

Facilitating Children's Friendships: The Adult's Role in Supporting Peer Relationships

Front Porch Series Broadcast Call

Gail Joseph: Well, happy Monday, and welcome back to another installment of the NCQTL Front Porch Series. We took a few months off over the summer, so we're very excited to be back with all of you. I'm Gail Joseph. I'm co-director of the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. And on behalf of my colleagues at NCQTL, I'd like to thank you all for joining us today. We have quite a few people logged on, which is great. So for those of you joining us for the first time, the goal of the Front Porch Series is to feature national experts who are doing innovative and applied work to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and in turn, the outcomes for young child and their families.

So let's imagine – it is the beginning of the school year for many of you, and you're children are settling in to the new routines and the environment. But are they forming relationships? Do they know each other's names? Do they have a best friend? So today's topic is just this: friendship. And we are joined by two leading experts on this, Dr. Micki Ostrosky and Lori Meyer. So let me tell you just a little bit about our speakers.

So Dr. Micki Ostrosky – sorry about that – is the head and professor of special education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. And one of the things I noticed is that, in a couple of days, they're going to celebrate an "Inclusion Day," which is really exciting. So Inclusion Day will be happening at the University of Illinois.

So Micki has been the principal investigator/lead researcher on several interesting projects looking at naturalistic language interventions, social interaction interventions, social-emotional competence, challenging behavior, and transitions. So, things that are probably of interest to all of us on – today. And you might also know her because she's been a big collaborator on the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, or CSEFEL. And so you've probably seen her name in print on many of those things on that website.

And joining her today is one of her doctoral students, Lori Meyer. So Lori is a doctoral candidate in the department of special education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. And she's been a teacher as – as an early childhood special education teacher in a blended program, so that would be children who are typically developing and children with special needs. And the focus of her research is on the development of friendship and peer-related social competence among young children. So very germane to the topic today, of course.

So I have personally been looking forward to this important topic being highlighted in our Front Porch Series. And now, before I turn it over to our esteemed speakers, let – let me remind you that, as always, we'll save a few minutes at the end to field your questions. You can enter those into the question bar. But feel free to enter those at any time, not just at the end, and then we can kind of start to look through those and be able to engage in some Q&A at the end.

But one more thing that is new to us at the Front Porch, we encourage you to share your thoughts on this presentation and your experiences supporting children's friendships on Twitter using the hashtag #FrontPorchChat. If you don't have a Twitter account, you can still view the conversation at

www.twitter.com/#FrontPorchChat. So we'll hope to see you there as well. So without further ado, I will now turn this over to our speakers, Dr. Ostrosky and Lori Meyer.

Dr. Michaelene Ostrosky: Thank you, Gail. Thanks for inviting us to be part of the Front Porch Series. Hello to everyone who's joining in today's webinar. Lori and I are pleased to be here to discuss a topic that is near and dear to our hearts. As someone who, years ago, taught young children who were deaf and blind, I've always been fascinated with peer relationships.

In fact, in that classroom many years ago, my team and I worked really hard to get our young students to interact with one another. For initially, they would push each other out of the way in order to find the adults in the classroom. For to them, they would look at us, the adults, as we were the ones who gave them access to things. We gave them access to the materials they wanted, to activities they enjoyed, to comfort when they needed it. They rarely interacted with their peers. So I spent several years working with children who were deaf and blind, fascinated and intrigued, on how we could support and facilitate their interactions with each other, both just social interactions and the development of some peer relationships.

So, today's topic – that's what we'll focus on in today's talk. And we'll really think about your role in supporting young children's peer relationships. So, today's talk will get – will require you to be a little bit active in this participation. So what we want you to do to get us started, grab a little piece of paper, pull out your pen, or at least think about this. We want you to think about a close friend that you have. And jot down, or think about, three to five things that make that relationship really special. So what words, what phrases come to mind when you think of that close friend? And I'm going to be quiet for 15 seconds while you think about that.

Okay, those of you that know me well know that was hard to do. Okay, so words that come to mind when we've done this kind of activity before – others throw out words like "caring" or "supportive," "loving," "a good listener," "trusting," "shared interests." I asked my 13-year-old son what words come to mind for him and one that he suggested was "equal." So think about those words, and we want you to keep those words or those phrases and also those special friendships in your thoughts as we talk today. So we want you to be able to re-think or re-group, thinking about your own experiences as we think about the young children that are in our care.

So when we think about friendships in young children, what does that mean? Friendships refer to a specific relationship between two children, and here reciprocity is really important. So reciprocity, or the mutual preference, of two children to be near or play with each other, that's considered a hallmark of friendship. So it's not just one-sided, but it's a reciprocal relationship. Also, friendships among young children have been characterized as being voluntary, based on mutual affection or liking, and involving common interests and shared activities. So when you go back to the list of words that you wrote down or the things you thought about, does this characterize your own friendships? Do they fit in this definition?

And today when Lori and I talk, we thought about an analogy of a four-leaf clover – that a best friend is like a four-leaf clover. And so, we're going to talk about these four topics that you see on this slide. We're going to go over: Why are friendships lucky? You know, why are they important to us? Why are friends sometimes hard to find? Why do some children struggle to develop friendships? What are things that you, as an adult, can do to facilitate the development or the finding of friendships for young children? And then, how can we help children navigate their own search for friends?

So when we think about why are friendships lucky, or why are they important for children, there are many outcomes that the research has shown are predictive – friendships will help predict. And some of these include learning how to share. So they predict later outcomes such as learning how to share, children cooperating with each other. So they learn how to share things, how to cooperate together to do something. Having friends helps with the development of language and communication – verbal/non-verbal communication skills, exchanging play ideas, responding proactively to aggression. Those of you that have had siblings know that sometimes those early rough and tumble, that helps teach you too how to respond to aggression. When is too much – enough of that kind of rough and tumble play?

And also, friendships are associated with feelings of positive self-esteem and increased self-awareness. Other outcomes that friendships support are early learning. So, all kind of academic and intellectual skills. Also, adjustment in kindergarten. So as children transition and move to other settings, other environments, having – knowing that they feel confident developing skills, having those social skills to develop friendships, assist with that adjustment or that transition. And then they also help protect against other problems that lead into adolescence and adulthood. So there's been research to show that having good social skills, having friendships, will help with other – will help support other developmental milestones into adulthood and adolescence.

So in summary, if we think about social interactions and friendships in early childhood, successful and effective social interactions with peers and friendships are a fundamental feature of early childhood. The fact that you're on this webinar means you must be interested or also believe this and support this. It's not just about academics, but it's all the skills that children gain from social interactions and then the friendships they develop and how those help support other areas of learning. So sometimes, typically developing children, as well as children with disabilities, struggle to make friends. So Lori's now going to talk a little bit about some of the children who struggle to make friends.

Lori Meyer: So even though interacting with peers and forming friendships are developmental milestones and things that many children eventually learn to do and do well during their early childhood years, for some children, either with or without disabilities, friendships are very hard to make and maintain.

So if we think back to our four-leaf clover analogy, everyone can attest: sometimes it feels like you're standing in a field surrounded by clover and it should be easy to find that four-leaf one, but it's not that easy. And we can relate that to children in the classroom setting. They might be surrounded by lots of other peers who would be potentially great playmates or friends, but for some reason a child may not be able to make that connection with peers in their classrooms.

And we're going to just mention specifically some of the challenges that children with disabilities face. So for children with disabilities, one of the most replicated findings that we see in research that's been done on inclusive preschool classrooms is that, children with disabilities interact with their peers less often than peers who are typically developing. And other children in the classroom who are typically developing tend to play with peers who are similar to themselves, so other peers who may be typically developing.

And we also see that children with disabilities are less accepted in their social setting and in their classrooms. And other peers may not expect much from them, or assign a lower social status to these

children. And children with disabilities are more likely to have poor peer interactions, specifically if they have certain types of developmental delays or disabilities like autism, or challenges in communication, language, challenging behaviors, or hearing impairments.

So one thing that isn't hard to find or see is the progression of social skill development. These are foundational skills that, as Early Head – Early Head Start teachers on the call would attest that we see these skills and behaviors in really young infants and toddlers. So we see this beginning interest in relationships with adults and with peers in the environment. We see this through social smiles and cooing, watching, observing other children playing around them, reaching out, trying to engage and interact with those around each other, and even imitation – very early imitation, by copying what other children are doing.

So all of these skills kind of lead in and support friendship development, joined attention, the ability to play with one another briefly, regulate their emotions, inhibit those dominant impulses to want to take a toy out of someone's hand, but practicing skills like turn taking and sharing. And we know that children don't have to have all these skills perfected in order to make friends, but it's within the friendship relationship that children can practice these skills and refine their social skills over time to encourage the friendship to develop. So these are just some of the skills, as teachers, we may be looking for in the classroom when observing children's current friendships.

And the other thing that we might be looking for, that Gail mentioned earlier in thinking to your classroom, do children have best friends yet? Who are the peers that you see children using these skills with? So with this in mind, we want you to think about your own classroom and the children in your care. And think of three children. And when you think of those three children, jot down their three closest friends in the classroom. And as you do that, think about how confident are you in your choices? So we'll give you 15 seconds to do that.

Okay. So right now you should have been thinking about three children and writing down who those three children's three closest friends were, and then how confident were you in your choices? So what's interesting is that we asked the same question to kindergarten teachers. We had them identify the friends of all the children in their classroom and then tell us were they confident in their choices or not. And surprisingly, the teachers told us that they had a really low level of confidence when asked this question. They really weren't sure who their friends were – who the friends were of children in their classroom.

And this was surprising to a certain extent, but literature tells us that there is evidence that teachers tend to feel that they can't influence the friends – the children's friendships in the classroom or have much influence on children's peer related social confidence. But we think that there's lots of things that teachers can do in the classroom to be mindful in observing children's relationships and their social skill development.

And one of the ideas that we have for you today is based on the work of Danko and Buysse – and it's a resource we have included at the end of this presentation – and they suggest creating something called "friendship files." So in a friendship file, and these might be especially important for children who are struggling in their friendship skills, but keeping a list of things like potential social partners. So children that others like playing with or maybe they are always in close proximity to. You might keep a list of children's interests, or in peers who also have similar interests. And you can use this information as you start to plan activities in your classroom for the children to interact and engage with one another.

Dr. Ostrosky: Okay, so now I'm going to talk about some of the strategies that you as teachers can do to help facilitate friendships in Early Head Start classrooms, in preschool classrooms. So one of the first things we want you to consider are ways that you can set up the environment. So arrange both the social environment and/or the physical environment to help support the development of friendships.

So, things like limiting the number of children in a play area, but also not having so many play areas available that children can play by themselves. So ideally, having two to six children in a play area, depending on what the play area – how small the – your density, the size of your space is. Arranging small play groups so that children can go into those areas and play and encourage interaction there. You can also pair children up. A child who has some social difficulties with a child is – who is more socially competent. So maybe having children pair up together to do an activity.

Also, having toys available that are likely to encourage social interaction. There's a wealth of literature out there to talk about things like blocks, and cars and trucks, dolls, dramatic play materials. Those types of materials encourage social interaction as opposed to things like writing utensils encourages more independent work, or sometimes Play-Doh materials where you're creating your own structure – your own Play-Doh creation, if you aren't kind of pushed to share the rollers or the cookie cut-outs, those types of materials can encourage more independence as opposed to social interaction.

Now, you can encourage social interaction by limiting some of the numbers of rollers or cookie cutters so that children are pushed and, if need be, supported by the adult in the environment to interact with one another and start to develop relationships with each other. Also having materials around, play things that are familiar to children, can encourage them interacting and developing relationships with one another. Things like the post office, grocery store, doctor, vet in the – in the dramatic play area.

And then having toys or activities in which children with – who experience social difficulties, things that they are particularly interested in, having those types of materials available. So if you have a child who has some social interaction difficulties but you notice he or she really likes trains or superheroes, or the water table like in this case in the slide picture that you see, having those types of materials available and encouraging children to interact together can be really successful in starting to help facilitate those friendships. So in other words, think about how you can arrange the environment, both physically and socially, to encourage children to interact and then facilitate friendships.

We also found in our own work that having cooperative play groups that were the same over time – so small groups of children interacting together over time – so even if it's once a week, for a couple weeks, or we did six weeks three times a week, children start to develop relationships and friendships with each other. They may not have known each other, but because they're together in those small groups, they start to develop relationships.

Other strategies you can use to help facilitate friendships are encouraging children to help each other and to do routines together. For example, two children help take something if it needs to go to the office or to the classroom next door, or two children working together to pull the wagon outdoors when it has all the sandbox toys in it. You can also, as the adult, provide positive verbal support for play between children. So as children are playing in the block center, talk about what they're building, prompt sharing, prompt joint construction. But also spend some time sitting back observing. Know kind of when to support and when to draw – you know, step back a little bit so that the children are – are interacting with one another.

As adults, sometimes we're in the interaction too much and then the children look to us to interact with the adults as opposed to each other. So finding that balance of offering some suggestions to get the play going or keep it going or help problem-solve if issues, conflicts arise, but also really supporting the children so they're interacting with one another. Another strategy that adults can use to facilitate friendships is reading books about friends, about playing together, about helping each other. There are many books that are available that focus on friendships, and we want to think about how we can use those books to actually support and to talk about, you know, what are some of the characteristics of friendships and what we can do to interact together.

So on this slide you'll see the CSEFEL – Gail mentioned the Center on Social-Emotional Foundations for Early Learning – the CSEFEL website at Vanderbilt. And if you go to even just csefel.vanderbilt.edu, under "Practical Strategies" you can find a book list that has categories of books that can support social interaction in classrooms. And there's a whole list of books on that website that talk about friendships or are books you can use to support friendships.

They're also – on this particular link where it's called "Book Nooks," there are a series of these things that we call "Book Nooks," that are like lesson plans, I would call them. They're like mini lesson plans. And so, what you can do is – they focus on specific books, these Book Nooks, and then they will give you examples of ideas of how you can use the books to have a theme go through the classroom, to do a particular activity.

So for example, using the book "Rainbow Fish," in this particular – on this particular Book Nook, that book is about a fish – if you're familiar with the book – that becomes upset and – and the rainbow fish is ignored because he won't share his scales with other fish. So he becomes lonely, talks about what it's – what it's like because he didn't have any friends.

So in this particular lesson plan on the Book Nook, we give you ideas of how children can work together to make an art project. So you pair children up, they work together to make their own rainbow fish with glittery scales. And after you've read the book and the children are then doing this hands-on activity, you can talk about things you observed, how they're sharing, how they're working together like friends, things that they are doing, those particular characteristics that you observe, and how they're being good friends, supporting each other, working together to do that project.

Other ideas that we've observed in classrooms or we ourselves have tried that also support the development of friendships are listed on this slide, and I'm just going to briefly talk a little bit about these. One is having a friendship can. So that could be as simple as a coffee can that you put in popsicle sticks with the children's names on them, or photographs of the children. And for some activities during the day or during the week, you might draw out the pictures or popsicle sticks of two children, who are then going to work together to do some activity. Maybe it's simply walking down the hall to go get a drink of water or go to the restroom, but it's a way to encourage children to interact with one another.

Another thing we've seen done in classrooms is planting seeds of friendships. And what this particular class did was – a class where – an early childhood class where children entered the class at different times. So if you think about a child care center, or maybe a Head Start classroom where the enrollment is kind of fluid, not all children start on the first day of class. So what the teacher did in that classroom is, early on when school started, she had the children plant some seeds in little Styrofoam cups. And then

as new children joined the class, they gave that child – each new child, a friendship plant – a friendship flower. So it was a way for children to welcome other children into the community of the classroom.

Another activity we've seen in several classroom – classrooms are designing something like a friendship tree, where teachers have things like leaves or hearts that as the teacher observes children doing things with friends, she writes down a note about what she observed or which two children were working together. And in this day of digital pictures – digital cameras, you could easily take a picture of that and of children engaging with one another, interacting together.

Another thing we've seen in several classrooms are friendship journals. And this is a great way also to share information about friendships and relationships in the classroom with – with the family life, with home. So you might create a class book, a friendship journal of children doing – doing things with their friends, digital photos with words or phrases of things that are happening in the picture.

So for this particular example, you could write about these two children playing together and then create a book that can then go home or be in the class library. We've seen teachers where different children – children can take turns taking the book home to share with their family. So it's a way for families to see, too, what their children are doing at school, learn about the names of the other children in their classroom, etc.

Another way to support the development of friendships is through music and song. So there are – there's a wealth of research done too on using routine songs and games, like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," where children face each other, they hold hands as they sing. So in that example, they're interacting with each other by holding hands as they sing the song. Or taking a song like, "If You're Happy and You Know It," and adapting it to, "If You're Happy and You Know It Smile at a Friend," or "Give a High Five to a Friend," "Hug a Friend," "Pat a Friend on the Back." So trying to alter the songs – the music slightly so that you're facilitating children interacting with one another.

Alright. This is a video that you can also find on the CSEFEL website. We can't show it on this webinar, but we left you the link so you could go in and observe it. We thought this was a great example of this teacher, and I just want to tell you briefly about what she's doing so that you can kind of visualize it. So what this teacher is doing is she has a box – like if you think about a computer paper box, the top of it – in it she has a piece of paper and she calls it a "friendship art activity."

She puts the paper in the box and then she puts two types of paints in it; so say for example, red and yellow. She adds a few marbles and she then invites her teaching assistant to come up and they hold the opposite ends of the box and rock it back and forth, and they're creating a friendship art picture together. So she models it with the other teacher. She talks to the children about them doing a friendship art activity. When you watch the video, you'll see how excited the children are. They can't wait to do this activity.

And so then she pulls out of a can – as in the friendship can – two children's names at a time, and they're going to create a friendship art activity together, which she then labels with the children's names, posts in the classroom, so they have this shared activity too that they can go back to and look at. "Remember when we did that friendship art activity together?" So there's another example of something you can do.

We think it's important that you, as Lori talked about, continually observe children, pay attention to those natural kind of interactions, especially for a child who might be really shy, withdrawn. Is there a child who that particular child seems to gravitate towards? So pay attention, take notes, observe who that child interacts with. Ask other knowledgeable adults, ask family members. Look at when the child is outside. Ask co-teachers, "Who is it that this child naturally interacting with?" Or, "Which children do you see who don't seem to have many children who are friends?" Also talking with children about their own relationships, talking with children about their friendships.

In our work we've heard from parents of preschoolers and kindergarteners about how – how it made them feel when they asked their children's teacher well into the fall semester who are their child's playmates and the teacher had no idea. So spending some time, paying attention to those social relationships is really important, too, in doing what you can do to facilitate those relationships for children who really struggle socially to connect with another child in the classroom. Lori's now going to talk about how children themselves can navigate the search for friendships.

Lori: So one of the ways that we can help children navigate their own search for finding friends independently is to teach them the skills that our often found in friendship relationships. And we can teach these skills to all children, not just the children who really need to work on the skills, so we don't single out any one child. We can also teach these skills in the context of activities that are really interesting, or perhaps preferred.

So finding – going back to your friendship files and seeing which activities are – may be of interest to two peers, like cars or trains, and then using that activity to teach some of these social skills. And when you're starting to teach social skills, like for example, taking turns, you can provide a brief instruction. So, explaining that taking turns means that you don't have a turn now, but you will soon after you wait a little bit. And similar to the teacher in the art activity, you can model what this looks like for the children so that they can see it.

You can also describe what you're going to say and do as a way of giving the children a script of what language they might use when asking a peer to take a turn, like, "Can I have a turn when you're done, please?" And you can also have the children role-play what taking turns looks like, giving them a chance to practice and then giving you an opportunity to provide them positive feedback and any corrective feedback that they may need as they're learning some of the social skills that we had mentioned earlier.

And these are also some other friendship skills that have been found to be present and perhaps related to the development of friendships. And we're presenting them in three broad categories. So the first are skills needed to help children enter play. So these are skills that might include observing peers and then thinking about, you know, how to join in with that peer; perhaps making eye contact, asking in a pleasant tone if they can play. Also including ideas for play, like, "Oh, if we take this block we can pretend that it's a telephone." And maybe being helpful, whether it's pretend helpful like finding the perfect ingredient for a soup that someone's making in the dramatic play area, or being helpful by giving a marker that a peer really wants to use.

In another category of friendship skills are skills that help a child be a good play partner. So skills like sharing and cooperating, taking turns, and even teaching children how to give each other compliments, like, "I like the way you're sharing right now," and "You're a good friend today. Thanks for helping me tie my shoe laces." So teaching children specifically how to do that, those are things that we probably think

of in a good friendship and maybe these are some of the things you listed even in the characteristics earlier on in today's presentation.

Another category is children's ability to maintain play – play that's interesting. So teaching children how to listen and how to converse and talk to one another. And this includes how to listen and converse when things get tough, like how to negotiate trading toys or resolving a conflict. And this could even include using something called "play scripts," where – this is, essentially, helping children use language in a way that keeps play going. So for example, if you have maybe a vet office set up in your dramatic play area, children may not know – what does it mean to go to a vet's office and what do I do there? So you may have to model for them some ideas that they can use when playing with their peers in that area.

One of the things that we have seen when we are out in classrooms is – one child was in his cooperative learning group and he only had one way to ask a peer to share a toy. And so he constantly asked, "Can I have a turn now?" And he'd wait a little bit, "Can I have a turn now?" Wait a little bit. And his peers in his group would either ignore him completely or they would respond to him and they'd say, "No!" And it was really hard to watch. And what we learned is that he needed to have some other ways to negotiate and to help – have his peers help share with him. So ideas like teaching how to trade toys, or thinking of an interesting way to share or use that toy together.

So you could observe in your classroom and think about, in these three big areas, which skills your children might need a little more support in learning. As Micki said before, a great way to teach social interaction skills is get peers involved. So assign peer buddies, like by using the friendship can. Teach children how to respond when a child initiates an interaction with them. And you can help children keep track of times that they do interact with one another or they do give compliments to peers, perhaps using a clipboard where children can keep tally marks for all of the praises or all of the initiations that they make with their peers in the classroom or just talking about the things that they're doing to be good friends in the classroom, like using the friendship tree and posting those interactions up so that everyone can see and be proud of them.

And as Early Head Start and Head Start teachers, you're in a great position to help families learn how important they are to teaching children friendship skills and how to interact and engage with one another. And you can communicate to them these three important roles. So one, families are really great at providing social opportunities for children to spend time together outside of the classroom. And as a teacher, you can help share information with families about peers that the child really seems to enjoy interacting with, and you can even provide them with information about opportunities that are in the community that may be available for children to participate in together.

You can also talk to parents about their role as an interactive partner. So, modeling for them ways of interacting with peers and adults in the environment. And also, coming up with different play ideas. As parents and family members get engaged in their children's play, teaching them different play scripts and ways of engaging.

And the last part is parents' role as a social coach. So, being able to observe their child and see maybe when they want to interact or they want to join in on someone's play but they need a little support, they need some coaching. So helping parents learn to say things like, "Well, why don't you ask Cameron over there if he'd like to go and play on the swing set with you?" or saying "Hey Joe, why don't you ask those

kids if you can play tag, too?" So being that social support and that social coach for children so that they can interact with others and develop their friendship skills even more.

So we know that the odds of finding a four-leaf clover are 1 in 10,000. However, we're pretty sure that if you use some of these promising practices that we've talked about today, the odds of helping children find their close friendship in your classroom is going to be much higher. But we can't underscore the importance of careful planning, careful information collecting, implementing the activities, arranging the environment, thinking about peers that would be grouped well together, and then modifying any of these strategies as needed as you're implementing them in your classroom.

All of these taken together can result in improved peer interactions. And as positive interactions happen between children, we think positive relationships and friendships can be formed. So this is really a worthy topic to spend some time thinking about and helping children develop friendships in their classroom. Now Micki's going to share with us some resources that we used in today's presentation.

Dr. Ostrosky: Yes, on this slide we've simply listed some of the resources that have informed our own work and also that are the result of our own research and our thinking about the topic of peer relationships and friendships. Also note that there were the two links, the Book Nook link and also the art video link within the PowerPoint. And I keyed your attention to the CSEFEL link that, if you're not familiar with any of those resources, you might want to look at them.

On the list here, I'd pay particular attention to the Camille Catlett – the third one – and Pam Winton resource, because on there you can find some free or relatively inexpensive resources for encouraging friendships. So they have a website. They have some music and songs. They have a friendship questionnaire that teachers can complete that was developed by Goldman and Vacey that can give you some ideas and help you think about the friendships of the children in your classroom.

So thank you, Gail, for inviting us, and thanks to the audience for listening. We hope we've given you a few ideas for supporting peer relationships with the children in your care. And I think it's that time now to field some questions.