

Childhood friendships crucial in learning to value another person's point of view

July 28 2014, by Evie Polsley



The early interactions we have with our close friends in childhood help us to mold and develop our character as adults.

Friends play an extremely important role in a person's life. From infancy on, we have a desire to connect and those early relationships help to mold and develop our adult character. Through interactions with one another, we learn to think beyond ourselves to understand the needs and desires of others.

"As human beings, we are [social creatures](#) at every developmental stage, from [infancy](#) to adulthood," said Dr. Theodote K. Pontikes, child and adolescent psychiatrist at Loyola University Health System in Maywood,

Ill. "Each stage has different goals to be achieved and mastered, with respect to social and moral development, and each is important towards contributing to how well one functions as an adult." Pontikes is also an assistant professor in the departments of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neurosciences and Pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Companionship and learning about others begins in infancy through early interactions with parents, other primary caregivers and family members. As children grow and explore the world outside the home and interact with peers, they begin to understand social mores.

"By interacting with their peers, children begin to learn about perspective taking, where they can realize how others may have different thoughts and feelings. This process facilitates learning to problem solve and develop critical thinking skills, while practicing how to respond respectfully in the context of disagreements when interpersonal tensions arise. These are situations one encounters throughout life, and children need a strong grounding to know how to respond," Pontikes said.

According to Pontikes, parents can help their children by holding supervised play dates and modeling healthy friendships with the parents of their children's friends. In addition to stimulation, these early friendships provide children with a better understanding of companionship, social comparison, time management, affection and empathy.

"Family gatherings, school and houses of worship are great places to provide early opportunities for kids to learn how to interact with others and form friendships. As children grow older, participating in a sport or extracurricular activity can help the child build additional social skills that can further enhance self-esteem," Pontikes said.

As important as friendships are to children, it's even more important for parents to remain involved in their kids' lives.

"Parents need to ask their children about their day, their experiences and their feelings. Children need to feel safe that they can be open and honest with their parents about their joys, struggles and concerns," Pontikes said. "When a child seems isolative and doesn't express an interest in being with others, it can be beneficial to consult a specialist to rule out depression and other conditions. This also provides [children](#) and parents the opportunity to find appropriate guidance so as to optimize a child's potential."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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