CHAPTER 1

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the conceptual foundations and research base that inform the design of the Friendship Group program. It reviews the importance of positive peer relations for social-emotional development, and the negative impact of chronic peer rejection on behavior and mental health. It describes the developmental progression of skills that support social competence in early and middle childhood, and the corresponding developmental framework that underlies the organization of Friendship Group program sessions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE PEER RELATIONS

Friendships play an important role in social and emotional development, beginning in preschool and extending through life. Positive peer interactions provide companionship, support the development of social skills, and foster feelings of competence and self-esteem. With peers, children are able to practice and refine their communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills. In the context of their friendships, children learn to understand and respect others' feelings, developing empathy and a commitment to fairness. These lessons have lifelong value. Children who develop competence and confidence in social interactions are advantaged in later years in areas of school, work, adult relationships, and mental health.

Conversely, children who are rejected by peers and excluded from play in childhood are at heightened risk for future problems, ranging from severe emotional distress to antisocial behaviors in adolescence and adulthood. Peer-rejected children are often lonely, anxious, angry, and sad, and they are more likely than others to be bullied or victimized by peers. In addition, children who are excluded or disliked by peers miss out on the positive social experiences they need to develop the more complex social skills that support social integration later in life.

The Friendship Group Program

Friendship Group, a unique, evidence-based program for peer-rejected children, is based on over 20 years of research. It incorporates proven strategies that build children's prosocial and play skills and strengthen their self-control, anger coping, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. Unlike other programs that focus primarily on shaping and managing behaviors, Friendship Group promotes the social and emotional skills that motivate and support friendships, such as empathy and caring. As detailed in Chapter 5, Friendship Group has been tested in rigorous studies. The program promotes friendships, decreases peer rejection, improves peer communication skills and cooperative behavior, and decreases impulsive and aggressive behaviors.

Friendship Group can be delivered during school (as a "pullout" program) or after school, as a school-based intervention or mental health service. The sessions are organized developmentally, with a program for early elementary students (26 lessons, ages 5–8, grades K–2) and a program for advanced elementary students (14 lessons, ages 8–11, grades 3–5). Following a standard format for coaching programs, each session focuses on a set of target skills. Discussions, modeling stories, and coach role plays are used to teach social skill concepts. Social skills are then practiced in the context of student role plays, structured activities, and collaborative group activities.

In the next sections of this chapter, we describe the developmental foundations of the Friendship Group program, and the principles of the "coaching model" of social skill training used in the program. Additional chapters focus on the administration of the Friendship Group program (Chapter 2), therapeutic processes (Chapter 3), behavior management (Chapter 4), and the Fast Track model of synchronized home–school intervention (Chapter 5). The case examples provided to illustrate common child characteristics and responses are based on composites; all identifying information about individual children has been removed or disguised.

Who Needs Friendship Group?

All children experience "ups" and "downs" in their peer relations as they encounter occasional conflicts or exclusion. However, when children have ongoing difficulties gaining acceptance by classroom peers or if they experience chronic social exclusion or victimization, it is important for teachers and parents to take action, because chronic peer rejection is harmful.

Children can have trouble getting along with peers for a number of reasons. Many rejected children are aggressive and impulsive, disruptive in the classroom and the peer group. Some are bullies who use aggression to coerce other children, and many are victims as well.

Socially anxious children may also experience chronic peer problems, although not all do so. Many shy children develop a small group of friends and feel comfortable interacting with peers at school and in the community. In such cases, shyness is not a social problem of concern. However, when shy children feel anxious and uncomfortable at school, and when they have difficulty making friends and gaining acceptance by peers, they are at heightened risk for chronic exclusion and victimization by peers.

Students with learning disabilities, attention deficits, autism spectrum characteristics, or related developmental challenges are also at risk for social isolation and peer rejection. These children are often awkward and insensitive in social settings, because they are slow to pick up on subtle social cues, read body language, and understand "implicit" social routines or expectations. Peers often find them to be "odd" or even "rude" and treat them accordingly, excluding them from play or, worse, teasing them.

Regardless of the nature of the behavioral, developmental, or emotional roots of the peer problems, children are likely to benefit from Friendship Group if they lack the social skills that would

allow them to improve their peer relations and achieve high-quality friendships. Social skills include specific behaviors and culturally validated routines, such as polite manners (e.g., chew with your mouth closed, and introduce yourself to someone new). Social skills also include more intangible social finesse—the ability to behave in ways that are socially sensitive and culturally appropriate.

To apply positive social skills, children need to recognize socially appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, but knowing what to do is not enough. Often, children know what to do and can explain what should be done in a given situation—yet, they behave differently. For example, a child may know that cheating at a game is wrong, yet still cheat. Such failures in self-regulation (e.g., being overwhelmed by feelings or impulses in social situations) can undermine social success as much as a lack of skill knowledge.

Social skills include both proactive behaviors (e.g., friendly initiations, cooperative behaviors, communication skills) and self-regulation skills (e.g., emotion regulation, impulse control, anger management). Socially skillful interaction requires behavioral skills (e.g., being able to enact socially skillful behavior), thinking skills (e.g., being able to think flexibly about how to respond when faced with various social challenges or conflicts), and emotion skills (e.g., being sensitive to one's own and others' emotions, being able to regulate one's emotion and respond to another's).

It is often assumed that children "pick up" social skills naturally and automatically by observation and occasional adult direction. Children without social skills sometimes suffer harsh judgment, as children and other adults find them to be ill-mannered or discourteous. In reality, not all children absorb social skills by observation and osmosis; some children need explicit instruction and support. The good news is that children *can* be taught social skills. Social skill training promotes the development of social sensitivity and social competence, in order to help children gain peer acceptance, make and sustain close friendships, and avoid isolation or victimization by peers.

Individual versus Group Intervention Models

Although one-on-one sessions can be used to teach children social skills, group sessions offer more opportunities for practicing and consolidating social-emotional skills. Peer pairs or small peer groups provide children with opportunities to practice skills in the context of collaborative social activities that mirror naturalistic social challenges—but at lower levels of intensity than the larger peer group. In a small-group context, adults can create a safe and supportive peer context. They can slow down the pace of the social interaction and provide feedback to help children attend and respond to social cues, thus supporting their ability to engage in increasingly complex social interactions. In addition, collaborative interactions with peers offer practice in negotiation and social problem-solving skills, and stimulate the development of the cognitive skills that underlie effective social exchange, including self-control and perspective taking. For these reasons, Friendship Group advocates the inclusion of peer partners in group sessions.

DEVELOPMENTAL FOUNDATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP GROUP

As early as the toddler years, most children show a marked interest in other children and make efforts to initiate contact. However, it is not until the preschool years that most children begin to engage in sustained and ordered play with other children, and begin to use the word *friend* in a meaningful way. Social skills then develop very rapidly during the preschool years (ages 3–5) and prepare children for the social demands of formal school entry, such as getting along in a group, forming friendships, following rules and routines, and controlling impulses. The early elementary

sessions of the Friendship Group program are designed to help children who enter early elementary school (grades K–2) without these foundational social skills in place. The Advanced Elementary Sessions (grades 3–5) address the more complex aspects of peer relations that emerge in the later elementary school years. The developmental progression of social skills that guides the organization of the program is reviewed briefly in the following sections.

Social Skill Development in Early Childhood

The foundations of effective social interaction develop in two intertwined domains: (1) positive play skills that emerge and mature to support effective social engagement, and (2) self-control skills that develop to support emotion regulation and the control of aggressive impulses. Play skills develop sequentially, beginning first with *parallel play,* when children play side by side, watching and imitating each other. *Cooperative play* emerges next, when children share materials, take turns, and help each other. Next, *coordinated play* emerges, when children make a plan and organize their play together, engaging in reciprocal role taking (playing mother and baby, or teacher and student) and dividing resources (toys, art materials) into equivalent shares for each play partner. Sustained, coordinated play is supported by the child's developing language skills, perspective-taking abilities, and attention and memory skills.

To support this increasingly complex play, children must learn to manage their feelings and control their impulses. To do so, children must develop the verbal, emotional, and social skills that allow them to inhibit their first impulses, comply with social protocol, and "use their words" to voice dissatisfaction and resolve disagreements.

Social Skill Development in Middle Childhood

In early elementary school, play interactions become more organized, elaborate, and rule-governed. Children more often play in larger peer groups, and competitive games increase in frequency and complexity. Understanding fair play and handling the pressures of competitive play are key to successful participation in grade school games. In general, children are moving from preschool to elementary play structures between the ages of 5 and 7, with more structured play characterizing the majority of large-group peer interactions by the ages of 7–8.

Correspondingly, self-control skills become more valued, including the capacity to regulate emotion and control impulses. Peers increasingly censure children who show dysregulated behavior, particularly children who exhibit reactive/outburst anger and/or norm-breaking behaviors such as rule violations, cheating, and poor sportsmanship. By second grade, aggressive-disruptive and hyperactive/inattentive behaviors become the primary predictors of peer rejection.

Around age 8 (third grade, on average), children's social cognitions mature, and they begin to understand the social world with greater sophistication. In particular, they begin to make social comparisons and to compare themselves with their peers. These new thinking skills have both positive and negative consequences for peer relations. On the one hand, children become increasingly capable of accurately reporting their social behavior and its effects on others, and of taking the perspective of others. They also become more competent at planning and social problem solving, generating multiple solutions to social problems and evaluating the appropriateness of each prior to acting. They are more able to understand and respect diverse points of view, and can work together more collaboratively to accomplish group decision making and conflict resolution. Children begin to differentiate *best friends* from *good friends* and *acquaintances*—recognizing that each type of relationship conveys a different degree of affection for and commitment toward each other. Their advanced social reasoning skills allow children to withstand disagreements and sustain friendships

over time, as they continue to develop a sense of loyalty and commitment to their friends. In addition, *conversation* becomes a more central focus of peer interactions, and play becomes increasingly goal-oriented, as children strive to improve their skills in team sports or games.

The negative side of this growing social sophistication is that, by third grade, children are aware of the general group status of their classmates and can identify those who are liked or disliked by peers. Correspondingly, social status becomes more crystallized, and peer acceptance and peer rejection become quite stable from year to year. The intentional victimization or social exclusion of targeted peers emerges as a distinct feature of peer relations during the later school years. With advanced social reasoning, children are able to sustain negative reputational biases, harbor grudges against disliked peers, and organize campaigns of peer exclusion. Children who are emotionally volatile, isolated, and submissive are at increased risk for peer victimization. Table 1.1 summarizes this overview of developmental characteristics.

A Developmentally Informed Intervention Design

Friendship Group is organized in alignment with these naturally occurring progressions in children's social and emotional skills. The manual is divided into two broad developmental levels. The early elementary sessions are designed for children in the 5–8 age range (grades K–2). Advanced sessions target more complex peer problems and are designed for children in the 8–11 age range (grades 3–5). The social games and activities that comprise the sessions are organized developmentally, moving from easier play activities at the beginning of the program (e.g., parallel play) to increasingly complex social play later in the year (e.g., competitive games with rules), providing children with opportunities to consolidate simpler skills (reaching automaticity) before moving on to more advanced social challenges.

TABLE 1.1. Developmental Characteristics of Social Skill Development in Children Ages 3–11

Age (years)	Social skill development
Preschool (3–5)	• Children initiate interaction and engage comfortably in parallel play. • Cooperative play emerges and becomes more frequent. • Children can share materials and work together on a common activity. • Coordinated pretend play with complementary roles emerges. • Simple group games are enjoyed.
Early elementary school (5–8)	• Coordinated pretend play continues and grows in complexity. • Organized and competitive games with rules become more common. • Aggressive behavior decreases. • Fair play and good sportsmanship are valued. • Empathy and altruism increase. • Negotiation and conflict management skills emerge.
Later elementary school (8–11)	• Can make social comparisons and consider social values. • "Best friendships" often emerge. • Conversation increases as a form of interaction. • Social understanding and recognition of different perspectives increases. • Decision making is more collaborative. • Problem solving and conflict are often managed without adult support. • Social reputations crystallize, social mobility is more limited. • Intentional victimization and social exclusion emerge.

Friendship Group Early Elementary School Sessions

There are six units in the early elementary (K–2) Friendship Group program, ordered developmentally. See Table 1.2. The curriculum begins with strategies for initiating friendships and establishing common ground (Unit I), and moves on to promoting cooperation and self-control skills (Unit II). Initial practice activities and games involve parallel and cooperative play. Next, the program introduces negotiation skills, with activities that call for coordinated and complementary roles (Unit III), followed by a focus on competitive play (good sportsmanship), including social problem solving to resolve conflicts (Unit IV). In Unit V, effective communication and listening skills are reviewed, along with more complex play activities that require more advanced social coordination, negotiation, and teamwork. The final set of sessions emphasizes strategies for sustaining friendships, including managing disappointments and coping with provocation (Unit VI).

TABLE 1.2. Summary of Unit Contents for Early Elementary Sessions

Unit focus	Early elementary sessions (grades K–2; ages 5–8)
Unit I. Establishing Common Ground	• Social participation and joining in; initiating friendships • Sharing information (telling about you) • Asking questions and listening (listening to your friend) • Recognizing and expressing basic emotions; sharing feelings
Unit II. Caring and Controlled Behavior	• Caring and cooperation; helping and sharing • Impulse control; calming down and thinking before you act • Expressing concerns (saying the problem and how you feel) • Fair play; finding a fair solution
Unit III. Negotiating with Friends	• Planning together • Negotiation skills • Compromise (making a deal) • Fair strategies for decision making (voting, taking turns, flipping a coin)
Unit IV. Handling Competitive Play	• Taking turns and following rules • Good sportsmanship (good things to say when you win or lose) • Resisting the temptation to cheat • Treating your friends with respect
Unit V. Communicating Effectively	• Expressing your point of view • Listening to and respecting the other's perspective • Attending to body language; noticing others' feelings • Working together as a team
Unit VI. Coping with Tough Stuff	• Coping with provocation and bullying • Managing disappointments • Closing Friendship Group

Friendship Group Advanced Elementary School Sessions

The advanced sessions focus on social skills training during the later elementary years (grades 3–5). See Table 1.3. Many of the social and self-regulatory skills introduced during the early elementary years continue to be important in these later elementary years, and several of the advanced intervention group sessions are designed to review, reinforce, and support the maintenance and generalization of these skills. Specifically, there is a continuing emphasis on teamwork, cooperation and communication skills, fair play, and effective conflict management and social problem solving. In addition, some new issues and skills are introduced. These new skills build upon the increased cognitive abilities of older elementary students, including the capacity for greater self-reflection, social comparison, and social reasoning. They also tackle some of the more complex social dynamics that older elementary students face in the peer group, including navigating social networks, dealing with social aggression and other forms of social exclusion or bullying, and coping with feelings of social anxiety and insecurity. New skills also include setting personal goals, positive thinking, and making responsible decisions.

In general, the sessions at the advanced elementary level anticipate that children will have more well-developed attention, cognitive, and verbal skills than the sessions at the early elementary level. Whereas the early elementary sessions move at a faster pace, including more "hands-on" activities with brief discussions, the Advanced Elementary Sessions include longer and more in-depth discussions and role plays. In addition, the Advanced Elementary Sessions tackle more difficult self-regulatory and conflict management skills, focusing on managing stress and regulating social anxiety. Group activities challenge the older children in areas of team planning, group collaboration, verbal discussion, and social problem solving.

Note that the age guidelines that differentiate the early and Advanced Elementary Sessions are just general heuristics. In some cases, the demands of the Advanced Elementary Sessions may be too high for children (particularly some 8- to 9-year-olds). If this is the case for children in your group, consider using sessions from the early elementary program that are designed for children with less advanced verbal, attentional, and social skills.

TABLE 1.3. Summary of Unit Contents for Advanced Elementary Sessions

Unit focus	Advanced elementary sessions (grades 3–5; ages 8–11)
Unit I. Cooperation and Conversation Skills	• Making new friends; meeting and greeting • Having a conversation; asking questions and listening • Initiating interactions; inviting others to play, joining in • Sustaining conversations and interactions
Unit II. Understanding and Respecting Others	• The Golden Rule; good sportsmanship • Cooperation and negotiation (working it out, making a deal) • Managing conflict; perspective taking and compromise • Social problem-solving skills; overcoming conflicts
Unit III. Coping with Social Stress	• Managing stress (keeping your cool) • Appraising social situations; positive thinking • Coping with teasing and bullying
Unit IV. Responsible Decision Making	• Generating alternatives; advanced social problem solving • Setting personal goals • Committing to positive change