



# Friendship & Belonging

from the perspectives of  
children and young people

### The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*.

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular, children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making, and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation. The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have greater input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that affect their lives.

### Acknowledgements

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- St Mary Magdalene's School

Please note: all quotes used in this report are reproduced verbatim.

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## Introduction

One of the things that children and young people repeatedly tell me is how important it is for them to have good friends. They speak about the love they feel for their friends, how they trust their friends the most, and that they enjoy spending more time with their friends than anyone else. If they have problematic friends, or if they feel they don't have many friends, their health and wellbeing is severely impacted.

Children have the right (Article 15 UNCRC)<sup>1</sup> to meet with other children and to join groups and organisations and be supported to relax and play freely with others their own age, sharing time with those with whom they have similar interests and experiencing a wide range of leisure activities throughout childhood.

Friendship and connection are extremely important to children's health and wellbeing – a factor increasingly recognised by governments around the world, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The UK, for example, has developed a strategy for tackling loneliness across its communities, seeing it as an essential part of maintaining the wellbeing of its population. The strategy is accompanied by 'social prescribing' through which relevant organisations can refer people to services that will support their social, emotional, or practical need to connect with others.<sup>2</sup>

Although children and young people often want adults to stay out of their relationships they also appreciate learning about friendship from adults they respect. They want to know how to be supportive of their friends, as well as how to 'get out of' a problematic friendship if one occurs.

Children and young people can also empathise strongly with peers they identify as having difficulty making friends. They have practical suggestions for ways to make friends, including being more accepting of others and allowing friendship to blossom in ways they may not have imagined. They also have advice for adults around how they can support children who might be feeling alone and left out to make friends.

Schools and governments can also play a role in supporting children and young people to make friends. They can provide opportunities for children and young people to meet and get to know others their age in welcoming spaces and environments that are safe and well organised.

Teachers and parents can deliver lessons that will help children and young people learn how to make and maintain positive relationships with others their own age, which can lead to strong friendships. Without being judgemental, they also have a role to play in fostering positive friendships amongst children and young people, helping to divert a child or young person away from a relationship that may not be good for them.



## What do kids say adults don't understand about friendship

Teenagers said that parents often don't understand that young people can have close friends who are of the opposite and same gender without being in a romantic relationship. These friendships are 'platonic' and 'not romantic'.

Young people said that because parents come from a different generation, they need to be aware that there is a generational gap between them and their children, and that because of this there are some things being done differently compared to when they grew up.

Young people said it would be helpful if adults understood that online friendships are as valid as in-person friendships. They said that in the twenty first century, and especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns, more and more interactions between young people occurred online, including friendships. Some young people described the way in which online friendships 'can save lives' emphasising that friendships in general keep young people safe.

Many young people said that adults don't understand that friendships, in all their diversity and complexity are valued. They don't want adults being dismissive of the friends they have who are 'different'.

While children and young people do seek advice about friendships and help with boundary setting from trusted adults, they were clear that they don't want adults to tell them how to 'do friendship' or be judgemental about who they choose to become friends with unless they ask them for help and ideas.



### Friendships are diverse and different and can mean...

- “ Having opposite gender friendships”  
– 14 year old
- “ I’m not dating everyone you meet mum”  
– 16 year old
- “ That I can talk to guy friends and it’s not romantic” – 15 year old
- “ complexity of social media and staying connected” – 16 year old
- “ that it’s deeper than just ‘hanging out’”  
– 16 year old
- “ they are important for mental health”  
– 17 year old
- “ that because we were born in a new generation, so a lot of the friendship is online” – 14 year old
- “ that lesbians can have girl best friends without dating them” – 16 year old
- “ understand[ing] that [a] person’s background, and or what they’re facing just because they acted wrong once, doesn’t make them a bad person” – 14 year old.





## Key messages

Friendships and connection are vital to the health and wellbeing of children and young people and require the support and investment of adults.

### 1

Additional help is needed to enable some young people to make friends and connections. Young carers, those living a disability or a chronic long-term illness, disadvantaged young people and those not attending school or in employment need extra support.

### 2

Investing in the health and wellbeing of all children and young people in their local communities involves offering affordable or free local activities of all kinds that bring people together – cultural, sporting and social activities all have value.

### 3

Local councils can have an active role in supporting activities for all ages of children and young people at both indoor and outdoor facilities. For example public libraries and local green spaces are valuable spaces in which to establish youth hubs. My guide to [Building Youth-Friendly Local Communities](#) has lots of helpful advice for local councils on this.

### 4

Accessing social media and participating in online games are integral to children and young people's capacity to build and maintain their friendships. Offering free access to Wi-Fi in public spaces, as well as facilities to recharge their electronic devices is essential to children and young people's ability to stay in touch, organise their school, work and social lives, as well as stay safe.

### 5

Relationship education should include lessons on friendship in the school curriculum. This would ensure students learn what healthy and unhealthy relationships are, and are provided with opportunities to discuss how they feel and deal with different friendship and relationships experiences they face.

### 6

Schools and teachers can help students form friendships at school by setting up group class activities in which they mix students up differently, and by organising a variety of inclusive clubs and other 'free-play' activities that can be run at breaktimes, lunchtime and after school.

## Friendships and wellbeing

Friendships have a significant impact on children and young people's wellbeing. Whether this impact is positive or negative depends on the nature of the friendship.

Children and young people say a good friend helps them to worry less and to focus more on learning. They encourage them to be brave. At the same time, they recognise that some friendships are 'toxic' and that at times they need to come to adults to seek advice on setting boundaries and help finding a way to leave a 'bad' friendship behind.

Young people say that good friends lift each other up and support, help, and love each other. Social interactions help young people develop social skills, and having friendships is key to a young person's capacity to keep a healthy mindset, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation. They said this was especially so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Friendships formed at a young age can have an impact on how future human connections and relationships are established over a lifetime.

Young people said that having good friends makes them feel confident and that they belong.

They make them feel comfortable to talk about anything, and can be relied upon to lend an ear, particularly when others in their lives, including parents and carers, do not or cannot provide the listening time and support they need.

They said having friends is like having free therapy. It keeps them feeling 'less depressed' and 'distracts them from their problems'. Young people said that having someone 'to fall back on' and 'rely upon' is important and that having a good friend is knowing there is someone you can 'count on' and who 'has your back'.

Friends who are attentive often realise when others are sad or in need of support, and will say things like 'are you okay?' or 'do you need me to go away and give you space?' They ask whether 'you need them to get help or find you an adult to talk to?'

Some children and young people told the Commissioner that friends are people they 'play with and enjoy life with' and who they 'have fun making memories with'.

### Friends are people who...

“ support, help and lift each other” – 14 year old

“ is someone to talk to when you know your parents wouldn't understand” – 14 year old

“ are hugely positive, provide support and love and understanding” – 14 year old

“ distract me from my problems and make me much more happier and energetic” – 14 year old

“ are really helpful and make you feel bubbly” – 13 year old

“ keep me alive” – 13 year old

“ [mean you] always feel happy knowing they have somebody there for them and are smiling and being joyful” – 11 year old

“ make me self-conscious and make me happy at the same time” – 14 year old

“ [can have both] positivity & negativity depending what friends you have” – 14 year old

“ can be toxic” – 16 year old



## What makes it hard for some kids to make friends?

Whilst some children and young people said that being at school with their friends is the best part of their day, others said they find it hard to make friends.

Children said that having different opinions and different personality types, such as being 'shy' can be a significant barrier to forming friendships. They also said that different learning styles and thought processing methods can make it difficult for some children to make friends.

They highlighted how 'some differences' impact significantly on a child's ability to make friends. These included things like living with a disability, having a different gender, being a certain religion, or having darker coloured skin. Children said these differences can be factors that can make it hard for some children to fit in and make friends.

Some children and young people said that a lack of social skills at a young age means some children are left out due to them 'not knowing how to make friends' or how to 'talk to anyone'. Children and young people with a disability, and/or a mental health issue, such as anxiety or depression, told the Commissioner that their social skills can be affected by these illnesses, making it difficult for them to make friends. Kids who have had 'people leaving them and having fake friends' said they have trust issues, which can also act as a barrier to them making new friends.

### It is sometimes hard to make friends because...

- “ they might be shy or have had bad experiences before” – 12 year old
- “ people that are shy, picked on, other experiences, race, appearance, gender” – 11 year old
- “ they may have a different skin color, race or something else and they could be shy” – 11 year old
- “ their religion, personality and the way they act” – 11 year old
- “ they look different, transgender, religion and if they're Christian” – 10 year old
- “ fear of rejection, new kid, religion, look different be different” – 11 year old

## The decisions adults are making can also impact on a child's capacity to make and maintain friendships.

These decisions can mean moving schools and changing teachers. Schools may select classes for students that separate friends. These are decisions that can break up existing friendships and make it hard for some children to find new friends.

Children and young people also told the Commissioner that popularity and appearance influences the forming of a friendship.



They said that 'being pretty helps you get friends more easily', while some kids said that 'playing video games' is a key part of how they form friendships and make social connections. Other kids said that 'if video games weren't invented' more people would be forced to socialise and not isolate themselves as much.

We know children and young people can be socially isolated if they don't have access to transport. Isolation can also occur if they are required to care for a family member. If a child or young person has a disability or a chronic or long-term illness they are likely to need additional support to enable them to meet and socialise with their peers and foster friendships.

Children and young people said that those who do not attend school, or who can't find work feel excluded from society and find it much harder to make friends.

## What suggestions do children have for how to make friends?

Children suggested that those who currently have no friends could 'make them by reaching out to others'. They said they could do this by 'being confident' and by 'stepping out of their comfort zones'. Others suggested that going to places to 'meet people, hangout with people, and then get up to being friends' with those they meet would also help.

Some young people suggested being inclusive and welcoming to others by 'asking if they want to play with you at breaktime' or saying 'you can play my game'.

They said inviting those who seem alone are steps that can be taken to help other kids make some friends. Other children said, 'I think we can help other kids make friends by helping them find some-one to talk to or play with.'

### We can all help children make friends by...

“ I think that if we try and include them and make them feel safe it can be easier to make friends” – 12 year old

“ be[ing] kind to each other. Friends are important. Other friends could invite other people to play with them. People should listen to others. Maybe clubs could help other people make friends” – 11 year old

“ encourage/talk them up, help them and be there to support them” – 11 year old

“ If you see a kid upset you could help her/him out” – 12 year old

“ including them. Have them around.

Ask someone sitting alone to come and play with them.” – 12 year old

“ talking to them and make them feel safe” – 10 year old.





## Practical ways parents/carers can help children make friends

Children identified three things that parents can do to help them make friends: arrange activities, encourage communication, and take them to locations where other kids their age will be.



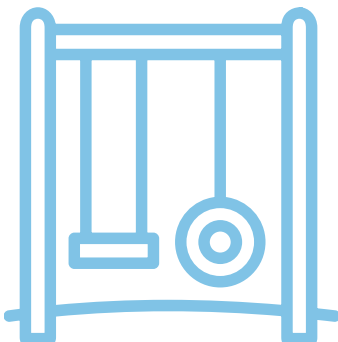
### **Arrange activities:**

Parents could arrange play dates for their child with the child of a family friend, or with other children their age from their child-care centre, pre-school or school.



### **Encourage communication:**

Parents could talk to their children about friendship and ask them what kind of friend they would like. Based on the answer their child provides, they could help them to introduce themselves to potential friends, 'match-making' them with the kind of friend they have described.



### **Co-locate them with peers:**

Parents could take young children to day-care centres, playgrounds, and other places children their own age are known to go. This would support them to make friends in these welcoming, relaxing, and playful environments, with the support of adult supervision and guidance.

## What can parents/carers do to help children and young people make friends?

Parents and other significant carers, can make time to talk to children about their friends, including what they want from their friendships. This is something most children and young people say they would like adults to do.

Whilst having a close relationship with your parents is seen as a positive, teenagers also want to have their own space and privacy, so they can learn to be their own person. They don't want their parents to constantly be looking over their shoulder when it comes to their choice of friends. Instead, they want them to let things happen with their friends, on their own, without adult supervision, and if they come to them for help, provide advice and support then.

Teenagers said they wished their parents would listen to them without making judgements. They want them to be more accepting and patient with them. They believe that if adults communi-

cated with their children and young people in more respectful and positive ways, this would enable them to do the same thing with their friends. Adults practising behaviours that support them to become a better friend is important and that 'seeing adults being good friends to each other would make a good role model'.

Some teenagers said they'd like their parents to educate them on what the qualities of a good friendship are. They would like adults to provide advice on 'toxic behaviours' and 'bad friendships' supporting them to end relationships that are not providing them with the kind of friendship they're seeking.

### When it comes to friendships, adults should...

- “ discuss setting boundaries” – 16 year old
- “ teach us about friendships ending and how we can cope” – 16 year old
- “ tell me when I'm in the wrong” – 15 year old
- “ teach what being a friend means and how to be a good friend” – 15 year old
- “ encourage relationships with everyone – not limiting friends based on their social standing/background etc.” – 16 year old
- “ help you to understand and cope with different situations” – 17 year old
- “ give helpful advice based on past experience and helping/allowing kids to see their friends where possible” – 16 year old
- “ let us do things by ourselves without constantly looking over our shoulders” – 14 year old
- “ not pressure you” – 11 year old
- “ leave us Alone” – 15 year old
- “ just let you figure it out” – 15 year old
- “ listen, not try to solve the problem” – 14 year old

## Practical ways educators can help kids make friends

Educators can also help children and young people make friends. They can do this by pairing them with others, or by undertaking group activities that 'break the ice'. Mixing kids up helps them learn where they connect and how to work together with other children and young people across different situations and scenarios.

Friendship clubs, buddy programs, and buddy benches can be helpful. Out-of-lesson activities such as drawing, cooking, role-playing, reading, or just providing places where kids can 'hang out' and have free play time are all good ways to support children to make friends.

Simple friendship building activities offered during school breaks, at lunchtime, and after school will also help. Schools should offer students a range of inclusive activities to choose from and 'not just sport'.

### Educators can support children make friendships by:

- “ start[ing] a community to join loads of kids, and do activities to make them friends.”
- “ having a group where everyone can go and make friends” – 10 year old
- “ Buddy benches” – 11 year old
- “ Encouragement to other kids, group activities, talking, making sure everyone is kind” – 11 year old
- “ events that could go on once a week like a sports event or craft event reading event” – 12 year old
- “ create[ing] more places for students to play to encourage more student to play and join others” – 12 year old
- “ Friendship clubs encourage students to help others” – 11 year old
- “ running activities during playtime and include everyone” – 11 year old
- “ changing seating arrangements often for kids to interact with different people. Encourage and bring kids together. Teachers could make anti-bullying club or friendship lesson” – 11 year old
- “ Swapping kids around their seating's (teachers) so they could talk to other people and make new friends” – 11 year old





## Lessons on friendship

If schools taught students about friendship as a school subject some of the topics young people highlighted for possible inclusion were as follows:

- How to get into a friendship safely
- How to handle friends, and
- How to end toxic friendships.

Schools could also include lessons on:

- How to recover from bullying
- How to deal with friends who manipulate others
- How not to become a friend who manipulates others
- Understanding what makes a friendship good or bad; and
- How to stop poor behaviours at the beginning of a friendship.

Children and young people said schools could also become places where students are taught how to respond to students who are being mean to them, or others.

They could help children develop the social skills needed to make friends, as well as explain what being a good friend involves. These lessons could include:

- How to assess and know self-worth
- How to read the room, and
- How to deal with the loss and loneliness of losing a friend.

Other topics children and young people suggested could be taught at school in lessons on friendship included:

- Defining the qualities of a good friendship (respect, empathy, loyalty, trust)
- Teaching children how to maintain healthy friendships
- Understanding how to respond to different situations or problems their peers may be facing; and
- Knowing how to set and communicate boundaries with some friends, including the ability to recognise when boundary setting is needed.

### Educators can help young people make friends by teaching...

“ understanding of different people”  
– 15 year old

“ how to support others” – 15 year old

“ consent at a young age” – 16 year old

“ respect and patience at a young age”  
– 14 year old

“ that GAYS, the gals and the non-binary  
[are] all pals” – 15 year old

“ how to deal with conflict” – 17 year old

“ how to treat friends in a kind and caring  
way. What to say and what not to say”  
– 15 year old

“ how to figure out if [a] relationship is toxic  
or not. How to not be toxic” – 15 year old

“ how to get out of toxic friendships safely”  
– 15 year old

“ that you don’t have to like everyone”  
– 16 year old

“ how to handle toxic friendships. How to  
help friends when they are struggling”  
– 15 year old

#### Endnotes

- 1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child  
[United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](https://www.unicef.org/au)  
([unicef.org.au](https://www.unicef.org/au))
- 2 A connected society: A strategy for tackling  
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