



## Exploring the Power and Processes of Friendship through Picturebooks

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### Introduction

*"Friendship is the only cement that will ever hold the whole world together."*

*--Woodrow Wilson, 1918*

These words of Woodrow Wilson, spoken a full century ago, ring just as true today in a world that often feels like it is falling apart. In the daily news cycle, national and global debates constantly swirl around issues of justice, equity, and civility, with concerns raging about the core elements needed for individuals, communities, and nations to interact successfully. No doubt, children are impacted by the way these issues play out on the world stage. However, they also learn similar, more developmentally appropriate life lessons about key relationship values and what it means to engage fairly, successfully, and happily with others, through the power of personal friendships. Close, personal friendships evidence the potential to serve as both anchors and supportive scaffolds for the developing child; rooting children in the security of established, close relationships and giving them the confidence and assurance essential to engage in new ones. Thus, it is important that children have opportunities to learn about the meaning and power of friendship, and receive tangible support to develop the pro-social skills necessary to forge, navigate, and deepen these relationships.

Children learn about friendship through many avenues, including observations of interpersonal interactions, their evolving participation in personal relationships, and the information about friendship that is presented through books and other media sources. High quality picturebooks provide an excellent source of accessible and developmentally appropriate information about the nature of friendship, revealed through informational tips, as well as through the stories of protagonists who grow through opportunities to alternatively embrace and struggle with different aspects of their personal relationships.

In this article, we offer an overview of the role of friendship in the lives of children and consider ways in which children can develop the skills and habits of mind and heart needed to *initiate*, *sustain*, and *navigate challenging areas* within these types of relationships. Related touchstone texts are introduced in the discussion of each of these areas. Finally, we discuss pedagogical possibilities for effectively sharing friendship-based stories with young children.

### **Friendship in the Lives of Children**

There is little doubt that strong, healthy relationships bring joy and stability to both young and old (Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Maunder & Monks, 2015). Relationships matter deeply to children from the time they are born. Infancy is a critical time for establishing strong attachments with parents, family members, and caregivers; people who often comprise the totality of the child's social world (Zeanah, Berlin, & Boris, 2011). As children emerge into the toddler and early childhood years, relational shifts begin to occur and their social worlds expand to include others beyond this tight circle. Even the very young begin to notice, acknowledge, and eventually interact with other similarly-aged children, setting the groundwork for the development of peer relationships (Erwin, 1998; Rubin, 1980).

The nature of peer relationships changes over time and across circumstances. For example, peer relationships among the very young may take the form of one child simply connecting with another through eye gaze or touch, while slightly older children may engage in parallel play, and eventually, in more interactive forms of engagement. As children develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially, they gain access to "tools" that enable them to extend their play and interactions, allowing them to participate in a greater range of relationships (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009). By the time children arrive in the middle childhood years, there is often a significant shift, in which children spend a more substantial amount of time with similarly-aged others. Thus, the impact of peer influence expands, while the impact of parents, family members, and other caregivers may begin to wane (Erwin, 1998, Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003).

Children's peer relationships also change in other ways throughout time. In terms of activities, young children typically engage in varied forms of pretend play, which eventually give way to participation in more structured forms of games and activities. Eventually, as children enter middle childhood, they begin to prefer extending opportunities to simply spend time talking and visiting in less structured ways with their peer group (Gifford-Smith, 2003; Zarbatany, Hartmann, & Rankin, 1990). While toddlers and very young children are typically satisfied spending time with whatever children are close to them in terms of proximity and availability, older children develop more specific preferences for the children with whom they want to

interact. In this way, children do not just participate in a general peer social network. Rather, they begin to develop genuine friendships.

Unlike more general relationships, childhood friendships are evolving, intimate relationships with selected similarly-aged peers; close relationships in which the participants are relative equals in terms of power and in which there is a degree of reciprocity (Gifford-Smith, 2003; Kemple, 2004; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003; Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Bowker, McDonald, & Heverly-Fitt, 2015). By the time that children reach the preschool years, they frequently identify other children who are friends, and it is not long after this that they may willingly identify a “best friend” (Erwin, 1998; Rubin, 1980). Studies indicate that children tend to build friendships with individuals who are somewhat similar to themselves. While young children often seek friends who are similar to them in superficial ways (i.e. same gender, similar ages, race, ethnicities, and abilities, etc.), older children tend to expand the scope of their friendships to include others who have similar beliefs, values, and interests (Rubin et al 2015).

While research indicates that there is a strong element of stability in children’s friendships, it is also clear that some friendships wax and wane; requiring more of an effort from participants at certain times than others. While many childhood friendships are maintained through long periods of time, other friendships seem to fade or lose importance; friends may develop new interests and grow in different directions, sometimes resulting in a relationship that is abandoned or left in a state of disrepair (Erwin, 1998; Staub, 1998).

The benefits of childhood friendships are rich and manifold. Friendships not only provide an opportunity for children to expand their relationships beyond the bounds of family and caregivers, these relationships provide an opportunity for children to develop important social skills that help them to engage in the give-and-take process that helps them to interact successfully with others (Kemple, 2004). As they develop communication skills with a trusted peer, they learn to better understand the perspectives of others, share confidences, and increase their level of relational intimacy. Children learn that high quality friendships not only offer a means of companionship, but can be a key to happiness, offering a “port in the storm” when they experience emotional stress or find themselves in difficult circumstances at school or at home (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Nangle et al, 2003; Rubin et al 2015).

Many friendships seem to have an organic quality and appear to evolve naturally, as two people are drawn together due to similar interests, activities, and personalities. However, it is also apparent that educators can do a number of things to help expand both the quantity and quality of children’s friendships; helping children to become more inclusive and to more effectively connect with others who differ from them or who struggle to engage socially (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007; Kemple, 2004; Nangle et al, 2003; Staub, 1998).

### **Learning about Friendship through Literature**

Children’s literature provides an excellent medium to help young readers learn about many different types of social phenomena, including friendship (Lacina & Griffith, 2014; Roberts & Crawford, 2008). Through literature, children have the opportunity to access developmentally appropriate information about high quality friendships, as well as more problematic ones. As is well noted, literature provides both illuminative and reflective qualities that invite readers to look

intently at their own life experiences and perspectives, while also gaining insight into the lives of others (Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Crawford & Calabria, 2018; Short, 2009; Wanless & Crawford, 2016). In particular, picturebooks provide the opportunity for authors and illustrators to offer multimodal, richly-layered stories that invite readers to consider information, weigh sensitive issues, and consider multiple perspectives of characters, all within the confines of a short, and accessible text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007).

In the sections that follow, we consider picturebooks as sources from which readers can learn about friendship. Specifically, we consider messages that these texts offer related to the areas of initiating friendships, sustaining friendships, and navigating challenges within friendships. Introductory comments and touchstone texts are provided for each of these areas.

### **Initiating Friendships**

Imagine a playground filled with children playing on swings, climbing gyms, or at a water table filled with all sorts of toys and containers. As children play, it is easy to observe how they glimpse at each other, and then how the glimpse becomes a lingering look, a smile, and a welcoming expression. The tentative looks of interest can be observed between all of us as we rest on park benches, survey playgrounds, and look up from our phones in waiting rooms. The noticing of another is the fragile beginning of an affiliation that can lead to a deeper sense of camaraderie. Friendships become initiated when we realize kindred experiences and recognize reciprocal feelings of trust and loyalty.

*Sam and Jump* (Mann, 2016) is a provocative text that illustrates the trust and loyalty experienced by two boys whose friendship begins on a sandy beach littered with sand pails, shovels, and toys. As the story begins, Sam goes to the beach accompanied by his family and best friend, Jump, a stuffed bunny. While building sandcastles, Sam meets Thomas, another child and fellow beach-goer. They play together happily and agree to meet again the next day. All goes well until the ride home, when Sam realizes that Jump was forgotten on the shore. After a restless night, they return to the beach, but Jump is not to be found. Happiness is restored only when Thomas arrives, with Jump tucked safely inside his sand pail. “Now Sam and Thomas-- and Jump-- are best friends” (n. p.). With scant text, the story probes these relationships, and the different types of security found within them. Together, words and pictures depict the initiation and development of a blossoming friendship.

In *Snapsy the Alligator and His Best Friend Forever! (Probably)*, Falatko & Miller (2017) nicely capture the proverbial dance that occurs when individuals are identifying new friends, defining relationships, and in some cases establishing relational boundaries. This graphic-rich book details a conversation between an unlikely pair, Snapsy the Alligator and Bert, his loyal chicken sidekick, who serves as story narrator. Bert admires everything that Snapsy says and does, and wants to be with him all the time. Snapsy is unconvinced they are destined to be friends and at times doesn't even seem to notice Bert's efforts. After many miscues, all hope for friendship seems to be lost. A satisfying turn around occurs when *both* animals realize they need and value the friendship. This seemingly light and humorous book raises important questions about how one might identify potential friends and behave in the early stages of friendship.

A decidedly more serious perspective of initiating friendship is presented in *The Day War Came* (Davies & Cobb, 2018). Inspired by a true story, this haunting book depicts the utter loneliness a young refugee experiences as the pain of war pervades her life and seemingly follows her to new places. Her agony is exacerbated when she is not welcomed in her new land and a teacher turns her away from school, “There is no room for you, you see. There is no chair for you to sit on. You have to go away” (n. p.). Light enters her darkness when a child knocks on her door, offering a chair so that she can come to class, and promises that the other classmates are doing the same so all children can attend school. Through an act of kindness, new friendships begin, “[p]ushing back the war with every step” (n. p.). This is a powerful tale that invites readers to enlarge their vision of who can be a friend and to take the necessary generous, caring actions required to make these friendships happen.

### **Sustaining Friendships**

Mutual trust and loyalty are part of the affective threads tying together friendship. The affective ties become stronger as feelings and thoughts are shared. Friends laugh, smile, look at each other, talk, and mimic each other more readily than with other individuals (Hartup, W.W. & Stevens, N., 1999). Our interactions as friends are often focused on activities that require us to cooperate, and cooperation necessitates compromising and working out differences. Negotiation makes a friendship elastic, thus the tugs and pulls of disagreement will stretch the friendship rather than break the affiliative bonds. At these less than ideal moments of a friendship, conflict is resolved when we look within, recognize our part in causing problems, and then attempt to repair the ties of friendship. The willingness to compromise and resolve conflict is a hallmark of a sturdy friendship as illustrated in the following books.

Starting a friendship is one thing. Sustaining it is another. In *How Do Dinosaurs Stay Friends*, Yolen and Teague (2016) ask readers simple, but important, questions about what one must do to sustain a friendship during difficult times: “How does a dinosaur keep his best friend when a terrible fight just might signal the end?” (n. p.). The lyrical rhymes and engaging illustrations will capture children’s interest. Meanwhile, this clever text offers concrete advice on ways to help resolve relational problems: one could apologize in person, send a note of explanation, invite the friend in question to play, or share a snack to start the healing process. The book ends on a reassuring note, reminding readers “that even though friends may occasionally fight, there is always a way to make everything right” (n. p.).

*The Big Balloon* (Scheffler, 2013) provides a reminder that small things matter in the life of a friendship. Pip and Posy have a day about town, showing off Pip’s beautiful, big, red balloon. Then, in one sad moment, the balloon slips away; soaring higher and higher until it pops. Pip is inconsolable until Posy comes up with an idea. She invites Pip to make bubbles with her. Like the balloon, the bubbles soar high and pop, but Pip and Posy don’t mind. Fun and happiness is restored. Ideal for the very young, this book invites children to understand their own sense of agency. When a friend is troubled, they can do small things that make a big difference.

*Yak and Gnu* (MacIver & Chapman, 2015) is the lyrical story of two friends who love to sail: “This is Yak, this is Gnu--/the best of friends,/ dear and true./ Yak has a kayak,/ Gnu a canoe./ Yak’s is black./ Gnu’s is blue.” As the two set out, they sing a happy song that celebrates their friendship and their unique ability to sail together: “No one else/ but you and me/ can float a

boat/or sail the sea” (n. p.). Much to their surprise, they are quickly joined by many others. A virtual animal kingdom arrives on a host of different vessels. Their surprise turns to anger and sadness when they realize they are surrounded by many who can do the same things that they can. Their strong emotions fade when they realize that no matter what else happens or who is around, they always have each other. Even in the midst of a crowd, their friendship goes on, special and unique. This poignant, yet whimsical tale, invites readers to think about “next steps” in friendships. What happens when the uniqueness of a special friendship seems to wear off? How does one sustain a friendship, when surrounded by many others?

### **Navigating Challenges within Friendships**

Proximity is often a stable characteristic that allows friendships to flourish at school, clubs, sports, and work. When proximity changes, friendships can be weakened, particularly for children who cannot independently navigate new distances occurring in place and time. In such circumstances affective ties become undone and companionship fades. Alliances become less reliable when friends grow apart in interests or when one friend no longer keeps confidences safe. When misunderstandings do occur, the friendship becomes disrupted with conflict and rivalry leading to emotional disengagement. The following books offer glimpses into the challenges of friendships when the ties that bind are tested. In the first two examples, the friendship challenges have happy outcomes and appear to be repaired “just in time.” The fate of the friendship in the third example, *My Best Friend* (Rodman & Lewis, 2004), looks less promising. Although a new relationship will not be a replica of a previous friendship, picture books can assist children in recognizing that all friendships are similar, therefore, they will again experience mutual positive regard, shared interests, and companionship with a new friend.

In *Are We Still Friends?* (Horowitz & Gómez, 2017), powerful lessons about the importance of communication are provided in the form of a nature-based metaphor. With their yards separated by only a small wall, Beatrice the bear and Abel the mouse are happy neighbors. Abel grows apples and Beatrice raises bees. Bea’s bees pollinate Abel’s apple trees to make a sweet honey, while Abel’s trees produce the most delicious apples. The friends help each other and enjoy the fruit of their collective labor in the form of tasty apple butter and sweet honey. All goes well until Abel gets stung by a startled bee. Suddenly, a series of misunderstandings occur, in which each neighbor thinks the other has no empathy. Is it possible that Bea is actually laughing at Abel’s pain? The two fall into a war of words, refusing to see one another. Meanwhile, outside, the bees continue doing what they always do, buzzing and pollinating, and helping wonderful apples to grow. Life goes on. It is not until the pair hits a crisis that they are willing to reconcile and renew their friendship. This bright, colorful picturebook shows that it’s easy to be friends... until something goes wrong. Then, it requires understanding, patience, and effort to make the relationship work.

In *The Two Tims*, Elliott and Aborozo (2016) explore a common challenge in friendships: How can close friends expand the boundaries of the relationship by including others? In this story, two boys, both named Tim, are best buddies who love to do all the same things and go everywhere together. All goes well until Tom, a third boy, enters the picture. Predictably, things quickly change, with two boys pairing off in different turns and the third boy feeling left out of the trio. Using an economy of words and an upbeat tone, the author captures the growing pains

that often occur when a pair of friends enlarges to become a group of three. In the end, the two Tims and a Tom find that they can all be best friends.

Are all friendships meant to be? Do they always end happily? Rodman and Lewis (2005) probe these questions through their poignant picturebook, *My Best Friend*. Each week, six-year-old Lily ventures to the pool to play with her best friend, seven-year-old Tamika. The only problem is that Tamika does not seem to know they are best friends. Each week, Lily tries to impress, cajole and attract Tamika. However, it is all to no avail, since Tamika almost always chooses to spend time with someone else, casting Lily in the role of a “baby” who simply tries too hard. Lily wonders, “How can I make her be my friend?” (n. p.). In the end, she realizes that she can’t and turns her attention to another little girl who clearly wants to be her friend. The well-told story, accompanied by Lewis’ luminescent illustrations, has strong emotional pull, raising questions about how to navigate one-sided friendships, and ultimately how to maintain self-respect in situations in which friendship goes unrequited.

### **Sharing Friendship-Oriented Literature with Children**

Children’s picturebooks offer a plethora of opportunities for children to learn the lessons of friendship. Surely, many children will benefit from simply having the opportunity to read these books or to listen as the books are read aloud to them. However, an abundance of research indicates that children gain much more from their literary experiences when they have an opportunity to transact deeply with texts; to read closely and respond to the print and visual messages within them (Panteleo, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1994; Sipe, 2007; Wiseman, 2011). The need for this deep type of transaction is particularly important when the content of texts address a complex, multilayered social phenomenon such as friendship. Young readers need the opportunity to read deeply as they consider their lives in light of the text and the text in light of their lived experiences. Repeated readings and the opportunity to look closely at illustrations within the text can help to facilitate these deep readings.

Educators can support children’s transactions with friendship-themed picturebooks in a number of practical ways. First, teachers might consider ways in which they can surround the reading of these books with opportunities for rich talk and discussion. This can be done through the implementation of interactive read alouds; shared reading experiences which include opportunities for children to interact with the text, as well as with the teacher and other children who are listening to the story (Panteleo, 2008; Wiseman, 2011). This type of read aloud allows for discussion and can be used as an invitation for children to make verbal connections between the story and their own life experiences with the topic. In this way, the texts can be used as a springboard for discussing student observations about friendship in both their literary and lived experiences. Literature circles, small group experiences in which readers have rich, student-led discussions based on texts, offer another excellent opportunity for children to pose questions and talk about the models of friendship they see in literature (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Teachers might also consider ways in which children can respond to these books through writing, the visual arts, or dramatic role play experiences. Ultimately, educators can use friendship-oriented literature as an invitation to praxis, as tools that provide tangible support to children as they seek out new friends and work through both the joys and challenging quirks that occur within friendships.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Friendships are among the most treasured and important experiences in the lives of children. These relationships offer opportunities to learn to get along and to make that all important human connection. As children engage with friends they have ongoing opportunities to mature and to discover ways in which friendships can be sources of joy, confidence, and companionship. Reflective of Woodrow Wilson's words, children can begin to see that friendship may indeed be the "cement that holds the whole world together." Picturebooks, and the thoughtful pedagogical experiences that surround them, can accompany children on this developmental journey, providing reassuring models and serving as crucial informational sources about the power, processes, and potential of friendship for their lives.



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