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The Path to Friendship: Exploring the Challenges of Building and Maintaining Friendships

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What is friendship? The simple response is that friendship can be defined in a few words with a multitude of adjectives or be a deep philosophical discussion based on an individual's personal and/or professional perspective. In the educational realm, this question in one form or another arises on a whim in the most unique of circumstances. In general, many educational professions are ingrained to have a fundamental response. While responses vary from one professional to the next, they rarely depend on strict contexts or hidden variables; instead, they stem from a foundational blend of human nature, core principles, and personal experience. The precise definition from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's website defines friendship as "the state of being friends; the quality or state of being friendly." Being friendly and open to having friends is essentially where "The Path to Friendship" begins.

Research identifies that friendships are critical for the healthy social and psychological development of all people. Socially, friendships have radically changed and transformed over time, transforming from an era of acquaintances to a support system. The drastic transformation has affected how people interact with peers, neighbors, and even family. The context of information shared between people is now supported by a digital or technological system that heavily impacts the shared conversations, interests, and support of one another. Learning alternative supports and strategies for building and maintaining friendships has become an essential social skill that all humans can benefit from.

New and developing research literature suggests that social-emotional learning programs should be implemented through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) at various tiers to have an early impact on young people and their futures. In the review of current literature, MTSS programs are implementing evidence-based practices for both Tier I-Universal Support and Tier II-Targeted Group Interventions. According to Hull (2025), high-quality adolescent friendships require deliberate, research-backed support because essential social capabilities do not always develop naturally. Implementing targeted programs such as social-emotional learning, peer-mediated interventions, specialized social groups, and extracurricular activities can successfully enrich friendship quality, reduce negative peer dynamics, and strengthen communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Experience and opportunity are the most beneficial ways to develop the skills necessary to build and maintain a friendship. Research continues to be an ongoing process to determine how best to develop these skills and the profound impact they can have on an individual during their school-age years. The University of New Hampshire offers the following tips regarding building and maintaining friendships to both educators and families.

1. Develop a "Friendship Mindset"
    - Believe that a friendship is possible.
    - Encourage connections and pursue them.
    - Notice irregularities with interactions.
2. Avoid "Special" and become a "Regular."
    - Become a familiar face (a regular).
    - Actively engage in opportunities with people who share interests and space.
    - Interact and attend activities and events regularly.
3. Be Real
    - Connect people to create real social opportunities.

- Support connections that allow people to interact and figure out the obstacles.

4. Just Ask
    - Encourage asking questions.
    - Explore newfound interest and opportunities.
5. Take Risks
    - Encourage adventurous social activities.
    - Start small and trust the process.
    - Be spontaneous.

As educational professionals and family units, we must create opportunities for social inclusion, sharing context and interest, and opportunities for building relationships in natural environments. Providing young people with exposure through community programs and organizations, while also creating unique opportunities in their natural environments. These experiences provide the information to utilize the concepts that are gained through human nature, basic principles, and experience. Unfortunately, the individuals populating the world today have a lack of experience because they have only lived in the digital age. They have never experienced a time in which they have needed to create meaningful connections utilizing only the social skills, language skills, or personal experiences their life has afforded them. This is the essence of why challenges exist in constructing, building, and maintaining friendships.

Additional Resources:
Friendship and Social Relationships: You Gotta Have Friends
https://cola.unh.edu/education/community-engagement/center-inclusive-education/friendship-social-relationships

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