthday parties was increasing, but in the last twelve years the options for entertainment have grown and the pressure has intensified. On top of this, the marketing industry targets brands at ever younger kids, making the competition between children to own particular items far tougher for parents to handle.

I'm also aware that researchers and psychologists who work with children are only now appreciating how much friends influence even younger children's development. It seemed a good moment, then, not only to talk to children and parents in greater depth about friendships, but also to record these conversations to help parents understand and manage better a central part of their child's life.

This book is the result. It focuses on children's typical friendship experiences pre-adolescence, particularly during their primary school years, and explains why friendships develop in the way they do. It also looks at how your role as a parent needs to adapt in response, from directing and fixing your children's

friendships at the beginning to staying in the background once they are settled in junior school.

Most advice for parents tends to focus on adolescent friendships, no doubt because more is at stake when they go wrong. But as we now know and appreciate that children's earlier friendships have a powerful influence on their developing identity and longer term social and emotional health and well-being, it is important to understand younger children's experiences, too. Teenagers who have problems making and keeping friends, or who get in with or seem attracted to the wrong crowd, have often had similar difficulties and styles of relationships in the years preceding adolescence, which means that the sooner you spot an emerging problem and respond to it appropriately, the better.

If you wait until your child's teenage years before you take action, it becomes much harder to intervene. During early and mid childhood, however, it is part of our parental duty to encourage, preserve and monitor friendships: this can be a very intensive process as the issues and dilemmas appear, if not daily then, typically, weekly, for girls especially. Such involvement can make us feel our child's pain and anguish intensely when things are difficult for them and we feel responsible.

Of course, children's primary school friendships are generally transient. Though some do stand the test of time, most will not survive into adolescence, and even fewer remain into adulthood. There are good developmental reasons for this, as we shall see. Early friendships can also fizzle out or get eclipsed when children change schools, move, or follow very different paths post-school. Yet transient does not mean insignificant or unimportant, which would be a typical 'grown up' mistake to make. To each child at that point in his

life, any particular friend can mean the world and it's important for us to remember this. We need to see the experience from his perspective, to have and retain a sense of proportion as we provide the shoulder to cry on or act as the metaphorical cushion to punch as he relieves frustration or even grief at the latest insult from, or apparent loss of, a special friend.

The key difference between children's friendships and those that adults have is that, while adults on the whole choose to be friends with people who have shared similar experiences, or share similar interests or characteristics (people whom they know they can trust and whose company they find enjoyable), children are still growing and finding out about themselves. They're learning about who they are and with whom they get along best; discovering different ways to manage conflict and to compromise and share; they're also finding out just how far they can go in being direct and open, and discovering when it might be better to be quiet and exercise discretion. As adults, we would seriously consider dropping someone who started to be overly critical or extremely thoughtless and selfish. Children, though, are both more needy of friends and have fewer expectations of appropriate behaviour from someone who claims to be a friend. Younger children are also far less judgmental. They haven't yet developed the cognitive skills to judge in a critical manner and will often tolerate behaviour we would find unacceptable. And, of course, as children, they understand all too well the temperamental and emotional outbursts of other children and will tend to see them in context.

Children learn a great deal of useful life lessons from friendship problems. It is, almost always, a mistake to step in too soon to protect them from this – sometimes, literally hands-on – learning. It is also a mistake to assume that every child is

going to have the same pattern of friends as you do. Children are different from each other and different from their parents. Some prefer to have, or simply end up with, a larger group of friends with no one person standing out as a special friend. Some will be content with serial best friends, just one or two of them at a time, and are not, therefore, invited to all the parties, but are content. And some children are quite happy with few, or no, particular friends. These children will often have passions and interests that they can follow intently at home and they may find the general rough and tumble of the playground dull. As parents, we need to remember to accept a range of friendship patterns in our children's lives, and if a child surprises or disappoints us, not to imply to him that he is inadequate in any way.

The greatest dilemma any parent faces is whether, and how far, to get involved either in a child's making friends or in smoothing upsets between friends. It's hard to resist when our child seems intensely distressed. How to balance our response is addressed throughout this book: my hope is that parents will be able to refer to it when different issues arise at different ages in a child's life and that parents will gain some insight and understanding as well as a range of useful responses. No one should try to dictate what to do in any particular situation as there are frequently subtleties that might suggest one action rather than another more obvious one; nevertheless, certain responses from us generally are helpful, while others seem to make things worse. By recounting the real stories of children and parents, I hope you will get a sense for which strategies and responses are likely to work best for you.

1. How Friendship Grows and Changes Before and Through Primary School

There is far more to our children's friendships than meets the eye. Children change and mature dramatically over their first twelve years and this inevitably affects their friendships; yet the changes occur so gradually that they often go unnoticed by us – the parents and carers. They happen in response to children's capacity to think about, relate to and understand their world and the people in it – their natural cognitive and emotional development – rather than to any practical aspect of home or school. In order to be supportive when things go wrong, it is useful for us to understand the typical phases of friendship that pre-teen children experience.

The Four Phases

Phase One: Nought to Four Years Old. Pre-friendship – Making Sociable Moments Comfortable

Although very young children do not make friends in a meaningful sense, even babies and young children who see others

regularly do seem to pick out and enjoy the company of particular children, or be indifferent to or even apparently irritated by others. Smiles, squeals, wriggles and jiggles are all signs that a young toddler is pleased to see a 'friend'. Parents and carers who meet regularly with a small group of friends with similar-aged children provide a springboard for early friendships. I once attended a multiple first birthday party organised by several mums who'd become friends at a local childbirth class during pregnancy. Their babies knew each other quite well by then. I was struck by one little boy who was obviously fixated by the shiny dark hair of the only girl who had flowing locks – the others were still almost bald. Whenever she came near to him, he scrambled to get closer to stroke her and her hair! He clearly loved to be near her and was captivated by her softness. Two other children, Katie and Daniel, had been looked after by the same carer for nearly a year. Now, nine months later, when they see each other they wriggle their arms about, smile broadly, run towards each other and hold hands, showing great pleasure and excitement, although they are really too young to play together as 'friends'. By contrast, when Grace, a serious little girl who plays intently on her own and doesn't smile much, comes over, Katie tends to ignore her.

Even at this young age, and despite their inability to talk to each other, children can benefit socially and emotionally from having regular time with familiar babies and the familiar adults who accompany them, especially if there is a recognisable, recurring pattern to those particular times together. Young children respond to faces they recognise and associate particular sounds and games with particular people. These encounters, at home, in the park or local café or at playgroup, help a young child to view other children as part of their widening social world and as a source of pleasure. Of course,

once children reach three, most will go to pre-school and spend regular time with others without a parent or carer in tow. A Reception class teacher told me she could tell when a new pupil has attended pre-school because they find it easier to play with other children and make friends. This does not mean that a child who has spent most of her time at home before starting formal, or 'big', school will be set back for very long, but it may take more time for that child to open herself up to and make a friend because she'll have to negotiate those initial steps first.

Phase Two: Four to Seven Years Old. The Infant School Years

When children start in Reception, their friendships tend to be founded on coincidence and convenience; and they are famously fickle. It's the 'easy come, easy go' phase. Friends come and go with a speed and ease that makes some parents worry about their child's ability to make meaningful friends. What it shows, though, is that children of this age invest a lot less of themselves in their individual friendships than older children and adults do. Friendship at this stage depends overwhelmingly on accessibility: the person they sit next to in the classroom; the one who goes to the same swimming class; the boy who lives next door or on the floor below; and, still very important, your good friend's son or daughter if they are of similar age. The friendships that are given the space to take root and flourish are almost always parent-led – 'Wouldn't you like to have Sara over to play? She seems like a nice girl!' 'Katy and Martha are coming over for coffee tomorrow morning, so you'll be able to spend time playing with Jo and Darrel. That'll be fun for you!'

Imaginary Friends

Your child's imagination helps to make them the unique individual that they are. Imagination fuels curiosity and creates energy, which children need to help them grow and develop. Imagination also makes children impulsive and immediate. They want things *now*. So when there is no one else around to be a real life playmate, an imaginary friend is likely to appear to fill the gap. The best thing about these companions is that they can be conjured up at will. If your child has a rich fantasy life with imaginary friends, it should be seen as evidence of having a healthy mind, not an embarrassing quirk. The phenomenon of imaginary friends will be covered in more detail in the next chapter.

Waiting for Real Friends to Appear

When children first start school, finding friends and then having the confidence to ask them over is a sign of being happy, settled and liked. Parents are usually desperate for that moment to arrive, partly so that they can relax, knowing that their child is 'normal', and perhaps partly so they can get some time off through arranged play dates. It can be tempting to invite someone over or to push your child to accept an invitation before he's ready. But a child who has just started at school needs a while to adjust – there are new rules, larger and much noisier groups; they get less individual attention and need to wait longer for it. It is exhausting to talk to and deal with a large number of unfamiliar children. It's hard even for us when we go somewhere where we know only a few people, or when we have to make conversation with a stranger for any length of time. For most

young children, this forced socialising and acclimatisation is sufficiently demanding to tire them out totally for weeks.

Adjusting to 'Big' School

During this difficult time coping with so many new things, children need the familiarity and stability of their home and the warmth of your love and approval far more than they need friends. Primary school teachers generally advise that children should not have after-school arrangements fixed for them until they ask, and most children won't be ready until towards the end of the second term. Even if your child has attended a nursery or playgroup five days a week and played with other children regularly, school is a dramatic change and they will need you more. Katy, mother of five-year-old Madeline, said: 'She attended full-time play-school before she started big school so I thought it would be a breeze. She was used to long days out. But I couldn't get over how totally exhausted she was. It was the bigger groups, the bigger children and the noise and not being able to do what she wanted. She point-blank refused to have any child back home for two terms. It's only now, though, in this third term, that she's happy for this to happen. She didn't mind going to someone else's home but hers was absolutely out of bounds to others.'

There are other reasons apart from sheer tiredness, why new boys and girls aren't raring to go in the race to build an impressive social life. Young children sometimes find it hard to integrate home and school or simply prefer to keep home separate. It is *their* place and they don't want to share it or you – like a favourite teddy or toy. Any parent who has ever been into their child's classroom to help with an activity can be shocked

to realise quite how possessive their child is, to hear them exclaim in puzzled and hurt tones: 'She's *my* mummy – I should have her first!', or 'No, it's my turn again!' They can hardly bear to have any other child get close or have your attention, and can only assert their special claim by having a second slot of time and attention at the end of your allotted session as well. This sense of ownership is also shown by the forlorn, even desperate, look on their faces when they emerge from school keen to be scooped up, repossessed and taken home by their parent or carer, only to find this person immersed in conversation with another parent.

If your child has not yet asked to have a friend back after school for tea, it doesn't necessarily mean that he's not making good friends during the day. He'd just prefer them to stay in that

Pointers for action . . .
The first weeks and months of primary school

- ➢ Realise your child needs to be with you at home.
- ➢ Don't force friends on your child – wait for them to ask to have someone over.
- ➢ Accept that your child will make friends more easily if they feel secure with you and knows that there's no pressure.
- ➢ Appreciate that your child will be making friends in class but may not want to play with them anywhere else. You can explain this to the parent/carer if your child is invited round to another child's house and doesn't want to go.

realm and not enter his other world. He may well have preferred people to paint with, others that he chooses as a dressing up partner, or someone to do puzzles with or rush around with at outdoor playtime – yet he may not be ready for them come home and share his mum or his private space.

Chopping and Changing

Four- to seven-year-olds, especially girls, can seem to have a different friend every week. Rupert, aged nine, said of his seven-year-old sister, 'She comes home with a new best friend every day!' This can occur because they have been paired with a different child from usual to do some class work or they happen to have found someone new to play with one break time. Younger children are very egocentric and immediate. The person they have just had a nice time with, whom they have just decided they like, is now their latest friend who, temporarily, eclipses all others. Younger children also do not yet have sophisticated thoughts. Loyalty is a sophisticated notion that takes time to grasp and it is only when children grow older that it becomes a feature of friendship. Although your child's latest friend looms large to the point that another child may be pushed from their thoughts, one new friend does not, in fact, mean that another has to be dropped and treated as a non-friend to make room: the superseded one may merely have been put out of mind for a while – a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. After the next close encounter, that individual will probably reappear as your child's special friend. This is quite normal. Six-year-old Annie Rose put it well: 'Say, every day you make a new friend and then you break up with them and then the next playtime you're back friends again!' While you may be

tempted to tease your child about the jack-in-a-box, on-off, style of relationship, it's best to say nothing, smile to yourself quietly and let it pass without comment.

Changing Their Minds About Going Over to Play

Mum was putting on Reva's coat, ready to take her in the car to play at Casey's house, when Reva suddenly became tearful.

'I don't want to go to Casey's house any more. Mum, I don't want to go. I want to stay here with you.'

'Well, you've got to go. Why didn't you tell me this earlier today? I've got something I've fixed and it's too late now to pull out. Sorry, but that's it. Now, get out the door and into the car . . . What's the problem?'

'Just don't want to go. Don't feel like it. I want to be here. Why do I have to go if I don't want to? Mum, let me stay here!'

And Reva sat down on the floor in the doorway.

A common feature of friendships during this phase is children's tendency to get cold feet at the last minute, just as they're about to leave home to go over to another child's home to play or for a party – especially if this is an occasion when you were planning to leave them there and not socialise at the same time.

There may be tears or tantrums if you insist that they go. Of course, this can be hugely inconvenient and embarrassing. It's natural to worry that your child's refusal will be seen as a rejection and insult that could end the friendship – and upset the parent, whom you may like and want as a friend, too. Yet a young child's sudden refusal is more likely to reflect their own uncertainty and insecurity than any worry about the

other playmate's temperament, parent or home circumstance. They may be anxious about what could happen at home while they're away from it, as well as worried about getting homesick and possibly creating a scene.

How might you decide what to do in this situation? You might like to encourage your child to go to prove that she can cope with this situation, which could boost her confidence. She might feel happier about going if you offer to stay for a short while, arrange for her to go for less time or offer a small incentive if she stays the whole time. You might prefer to let your child follow her instincts and let her see that you understand and trust her, in which case you would need to phone and cancel on this occasion. For the next play date, ask her if she's happy to go. If she agrees, yet when the time comes changes his mind again, offer to stay for a while and return a bit early, to let her see she can manage. If she does, praise her for it, say you expect she's pleased that it went well and comment that you were confident she'd be fine. Only you can decide what's right for your child as you know her best.

Phase Three: Seven- to Ten-Year-Olds. Junior School

The most noticeable change in the lives of seven- to ten-year-olds is their growing focus on friends. Around the age of seven or eight, most children become achingly hungry for friends. As friends become more important, family becomes slowly but progressively less so. The changes that take place in children's brains as a normal part of growing up enable children to think in more abstract ways – psychologists call this cognitive development. Middle childhood, as this period is referred to, is the

time when children begin to see themselves as separate beings and move apart from their families emotionally; they remain reliant on their family but no longer wholly dependent on it for identity, entertainment and affirmation. They begin to find their own feet and, rather than rely on family, seek friends to widen their horizons, confirm that they are likeable and that they can survive in the wider world that they now know exists beyond their home.

Choosing Their Own Friends

The key words that characterise this phase of friendship are: choice, autonomy, independence, influence, exploration and fun. Children are no longer content to have the friends that parents sift and select for them, or to spend time with children whom they chanced to meet or sit with; they now want to choose their own friends. They have very clear needs now: to have friends who are like them, with whom they click, who are interested in similar things, have a similar sense of humour, with whom they can explore new opportunities, learn new things and become more independent and have fun. This is the age and stage during which children experiment, explore and confirm who they think they are by choosing friends they think – perhaps subconsciously – are like them. They say, in effect, 'This is me; this is what I have to offer. I think I am like you in this or that way; do you agree, and do you like me?' If the person accepts the friendship, the implication is, 'Hey, yes, I like you and I reckon I am quite like you.' When this happens, the child can feel not only accepted and likeable, but also confident in their sense of self and how they 'read' other people. It will increase their

happiness by helping to boost their self-esteem, make them more outgoing and keep their confidence afloat.

Paul, who was nearly nine, came home from his first day back at school extremely excited. 'There's a new boy in my class,' he explained, 'and he's just like me! He plays the trumpet, likes bird-watching, loves nature, is interested in tanks and aircraft and his special passion is fishing!' This new boy was an identikit Paul. Bird-watching was a joint family pastime, but none of his other passions was understood or really appreciated at home. This new friend enabled Paul to carve out some comfortable and stimulating private space – time alone with his friend – that provided both enormous pleasure and a measure of independence from his parents, a time that he could use to explore and develop himself. The two boys became inseparable and are still best friends twenty years on.

Trust and Loyalty

Of course, it's not always straightforward and easy. Children who are still learning the ropes of relationships can misjudge them and are bound to make mistakes. They'll almost certainly go through a number of friends until they find one who's the best fit *and* trustworthy, and even then they can be let down or, after time apart, can be unsure how enduring a friendship is. By the end of phase three, children begin to see friends as more than people they like and click with – they also expect a friend to be loyal, trusting and to offer intimacy: someone to whom they can tell secrets and discuss personal matters. Initially, that requires regular time together to build up trust and check out

loyalty. When children don't see school friends during the long summer holidays, it can create uncertainty. Lucy, aged nine, said as the start of the new school year loomed, 'It's funny, not being sure who your friends are until school starts again.' She was concerned in case the closeness she felt she had with certain friends was misjudged.

Pointers for action . . .
At the beginning of a school term

- ➢ Suggest that your child invites a friend over to play before term starts, to start the friendship up again.
- ➢ Realise that your child is likely to be more tired than usual during those first stressful weeks of term.
- ➢ Make sure that your child has opportunities to talk to you.
- ➢ Realise that your child's concerns about the coming term may be reflected in more challenging behaviour, and try to be patient.
- ➢ Spend some fun time together so your child knows they have your love and support whatever may happen at school.

Getting back into the routine of school can be emotionally exhausting and makes learning more difficult. Psychologists know that every year in September children's reading standards drop for about a month, along with other cognitive skills. The

effort needed to get back into the habit of learning can mean that their social skills take a battering, too. It is not at all surprising that children can seem permanently exhausted and bad tempered in the first week or two of any term and this is more marked at the start of a school year.

Same Sex Friendships

The one feature almost all seven- to ten-year-olds display is having same-gender friendships. Until this time, children can be happy to play a wide range of games with either boys or girls, often in mixed groups. Up to the age of about six, birthday parties are often mixed affairs and even best friends can be the opposite gender. This third phase, however, marks the complete parting of the ways. It signifies, in fact, the developmental moment when gender takes centre stage in a child's identity. They now need to explore what being a boy or a girl means and how they might need to adjust their previous behaviour and relationships accordingly.

Pulling Rank: How Behaviour Can Border on Bullying

The journey through these three or four years of middle childhood can be tough. Children this age are trying to make their mark, so there can be a constant undercurrent of competition as they pitch themselves and pull rank in the attempt to be top dog. The jostling for position can border on bullying. Gossipmongering and spreading rumours are common tactics for children of this age, especially for less secure youngsters who are trying to cope with self-doubt. They often target those with oodles of the coveted confidence.