



Peer Relationships

When asked to discuss qualities that characterize their best friends, research shows younger children often associate friendship with sharing material things, participating in activities together, offering help and defense, and overall being friendly. Older children associate friendships more with sharing interests, private thoughts, and having mutual affection and respect for one another.

Gifted children generally have a higher understanding of mutuality in friendships and higher expectations for those they call “friends,” when compared to typical children of similar age. Gifted children understand interdependence in friendships better, if not beyond, their age-peers.

This can cause gifted children to be out of sync with age peers in the understanding of relationships.

Being out of sync, combined with differences in interests and behaviors, may cause gifted children to find few friends their own age. They often prefer friendships with older children or even prefer to interact more with adults. Extroverted gifted children may find success in making new friends more quickly, while more introverted gifted children need peers who can balance the need for interaction with the introverted child’s need to be alone. All children, regardless of giftedness, have a need to be connected with others. *(Adapted from Webb, 2007 & Lovecky, 1995.)*

Agemate versus Peer.

“Although most gifted kids don’t have serious problems with peer relations - contrary to popular myth - they do encounter unique situations due to their advanced intellects and intense levels of observation and insight. One particular social issue gifted kids often deal with is the difference between agemate and peer.” For example, a 10-year-old, who has the intellectual capacity of a typical 13-year old, will have little in common with same aged classmates. However, when this same 10-year-old has the chance to interact with older kids or adults, they may find themselves more engaged in interesting conversations. An “age” mate is someone who shares the same chronological age and a “peer” is someone you interact with because you have common interests, no matter the age.

(Modified from Delisle, Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2011.)

Parents of gifted children often wonder and worry about the peer relationships of their children. They may hear stories of gifted children going awry because of peer pressure or feelings of isolation. The studies on the issue of highly gifted children and their development of peer relationships are countless. The following list was developed by Kacey Pittman, the Davidson Institute Family Consultant, at a seminar on peer relations and gifted children.

Strategies for Fostering Friendships:

- **Understand the need for alone time.** Highly intelligent students need more time and space where they can relax in their own thoughts. It's important for parents to understand it's okay for this quiet time.
- **Having friends for different purposes.** It's okay to be attracted to different people for different reasons. It's good to have different friends and enjoy the uniqueness of each friendship.
- **Help facilitate connections.** Connect your child with others of similar interests and facilitate ways for your child to meet friends of different backgrounds and interests.
- **Set-up opportunities for friendships.** When students struggle in this area, parents can set-up playdates, have friends or family over, or visit places where other children may be.
- **Modeling good behavior.** Parents should model good behavior with their own peers. When appropriate, discuss certain relationships and dynamics of the relationships with your children. Sharing with your children help them see how you handle certain situations and people.
- **Visit a social skills group.** Social skills groups are designed for students to work together in learning how to interact with one another, read social cues, and resolve conflicts. These are all skills any person who encounters others on a daily basis can benefit. These groups can be led by medical or social professionals.
- **Understanding differences in age and gender.** It is okay for children to have friends who might be of another gender or age. Children should understand that it doesn't matter who their friends are as long as they feel respected.
- **Effective tools for success.** If your child seems to struggle with social cues or the handling of certain social situations, role-playing can be a powerful learning tool. Be sure to set aside time each day to talk and play with your child, this special time can help your child practice effective communication skills.
- **Maintaining connections.** Friendships may happen across a long distance. Children can use a variety of communication methods to help maintain connections, such as, social media tools appropriate for their age group. It's important that parents keep an eye on the child's social media accounts to ensure that communications are appropriate and of a positive nature for the child.