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Friends matter

> The scene is a small room in a nursery school – empty except for a table and a pile of dressing-up clothes and toys. Alone in the room, Harry and Joe, two four-year-olds who've been together at the nursery for the last year, begin investigating the dressing-up clothes, and a story of high adventure begins. First they are pirates sailing on a search for treasure, then their ship is wrecked, and they are attacked by sharks; they reach the safety of an island, and build a house (under the table). What to eat, and how to cook it are problems that are ingeniously solved. Their elaborate adventure, their quickly solved disputes (are they being attacked by sharks or by crocodiles?), their extended conversations about what happens next – all are captured by our video-camera in the corner of the room.[1]

The absorption of Harry and Joe in their joint adventure is striking, and so is the skill with which they tune into the shared narrative. Their discussion of whether and how they'll escape the sharks/crocodiles, their amusement at the scatological turns the conversation takes – all this is so unlike what happens with their parents, with the other children in the nursery, or with Harry's (for the most part despised) younger sister. Note three features of this exciting and complicated joint enterprise:

- The pirate adventure depends on *both* children – on the coordination of their ideas and imagination. It wouldn't happen unless they joined together in the story.
- Sharing ideas like this is a considerable intellectual feat for such young children – it is the beginning of intimacy.
- It is emotionally absorbing, and exciting for both children.

Joint adventures like this are key to the relationship between Harry and Joe. And it is a relationship that matters very much to both children; when Joe is away from nursery, Harry is distressed and clearly misses him –

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and vice versa. Their relationship began over a year ago, and continues for the next three years that the boys take part in our research.

Is it appropriate to think of Harry and Joe's relationship as *friendship*?

The nature of young children's friendships

There's a long history to the debate about what constitutes friendship. Most people agree that a crucial feature of friendship is that it is a reciprocal relationship between two people with both affirming it.[2] Reciprocity or mutuality of affection is of particular significance: such reciprocity distinguishes friendship from one child's desire to be liked by another, when that other doesn't return the preference. It also distinguishes friendship from acceptance by a group of peers, or popularity. Acceptance describes the tendency of a group of children to like a particular child; how that child sees the others in the group is not relevant – so acceptance is a 'one-way' construct.[3] Friendship is a voluntary relationship, not one that is prescribed or obligatory (so it excludes those relationships where one child has been assigned to be the 'buddy' of a new child starting school, for instance). Those who study friendship in 'middle' childhood (say from 8 to 12 years old) commonly describe friendship as a relationship that includes *companionship, intimacy and affection.*[4] (*Loyalty* and *commitment* are also seen as key features of adult friendships, but are assumed to be achieved only at adolescence). When children are old enough to talk or write about their perceptions of their friendships, they do indeed refer to companionship, intimacy and affection, and they talk about these dimensions of friendship in describing their satisfaction (or otherwise) with the friendship.[5]

The relationship between Harry and Joe is certainly one of companionship and affection, mutually expressed. And the first glimmerings of intimacy are evident in their sharing of their imaginative world. When do such relationships between young children begin? And when does *support* and *concern* for a friend's feelings and well-being develop? If we watch and listen carefully to children, what can we learn about the growth of intimacy between them?

The first theme of this book is that important relationships with other children begin very early. With the evidence from the recent studies of toddlers and young preschoolers, the first challenge we tackle is to understand what kind of friendships very young children have with each other, and how these change with development. Of course, children don't leap into full-blown intense friendships that are loyal and committed relationships, during the preschool and early school years. It is with the development of the features of sharing feelings and ideas, of mutual affection and attachment, of concern for the other, which lead eventually to commitment and loyalty, that this book is concerned. Is the developmental story that emerges simply an account of growing social skills? No. There is an important distinction between social skills, and friendship as an intimate bond. Social skills can be used for self-promotion and gaining self-interested goals, *or* to cooperate with, care for, and support another; they can be used to win arguments and get your own way, or to solve disagreements in the interests of the other, or of both. Friendship is indeed a forum for developing social skills and understanding of another person, but it is much more.

Why is it important to study friendship?

First, it is important because friends *matter* to children. We are missing a major piece of what excites, pleases, and upsets children, what is central to their lives even in the years before school, if we don't attend to what happens between children and their friends. The pleasures, but also the betrayals, the jealousies and tangled intrigues, make friendships key to the quality of children's lives. The focus of most research on children's social development until relatively recently, though, has been either on their relationships with their parents, or on their relations with the group of classmates at school – their popularity or isolation in the classroom or playground – as the major players in children's development.[6] Less attention has been paid to the close relationships within individual pairs or triads of friends. Yet friends are very often, as parents know, far more exciting companions than parents; they are figures who can make or break children's pleasure and happiness. Harry and Joe's shared imaginative world was one of particular excitement – not a feature of their other relationships. The experiences of rejection by other children, or of acceptance and popularity, are undoubtedly important for children's later development and adjustment, but what happens between friends is different – and *also* important for children's development and adjustment.

Second, it is important to study friends because young friends can also be important as *emotional supports*. At key turning points in children's lives, we now know, having a close friend can make a real difference to how children manage those transitions. Take the transition to 'real' school faced by five- and six-year-olds – often a stressful experience for children, even if they have been at day care or preschool. How children cope with the demands of that new world of school is closely linked to the kind of relationships that they have with friends when they first start school. For even younger children, there is a striking example of the support that friends can provide, at which we will look in detail in Chapter 5. This is the evidence that a close friendship may well buffer a child from the stress of the family upheaval when a new sibling is born. The ways in which friends provide support are likely to change as children grow up, of course, and those patterns of change will be examined in the chapters that follow.

And there's a third reason why it is important to describe and understand the early relationships between young children today. Many small children spend major parts of their days outside the family in day care or nurseries, in the company of other children. The issue of what kind of social relationships they have with these others is of increasing social significance – reflected in a recent surge of research on children in childcare settings. If we are to understand the full impact of these experiences we need to know what kinds of relationships children form with other children, and what these relationships imply developmentally.

But a close look at children in the context of their friendships does more than illuminate the early stages of an important relationship. It gives us a new window on children's cognitive and social development – their understanding of their social world – and on how their friendship experiences influence the development of that understanding, and vice versa.

Friends and the development of understanding others

Here are two incidents described by Lawrence Blum, a philosopher who watched the development of his own daughter Sarah's understanding of her friends.[7] Sarah was only two years old in the first incident, and three in the second:

> Sarah, 2 years 3 months, is riding in the car with her cousin Ali, who is 4. Ali is upset because she does not have her teddy bear, and there is a fairly extended discussion about how the bear is probably in the trunk and can be retrieved when they arrive at the house. About ten minutes pass and as the car approaches the house Sarah says to Ali, 'Now you can get your bear' . . .

> Sarah, 3, gives Clara 3 (her friend), her own Donald Duck cap (to keep 'forever') saying that she has done so because Clara has (recently, but not at the moment) lost her (Boston) Celtics cap.

Sarah is not just sensitive to her friend's immediate needs; she draws on her memory and her understanding of what her cousin and friend like, she wants to make them both happier. In this concern about their happiness and feelings we see the beginnings of children's moral understanding. The second theme of this book is that careful study of young friends gives us a different view of children than the perspective we gain from studying children with adults. It presents distinctive evidence on the nature of children's grasp of what other people feel, think and believe, and the connections between people's beliefs and thoughts and the way they act. This ability to 'mind-read' is an absolutely core feature of being human, and a major milestone in children's development. The evidence from young friends gives us a fresh perspective on children's developing understanding of self and of others – their family as well as their friends, a window on what they understand about the social world more broadly, and on their sensibility and views on moral issues.

Why should a focus on children with their friends be so revealing? The argument here is that it is because of the distinctive features of young children's friendships that we gain this window on what children know and understand about the social world. A friendship is usually a child's first close relationship outside the family, and it can be very different in nature from family relationships with parents or with brothers and sisters. Consider the adventure of Harry and Joe with which we began. The distinctive features of young friends' relationships include the *emotional* quality of the relationship, closely linked to the nature of the *particular games and conversations* which friends share.

First, the emotions – the affection, the excitement, the jealousy, the interest children have in their friends. Children care about their friends, and they are often highly motivated to stay friends, in spite of disagreements and tensions. They *want* to sort out quarrels with their friends – whereas with their siblings they often don't bother or don't care (or even enjoy the power play, if they win). A friendship is often the first relationship in which children begin to care about and try to understand someone else, and to respond to the feelings, needs and troubles of another. Talk to a seven-year-old about his friend and you will be surprised by the depth of his grasp of how this friend sees the world. He can tell you what his friend is upset about, and what would cheer and amuse him. You may well be surprised by the subtlety of his understanding and by how much he cares about his friend.

Here are some examples from a study by Inge Bretherton and her colleagues,[8] which illustrate the subtlety of six- and seven-year-old children's emotional understanding in the context of their friendships:

> [1] A 7-year-old explains to his mother about an incident at school where he accidentally hit another boy:
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> 'And I tried to go up to Jim to play with him again, but he won't come near me. And he's not . . . when a kid isn't really your friend yet, they don't know you didn't mean to do it to them'.

> [2] Another 7-year-old explains to a friend why another child did not respond to friend's efforts to comfort her:
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> 'Well that's all right. Sometimes when I hit you and then I want to comfort you, you push me away because you're still angry.'

You see a very different side of a child in the context of his friendships: Empathy, concern and understanding of the other person can be evident in very young children talking to and about their friends. If we eavesdrop on friends talking (as we will throughout this book) we get glimpses of that private, different world outside the family that is so important to them, and of how they function in it.

How soon does this understanding of the feelings and needs of another begin? Is it among children in the middle school years, and in adolescence that it is evident? We will see in the next two chapters that the evidence points much earlier – to the preschool years. And why is it the interaction between *friends* that is revealing? The argument of this book is that particular features of what happens between young friends – such as the sharing of fantasy play, and the discussion of why people behave the way they do that this play involves – are closely implicated in the early stages of children's understanding of others. More generally, we find that the experience of cooperating with a friend or sibling – child-to-child interaction – has a special role in the development of social understanding.

Friends and moral understanding

The emotional quality of friendship is also implicated in children's growing moral sensibility. In a centrally important sense friendship is the crucible in which moral sensibility is formed. Because children care about their friends, they think about their needs and rights in a way that is quite different from their views on moral issues when they are asked about hypothetical situations – and quite differently from how they think about morals when their siblings are involved. 'It's fine to take a toy from her, 'cause she's only my sister!' says a five-year-old, who was adamant that he'd not take a toy from his friend.[9] So what we learn from listening to children talking with their friends is very different from the messages about moral development we gain from 'testing' children in other situation.

As well as the emotional quality of friendships, the power relations between friends are also implicated in their growing moral sensibility. The power politics of parent–child and brother–sister relationships are quite different from those of friendships: children are usually much closer to their friends in status and dominance than they are with their siblings or parents. And this may be important in explaining why friendships can foster moral understanding – a point made many decades ago by Jean Piaget.[10] He suggested that arguments *between children* were of special significance in the growth of children's understanding of moral issues. With adults, he argued, children face a disparity in status that makes it hard for them to argue back, or see the other person's point of view. We may feel that nowadays the power differentials between child and adult are very far from those of Piaget's day – that parents are no longer held in respect as authority figures as they were in Piaget's Geneva of 80 years ago – but the story of the recent research bears out Piaget's view that between peers, disputes and conversations about the social world carry special developmental significance.

The other feature of friendship that is a key contributor to children's growing understanding of the social world is that it marks the beginning of a new independence from parents. Children throughout our evolutionary history, and currently in many cultures other than those of North America and Europe, grow up not in isolated nuclear families, but within a wider world of others, including children – sisters, brothers, playmates, loose-knit gangs of children. This world of other children means opportunities for friendship, enmities, gang life, leaders and followers. It means opportunities for working out the intricate balance of power and status between people, for sharing imaginative experiences, for understanding and manipulating the feelings and ideas of others, for a range of relationships that differ greatly from those of parents-with-children. The psychologist and psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs who documented young children's early friendships and group relations in her famous nursery school in Cambridge in the 1930s, saw the key role of friendships in children's increasing independence from their parents like this:[11] 'Under the shelter of this alliance with others of his own age that child wins his first real independence of his parents and teachers, and begins to see them more nearly as they are. They cease to be the gods, the giants and the ogres that they were . . .'

Individual differences and the impact of friends on children's development

The third theme of the book concerns individual differences. Eavesdropping on children talking, as we do in this book, also teaches us not to be sentimental about children's friendships. The birth of intimate relationships outside the family can mean the growth of jealousy and insecurity, and new experiences of rejection and loss. Understanding someone well is no guarantee of kindness and support. It can also mean a new dimension to teasing and bullying. One group of psychologists, struck by the viciousness of some of the behaviour they recorded in a careful observational study of young children at school, described the classroom as more the source of criminal behaviour than a nursery of morality.

What is clear is that the quality of children's friendships varies tremendously. Harry and Joe, with whom we began, shared an imaginative world of joint pretence that ran through their friendship for years. Other friends are less engaged in a world of make-believe. Some share intimacies, problems, secrets, and talk endlessly about the network of relationships among their peers. Others are good companions in the world of sports, but rarely discuss their feelings or problems. Some draw each other into deviancy. Some children move in a group of loose-knit connections between a number of others, some have just one very close friend. Some children enjoy and flourish in solitude – we certainly should not assume that children are *only* happy with friends. We will look in this book at what we know about why these differences develop, and what they imply for children's relationships and adjustment as they grow towards adolescence and adulthood. It is crucial to appreciate these individual differences in children's friendships, if we are to understand how friends affect children's development. There is not just one kind of friendship, and we have learned that it is the kind of friendship children experience, and who their friends are, that matter in terms of developmental impact.

Differences between boys and girls in the kinds of friendship they form are often evident, in the school years. For instance, girls, some studies suggest, are more intimate with their friends, sharing secrets, and disclosing their own feelings more than boys do, but there are also special tensions and traumas in girls' cliques, and in the making and breaking of friendships. What do these gender differences in patterns of friendships within and outside cliques imply for later in life, and what influences their development? What about those all-too-rare cross-gender friendships which can flourish 'underground', away from the critical eyes of the other kids at school? Are they, in fact, so rare? And do they differ from the friendships of boys with boys, and girls with girls? We look in Chapter 7 at these matters of gender.

Family and friends

Individual differences in the quality of children's friendships are indisputably clear. A key issue is the question of whether and how children's relationships with their friends are, or are not, linked to their family relationships. What connections are there between difficulties with friends – loneliness, trouble in making friends – and children's relationships with parents and siblings? What about that issue that can loom so large for parents – how to protect their children from those *unsuitable* friends: to interfere or not to interfere in their friendships? There is a long history to parental concern with the dangers of children's involvement with other children, illustrated in documentation from the early years of immigrant life in the urban centres of the US.[12] Life on the streets with other children could be a liberating experience for the children, but their parents were concerned that these experiences with other children meant growing away from the values and traditions of their immigrant parents. In the 1920s and 1930s parental fears about urban gangs and the pernicious influence of other children led to advice from psychologists for parents to supervise friendships, to monitor their children's relations with other children and to become involved themselves in the children's networks of friends. 'Parents as pals' became the catchword. Fathers especially were exhorted to be 'a boy yourself', to 'travel the road with your son'.

The idea of parental management of children's relations with other children is still with us now. Social forces in the last decade certainly have not decreased parental anxieties about their children's lives outside the family. On the one hand, there are concerns about the very real risks and dangers of deviance and drugs – introduced often by other school-aged children. On the other hand, the suggestion from experts that the quality of parents' relations with their young children is central to the children's adjustment and their ability to form and keep good friendships is still prominent, and leads to a real pressure on parents. In Chapter 8 these ideas are examined critically.

The book is firmly based in the real world of children. I draw on studies of children growing up in the US, in the UK, Italy, Israel. All the quotations of children talking to their friends, or about their experiences are real children speaking.[13] The pleasures and conflicts, excitements and difficulties that their conversations reveal illustrate the arguments of the book, which are based on systematic, quantitative studies of children with their friends and families. In summary:

- The first theme concerns the nature of children's developing relationships with other children, and what has been learned from a close look at what happens between children. This attention to early friendships shows us how much friends can matter to young children, that young children's friendships are in an important sense real relationships, not just the sum of two individuals' acts, and that their relationships differ from those of parents-and-children or siblings.
- The second theme is that our understanding of the nature of children's cognitive and emotional development can be illuminated by studying them within these relationships: the first intimate relationships outside the family. A close look at young friends shows us the link between caring about someone, and understanding them – a two-way connection that underlies all our important relationships, as adults as well as children. It is this combination of emotion and understanding that makes friendship a relationship of great potential influence on children's development – influence for good or for problems in adjustment. Friends can foster each other's development or get them in deep trouble. The intensity of what children can feel about their friends, coupled with their familiarity and intimacy, means that this can be a relationship of great power in influencing the development of their social understanding, their self-confidence, and their later relationships.
- The third theme, then, is that the nature of this developmental influence depends on the quality of the friendship, and that individual differences in the various dimensions of friendship are key. To assess developmental impact we need to understand how friendships differ in terms of affection and support, of intimacy and sharing secrets, of the 'meeting of minds' evident in connectedness of communication and play, of power dynamics and control.

The book is based on the recent research interest in young friends, but its argument is illustrated also by drawing on the biographies and autobiographies of writers who have illuminated for us the part that friends played in their childhood experiences and their imaginative growth, and the power of the emotional quality of friendships in early childhood (so hard for psychologists to capture).

Friendships are formed in a particular time and place, a particular social world. Differences in time, place and culture mean that children have different opportunities to make friends; the forms and culture of friendships may well differ too. For children in the inner city ghettos, in the rural Appalachians, and in the prep schools of middle England, the opportunities for developing close relations with other children differ. What friends do together will differ in some ways too. The significance of friendships for children's development and their wellbeing will differ too, with time and place. In the extreme case of the children growing up in the concentration camps of the holocaust, or the homeless children of bombed cities in the Second World War, close friendships were a crucial source of emotional support and security. For children growing up today in ordinary families, friends are less likely to be such key security figures, at least in the early years of childhood; yet the increasing number of children spending much of their early years in day care or preschool, in a world of other children rather than their close families, raises the question of what kinds of close relationships they have with these others, and what developmental impact such child–child relations may have. For children enduring the horrors of boarding schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, friends – or the loss of friends – could make or break their spirits. Again, for children who are not subjected to such boarding school experiences, friends could well play a less central role in children's wellbeing. Yet the vulnerability of children to the betrayals and pain of broken friendship is not tied to time or place – a point that is brought home to us by comparing Margaret Atwood's poignant account of bullying and suffering in a quartet of nine-year-old friends in Toronto in the 1950s in her novel *Cat's Eye*, with the autobiographical accounts of being bullied by some of the writers from earlier times. A searing account is given by the nineteenth century novelist Anthony Trollope in his *Autobiography* of the bullying he received at school, while Graham Greene in his autobiography *A Sort of Life* describes the life-long impact of being bullied and tormented by two 'friends'.

The excitement, the pleasures, problems and humour, the compelling intensity of these relationships with friends (and enemies) in writers' early lives and their fiction are interwoven in the book with the present-day examples from the children in our research and that of others. The message is that the excitement and dramas of children's changing worlds of friends can not only amuse and move us, but greatly enlighten us about ourselves, our families and friends.