Fostering your child's relationships with others

Your child needs relationships with many people: parents, siblings, extended family members, friends, neighbours, teachers, health-care workers, caregivers and classmates. The relationships your child has with other people can foster physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social health.

When children relate to many different people, they learn important social skills. For example, they learn how to make friends and how to get along with others. They learn that they are special and worth knowing.

The opportunities your child has to build relationships depend on your family's lifestyle. Do you have a large extended family, with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins? Does your child go to child care or to a playgroup? Does your child have opportunities to be with people in your community? Does your child spend time with your adult friends and with other children his or her age? What do you think are the most important relationships in your child's life?

Communicate: tips for active listening

Clear communication—and lots of it—is the most useful tool to build a close relationship with your child. Adults must learn to be active listeners, paying close attention to a child's words, sounds, behaviour and body language. Here are some tips:

- Use words like, *"I hear you telling me that you are sad because . Can you tell me more?"* This lets your child know that you were really listening to him or her. It gives him or her an opportunity to correct you if you didn't quite understand. It encourages your child to express his or her own point of view.
- Use “I” messages like, *"I see you are having fun but when you climb the fence, I'm afraid that you are going to fall and get hurt."* This way, you acknowledge your child's point of view, as well as voice your concerns about his or her behaviour and your feelings toward them. Children need to know that you still love them, even when they are doing something you don't think is in their best interest.
- Children who feel acceptance and trust are more likely to express themselves openly. They feel safe knowing that you love them, no matter what

Encourage sharing

Sharing is hard when children don't understand that they’re not losing something. Very young children tend to be concerned mostly with themselves until they have more experience learning social skills and building relationships. It’s normal for your child to be more interested in "me" than in relationships with other children. Your three-year-old who spends time with others is more likely to practice skills you have tried to teach like sharing, co-operation, planning and working together.

Role-playing

When children role-play and pretend, they learn about daily life and relationships. A child who plays with a doll may be pretending to care for a baby sister or brother. A child who stuffs a large purse with paper may be pretending to be mom leaving for work with her briefcase. These children come closer to understanding what life is like and what possibilities it holds.

Your child is exploring relationships through play. He or she finds answers to puzzling questions and eases his or her fears. When your child is upset about something, he or she will often process the problem by acting it out or by pretending.

Children play roles that they know about: mom, dad, teacher, doctor, nurse, librarian, grandparent, brother, sister, caregiver and crossing guard. Adult clothes, hats, shoes, phones, child-sized furniture and kitchen appliances and other props encourage imaginary and pretend play.

Be sure to maintain open communication with your child and discuss his or her progress with your spouse and your child's teacher. If you are concerned that your child is not interacting well with others, be sure to seek professional advice. You can discuss the issue with a child psychologist or your child's school guidance counsellor, who will be able to provide professional advice.