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CARTER, Caron <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9280-6241>>

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Young Children's Friendship Selection

Dr Caron Carter, Senior Lecturer in Childhood & Early Childhood Education & Postgraduate Research Tutor in Education, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Introduction

Children's friendships can provide a variety of positive outcomes for holistic learning and development (Daniels et al, 2010; Hedges & Cooper, 2017). However, friendships can often be overlooked due to busy routines, curriculum demands (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016) and even uncertainty about how to support children. This article focuses upon how young children select their friends, and how teachers and educators can use these insights to support the making and maintaining of children's friendships. I will draw upon examples from my own research to illustrate how 5 and 6-year-olds navigate friendship selection in a school context.

The Importance of Young Children's Friendships

Friendships are often children's first voluntary relationships (Rose et al, 2022) and are of significant interest to children (Unicef, 2011). Friendships can provide positive outcomes, including opportunities for learning social skills, positive academic outcomes and fostering a sense of belonging (Nix et al, 2013; Rogoff, 2003). Having quality friendships is also associated with higher self-

esteem and can reduce the possibility of feeling lonely and anxious (Samara et al, 2020). Therefore, it is important that we understand more about children's friendships and how to support them.

It is particularly pertinent that we pay more attention to children's friendships in a post Covid era. Children experienced an unprecedented phenomenon, where many children were affected socially and emotionally (Carter et al, 2023; Pascal et al, 2020). During Covid, the importance of friends for children's holistic learning, development and wellbeing became acutely evident. Paediatricians were

calling for restrictions to be eased so children could play and socialise normally (Grant, 2021). The impact of this period cannot be underestimated, and it is essential that friendship is kept on the agenda (Carter, 2024).

I acknowledge that children's friendships involve nuanced and complex processes and justice to these cannot be done here. Therefore, this article will focus on one aspect of children's friendships: how children select friends.

Selecting Friends

Before children make friends a process of selection takes place. Research into how children select their friendships has previously taken place in the field of psychology and with adolescence (Ojanen et al, 2010; Dijkstra et al, 2013). Adolescents select friends for a variety of different reasons including popularity and high educational aspirations (Bravo, 2022; Lorenz, 2021). Less research has been conducted into how young children select their friends. One of the few available studies noted that young children made specific friendships selections (Wang et al, 2019), whilst other research found that children were drawn to those with similar preferences (Fawcett & Markson, 2010). The research outlined below asked young children directly how they selected their friend(s).

The Research

My research (Carter, 2023) took place in a large multi-cultural infant school (4–7 years) in the North of England. Seven Year 1 children (5- & 6-year-olds) participated in the study. Year 1 is associated with the start of compulsory education in England and is typically recognised as having fewer opportunities to learn through play in comparison to the previous reception year (4- & 5-year-olds). Playtime and lunchtime, where children can play freely, therefore become important times and spaces as play is integral to children's friendships.

Method

Children's voices were central to this project. The research design was grounded in the knowledge that young children can "express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them" (Article 12, United Nations, 1989). This research listened to children's everyday friendship experiences to begin to explore how friendships can be supported. It is important to listen to children's perspectives and opinions because it is likely that adults and children will have different priorities (Brogaard-Clausen & Robson, 2019). If we genuinely want to support then we need to listen, learn from children and allow suggestions to be made.

To talk to the children, I used small world play interviews. These interviews were inspired by the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2017) and included a small playground 'Playmobil' scene for the children and the researcher to engage in play together. During the play the researcher asked questions in role, so the process was close to everyday practice and non-threatening for children. Two interviews took place across two terms. Each interview was approximately 30 mins in duration and were audio recorded.

Ethics

There are important ongoing ethical considerations needed when children participate in research. This started with gaining ethical approval from the University, followed by visits to the school to get to know the children and develop rapport (Barley, 2021). Informed consent was obtained from gatekeepers, parents/guardians and children. For children, the information about the project was shared verbally and in a written and pictorial format appropriate for children to understand. To make sure that children wanted to participate on each occasion, at the beginning of each session I ensured there was 'assent' from the children (Ericsson & Boyd, 2017). The children were made aware that this was not schoolwork, and they had a choice to participate, come at another time or opt out completely (Heath et al, 2007; Carter, 2023).

During both interviews, I was aware of the power imbalance between myself and the child (Coady, 2010). To address the power imbalance, initially children played with the small playground and 'Playmobil' figures alone. Some children involved me in their play from the start, whilst with others I entered the play slowly and cautiously through some 'in role' dialogue to see if my involvement was welcomed. One child showed through body language that they did not want to play so their wishes were respected. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and any names of other children referred to during the interviews.

Findings

How did children select their friends?

The children noted three important stages to their friendship selection.

1 Pre-selection

2 Selection criteria

3 Selection in action

1 Pre-selection

The first stage of selecting a friend was pre-selection. This involved a period for children to survey and observe the playground and decide who might be an appropriate peer to approach. Once children had spent some time surveying the playground, then they started to apply a selection criterion to select or eliminate who to play with. This criteria is outlined in the table below.

2 Selection criteria

Children used specific criteria for selecting who to play with and befriend as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Selection criteria used by the children.

Selection Criteria	Child Voice	Description of each Criterion for Selection
Presence at the start of playtimes	Elsa: "Go out quickly at playtime... If people are already playing you can ask, 'Can I join in please?'. Sometimes they say no or pretend they can't hear you...A kind or lonely person might say yes."	Children felt that being out on the playground quickly made being selected for games easier. If games were already established, it was harder to gain access to play.
Nice and Kind	Nancy: "By being kind and, because if you're nice to somebody they all want to be your friend."	All the children stated they would look for children who were 'playing nicely' and being kind.
Strengths and Interests	Theo: "Because he might be a good footballer."	Being good at something and/or having a shared interest.
Appearance	Nancy: "Because he might look a bit babyish and wants to play babyish things...they might not like his clothes."	Physical appearance and behaviour were criterion, e.g., if they liked the clothes a child was wearing that would influence their selection or if a child was 'babyish' this would potentially eliminate them.
Toys and objects	Henry: "She's got a kite and he can play with it." Theo: "He might show his new skateboard."	Toys and objects were used to persuade selected children to play or children with objects or toys were selected so children could also play with the toys too.

3 Selection in action

Once children had selected a friend there was a period of hesitation and trepidation about approaching that child or children because approaching a child has the potential for rejection. It is important that teachers and educators have awareness of the courage involved when instigating a friendship and consider ways to support children to manage rejection.

Implications for Practice

We can use this knowledge about how children make selections to support friendships. It is not only important to listen to what children say but to also reflect on this and adapt practice wherever possible, as shown in Table 2. This process will support children to navigate their friendships.

Table 2: Key messages from children and potential action.

Children Said:	Therefore, We Should Reflect Upon... Adapt Practice...
(i) They need to be out on the playground straight away at the beginning of playtime. They need time and space to decide who to play with.	Let children go out promptly at playtime and make alternative provision for fruit and toilet time. Preserve playtime wherever possible. Allow time for children to have agency in their friendships and be available for support when requested.
(ii) Friendships are important.	Teachers/Educators who have knowledge of peer culture, e.g., approaching a potential friend. Teachers/Educators who value and respect children's friendships. Teachers/Educators who support children to manage rejection.
(iii) They look for children who have specific interests or strengths.	Get to know children's interests and funds of knowledge (Chesworth, 2016). Teachers/Educators can act as brokers for children's friendships by sharing this knowledge.
(iv) They pick friends based on appearances (e.g. clothes).	Pick up on aspects of friendship where direct teaching can take place in whole class PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) sessions with a specific focus on inclusion.
(v) They use toys and objects to select friends.	Introduce a local policy where children can bring in small pocket toys/objects to play with at playtime.

Conclusion

This research used innovative small world play interviews with children to examine how children selected their friends. The findings draw attention to the everyday practices and challenges of navigating friendship. The children revealed three stages of selection, namely: pre-selection, application of a selection criteria and selection in action. Time and space are needed for all three of these stages. It is acknowledged that this can be a challenge for teachers and educators under pressure to deliver frameworks, curricula, and progress outcomes. That said, time and space for friendship needs to be carved

out as friendship is important and provides positive outcomes, including for happiness and wellbeing (Taylor, 2015), which are essential ingredients for good mental health. Indeed, children's friendships have become even more significant in a post-Covid era (Larivière-Bastien et al, 2022; Carter et al, 2023; Pascal et al, 2020; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). I therefore hope this article provides schools and settings with the opportunity for further dialogue and reflection around how to support children's friendships.

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