

# The SURPRISING SECRET to Success in School

By Jean MacLeod

Suzuki violin? Kumon math tutoring? Fluency in a foreign language?

The secret to our children's future school success may not be what you think! It is both much simpler than after-school enrichment classes, and in true Zen fashion, much more complex. The secret is...friends.

*"The single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, not school grades, and not classroom behavior but, rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. (W.W. Hartup)*

A socially insecure child will often have great difficulty with group academic experiences. Successful classroom learning requires a child to be interactive with the teacher and with other students; school requires Relational I.Q.

Building relationships and making friends is not always a natural process, particularly for internationally adopted children with post-institutional deficits, or who are dealing with speech and language or sensory issues. Parents can give their children a map to the friendship maze and front-load them for school by teaching children the invisible rules of communication. This 'friendship therapy' is a two-part process that can be practiced at home and in public with awareness, role-play and reinforcement. A child needs to learn both:

- 1) Non-verbal language (reading physical 'clues')
- 2) Social skills (understanding the 'rules' of reciprocal play)

## ***Non-verbal Language***

*"Teaching non-verbal language is the foundation before you can teach appropriate social skills."* (Ann Siegel)

Most of our post-institutional kids missed out on the intensely close mother-baby reciprocal relationship, where secret messages pass between the two in hundreds of small, mostly unnoticed moments every day. A baby, toddler or preschooler models behavior, and gets "encoded" for future relationships by these moments of responsive give and take. A child living in an orphanage has likely missed out on the mother-baby dance, and may not have had the kind of caring one-on-one communication or interaction with caretakers to support the learning of **non-verbal language**.

So, how do parents begin to teach a child about the invisible rules of behavior, rules that other kids seem to be able to decode and apply? Use easy, understandable cues for concrete thinkers. Teach a child to:

**FOCUS ON FACES** – use, and ask for, eye contact when speaking with your child.

Recognize and name emotions (practice by identifying expressions on people at home or on TV) and learn to interpret meaning. Watch for and anticipate facial expression changes.

The virtual Emotions Game at [www.do2learn.com](http://www.do2learn.com)  
is a wonderful tool for learning to 'read' faces

**LEARN BACK and FORTH** - help a child to picture conversation as a teeter-totter (for a young child) or as a tennis match (for an older child). Actually use a teeter-totter, for instance, to teach the up-and-down flow of conversation. The person at the top is the talker, the person at the bottom is the listener, until the balance shifts.

**KEEP HANDS TO YOURSELF**- being touched by another without the correct social cue is an unwanted violation of self for most people. Little kids might not understand social spaces or the varying physical comfort zones for the different types of relationships, but they all understand "keep your hands to yourself".

**STAND BACK**- a child who stands too close to others may appear strange or intimidating. "Stand back" is another reminder for physical children who unknowingly create tension by invading personal space. It's a simple place to start when teaching a child about respecting other people's 'territory'.

**USE LOUD or SOFT** – a child's tone of voice, and voice level, sends an immediate message. Like learning a part in a play, a child can practice different voice inflections and volume for a variety of circumstances. Use meal-time to practice 'conversation'.

### **Social Skills**

Empowering a child with the underlying structure and pattern of interpersonal communication will lead to the next step of **social skills** (the rules-of-relationships component). Making friends is about being cognizant of how others think and feel, about 'reading' and attuning to different people, and deciding in advance what you stand for and how you want to act in different, unexpected, or stressful situations.

**Books.** Books can provide lots of topics and resources for thoughtful parent-child discussion on behavior planning, and on a child's decisions and reactions in social situations.

**Practice role-playing social skills.** Help a child understand skills like sharing, taking turns, listening, appropriate (and inappropriate) topics of conversation, table manners, kindness and thinking of others. Play-dates will be far more successful when a child understands guest and host behavior, and has role-played out certain potentially stressful scenarios in advance!  
*Some parents and children work out a code word for a parent to use in public, when a child needs to pay attention to his or her social behavior.*

**Structured Settings.** One of the easiest ways for a child to make friends is to have a regular, structured small-group setting like Scouts to attend (with lots of parent involvement guiding interaction). Scheduled, structured activities can become a resource for one-on-one play-dates with the other children who belong to the group. Children may also more easily connect to a kindred spirit if they have a sport or hobby that they are really and truly interested in, and a venue to meet children with the same focus.

## **A Parent's Help**

It is important to remember that we parents may need to spend a lot of time and effort as invisible, peripheral help in order to assist our adopted children to become successful at what we may feel should be a 'natural' skill. Every kid **needs** a least one good friend. Clueing our children in to the secrets of friendship will help them successfully navigate the classroom and the playground, and help make learning a positive experience.

## **References**

Hartup, W. W. (1992). *Having Friends, Making Friends, and Keeping Friends: Relationships as Educational Contexts*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. ED 345 854.

Ann Siegel, *Learning the Language of Relationships*, Newsbriefs May/June 1998  
Learning Disabilities Association of America

Copyright 2006 MacLeod, All Rights Reserved

## **Book Resources**

### **FRIENDSHIP: HOW DO YOU ACT? WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?**

#### **Books for Elementary and Middle School Children:**

*What Do You Stand For? A Kid's Guide to Building Character*  
By Barbara A. Lewis

*If You Had to Choose, What Would You Do?*  
By Sandra McLeod Humphrey

#### **From the American Girl Library ([www.americangirl.com](http://www.americangirl.com)):**

*The Care and Keeping of Friends*  
By Nadine Bernard Westcott (ill.)

*The Smart Girl's Guide to Friendship Troubles*  
By Patty Kelley Criswell

*The Big Book of Help*  
By Nancy Holyoke

*What Would You Do?*  
By Patty Kelley Criswell

## **MAKING FRIENDS: BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

**\*Books that may appear too young for a child's age may still be appropriate for them on a developmental or emotional level**

*Making Friends*  
By Fred Rogers

*How to Be a Friend: A Guide to Making Friends and Keeping Them*  
By Laurie Krasny Brown

*How to Lose All Your Friends*  
By [Nancy L. Carlson](#)

*King of the Playground*  
By [Phyllis Reynolds Naylor](#)

*The Recess Queen*  
By [Alexis O'Neill](#)

## **FOR PARENTS: HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN to MAKE FRIENDS**

*Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit in*  
By [Stephen Nowicki](#) and [Marshall P. Duke](#)

*Good Friends Are Hard to Find :  
Help Your Child Find, Make, and Keep Friends*  
By Fred Frankel, Ph.D

*Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me:  
The Top 25 Friendship Problems and How to Solve Them*  
By [Michele Borba](#)

*The Unwritten Rules of Friendship:  
Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Make Friends*  
By [Natalie Madorsky Elman](#) and [Eileen Kennedy-Moore](#)

*Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success*  
By [Marshall P. Duke](#), [Elisabeth A. Martin](#), [Stephen Nowicki Jr.](#)