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ASK THE expert

Parenting coach Caroline Maguire gives advice on how parents can help their children learn to make new friends

Q My child doesn't seem to have any friends and gets upset about it. What can I do to help?

A Caroline Maguire, parenting coach and author of *Why Will No One Play With Me?* (Vermilion, £14.99) says: "Many kids struggle with friendship skills and, as a parent, you're their first teacher and you can help them work on these social skills.

"Whatever the reason behind the friendship struggles, it's important to engage in a series of conversations to help your child explore what they'd like their friendships to look like in the future and what changes to their social approach they'd like to make.

"Start by having a conversation when they're comfortable to explore their assumptions about friendship. To help your child open up, try to use open-ended questions to encourage them to really explore what they'd like to change.

"Keep it light and ask about their friendships, asking questions such as: What would you like to change about your friendships? Who are you playing with these days? How do you feel about your friendships?

"Next, I'd begin to lay the groundwork for changing their approach and working on friendship skills. You can

start by sharing stories from your own life when you've reached out for help and how you utilise resources. Explain that you'd love to be their 'go to' support for friendship. I suggest you work together on friendship skills.

"A good conversation starter for this can be, 'What if we each picked something hard for us — and we worked on it together. I think it might be good to work on your friendship skills — what do you think?'. Try to reinforce that their social interactions can get better and hark back to their vision of how they'd like friendships to be.

"If you notice something's hard for your child, like joining a group, gently bring it up during this conversation, saying something like, 'I've noticed sometimes you have a hard time joining a group — what makes that hard?'

"If your child doesn't know why they're struggling, you can reach out to their teachers and try to gather information about what's happening at school. You're the perfect person to collaborate with your child to guide them to make new friends."

Lisa Salmon