Most children start down the path to friendship by identifying one special person whom they want to be with. All a child really needs in the beginning is one best friend with whom he can “hang out” and practise his social skills.

If you noted in the quiz that your child has some social play skills but only when he plays with one other child, he should continue to play one-on-one. Even a child who shows many social play skills will benefit from continuing this kind of play. But a child with many skills is also ready to start playing in groups of three or more.

Three Levels of Social Play Skills

The remaining chapters in this book will discuss strategies to improve your child’s social play skills. For now, though, what’s important is understanding how these skills develop naturally through play. As you read the rest of this chapter, use your quiz answers to identify your child’s current level of social play. Then keep reading to learn which skills he still needs to develop.

No social play skills

If you wrote in the Social Play Skills Quiz that your child often…

» Plays alone (#1) or
» Plays near another child or a group of children (#2)

…then your child probably doesn’t know what to do or say to join in with other children.

Sometimes, children play alone because they want to play their own way. They may find it hard to do what someone else wants. An “often” or “sometimes” answer to question #2 lets you know that even though your child plays alone, he’s interested in other children; he just needs some help in getting in on the action and staying there.

Goals for a child with no social play skills

If your child doesn’t seem to be interested in playing with other children, he may need to spend more time with them simply by being in the same room. After observing another child play for a while, he’s likely to become more comfortable with the idea of joining in.

If your child already shows an interest in what other children are doing, then he’s probably ready to start moving toward the next stage. That means, first, playing beside other children and sharing toys. They’re not really playing together just yet, but it’s a good start. (For example, they each build their own tower using blocks from the same box or move their own trains back and forth on the same set of tracks.)

Then your child will be ready to join in some play with one or two other children. Activities that the children can do in unison, like singing songs or moving to music with one another, help build friendships at this stage. When you notice the children exchanging glances and smiles, you’ll know they’re starting to connect. Other activities your child may start to enjoy at this stage include sharing physical activities (such as chase or running after a soccer ball).

These kinds of play will help lead your child to the next stage. In the beginning, though, the goals for a child with no social play skills are to stay and play beside another child (or other children). Playing briefly beside another child—or even just being in the same room—is the first step. To summarize…

Don’t expect your child to stay with another child throughout the entire play date. In the beginning, he might join his friend for one or two activities out of five. Consider it a bonus if the children talk to one another.

Some social play skills

If you wrote in the Social Play Skills Quiz that your child often…

» Plays beside another child or a group of children, using the same toys as them (#3) or
» Joins in physical play with another child or a group (#4) or sometimes…

» Initiates play with another child or a group by joining in with their activities (#9)

…then your child is already starting to make friends. Playing alongside another child is a good stepping stone to playing together. Your child is learning what to do by watching others play.