

‘YOU’VE GOT A FRIEND’ – SUPPORTING FRIENDSHIPS IN SCHOOL-AGE CARE SERVICES

James Taylor’s song ‘You’ve Got a Friend’ describes well why friendships matter in our lives and what some of their qualities are. We know that friendships are important to children and become increasingly important as they move through childhood.

Some people would assert that friendships are a very specific kind of relationship with particular characteristics. However, ‘friendship’ is a term that is used in a variety of ways, sometimes very loosely. Educators make comments to children such as ‘We’re all friends here’. It’s interesting to explore what the term means.

Think about your own friendships. What is a friendship? How would you define it? Are there different kinds of friendships?

Do you think of friendships in school-aged care (SAC) differently to the ways you think about your friendships? In what ways are they similar and different?

What about unhealthy friendships in SAC? What are their characteristics?

Is the assertion that ‘we’re all friends here’ appropriate – something to aim for in a SAC service? Why or why not? If it is, what does it mean?

There is a delicate balance between supporting and encouraging friendships and pressuring children to be friends. Some of us would know from personal experience that one of the worst ways to encourage friendships is to pressure people to have them.

The Framework for School-age Care (FSAC), the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) highlight the central place of relationships in children’s learning. Friendships are closely connected with:

- belonging, being and becoming
- identity
- learning to get along with others, balancing rights and obligations
- wellbeing
- learning from and teaching others
- being comfortable with diversity and difference
- dealing with bias and exclusion
- learning to be a part of a community or group
- children as learners and communicators.

How do friendships link with belonging, being and becoming?

What are the connections between friendships and each of the learning outcomes in FSAC?

When asked about good things that happen in SAC, most educators would mention friendships among children. An interesting thing to observe when a number of children begin in the service is the emergence of new friendships and their development over time. Educators in SAC monitor friendships to ensure that they are positive and constructive for everyone in the group. They intervene if, for example, friendships leave other children out, are not positive for a child or restrict children’s participation in the range of experiences and opportunities offered.

There’s no question that SAC educators pay attention to friendships. However the frameworks and the NQS ask much more of educators than that they just pay attention. Because relationships are so central to children’s learning in the frameworks, what is demanded of educators is that they actively plan for and support friendships. That is what is meant by intentionality – it’s not just a matter of letting friendships happen and intervening if necessary, but rather acknowledging their importance in the curriculum by planning for them and reflecting critically and continually about what they contribute and what improvements that can be made.

Before reading any further, think about what you currently do to support friendships. Be as specific as possible and give examples. Discuss this with your professional peers at your next networking opportunity.

Some questions to consider follow.

The curriculum and your role

How does the way you set up the environment support friendships?

What about the experiences you plan? How do they encourage and support friendships?

What about the physical environment? How does it contribute to friendships?

What are your roles in promoting and supporting friendships?



What about mixed-age friendships and friendships between boys and girls?

How do you achieve a good balance between encouraging friendships and not pressuring children to 'be friends'?

What would children say about friendships? Talk to them. Think about which of the questions in this article you could ask children, in order to get them to reflect critically about the place of friendships in their lives and in their SAC experience.

Assessment and planning

What are your aims or goals in relation to friendships among children? How does the service philosophy reflect these goals? How do your practices reflect the goals?

How do you ensure that you look for evidence that relates to friendships and how do you record that evidence?

How does the information you record about friendships inform your plans and practice?

And the most important question:

How can you improve your practice? What can you do better, and what will be your first step?

REFERENCES



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