

1 MINUTE GUIDE

Safeguarding Committee *peer-to-peer relationships*



At Witham Prospect School, fostering strong **peer-to-peer relationships** is essential for our residents, even those with severe or profound learning difficulties. Research shows that positive friendships offer a multitude of benefits for children's development, regardless of their abilities. This guide equips staff with **information, tips, and techniques** to cultivate positive connections within our communal environment.

WHY PEER-TO-PEER RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Positive friendships contribute significantly to our children and young people's development. They provide opportunities for:

- **Social Interaction:** Playing together allows children to develop social skills like turn-taking, sharing, and communication.
- **Communication Skills Development:** Interaction with peers encourages attempts at communication, both verbal and nonverbal.
- **Emotional Well-being:** A sense of connection with others reduces feelings of isolation and fosters a sense of belonging.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Children with severe or profound learning difficulties may have difficulty with traditional verbal communication. It's crucial to understand each child's unique communication style and utilise alternative methods to bridge the gap.



This diagram outlines potential stages of peer-to-peer development.

While the PACE model is not a direct strategy for building friendships, it provides a framework for creating a safe and supportive environment where positive peer-to-peer relationships can flourish.

Social Development: A 2018 study published in the journal "Child Development" found that the quality of peer friendships in early childhood positively impacts later social competence in adolescence
<https://help.wrike.com/hc/en-us/articles/360041051853-Step-5-Start-Working-and-Collaborate>

Communication Skills Development: A 2017 study in the "Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research" showed that peer interaction plays a significant role in language development, particularly for children with communication delays
<https://www.rwjf.org/en/about-rwjf/how-we-work/health-advocacy-and-policy.html>

Emotional Well-being & Reduced Challenging Behaviours: A 2015 meta-analysis published in "School Psychology Quarterly" found that positive peer relationships are associated with lower levels of depression, loneliness, and anxiety in children
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/resources/studies>

Another 2013 study in "Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders" suggests that positive social interactions can potentially reduce challenging behaviours in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/resources/studies>

BENEFITS OF PEER-TO-PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Studies have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of peer-to-peer relationships on children's development. Here's a closer look at some key benefits:

- **Social Development:** Playing together allows children to develop crucial social skills like turn-taking, sharing, communication, cooperation, and empathy. These skills are essential for navigating social situations throughout life.
- **Communication Skills Development:** Interacting with peers encourages attempts at communication, both verbal and nonverbal. Children learn to express their needs and wants, understand others' perspectives, and engage in reciprocal communication.
- **Emotional Well-being:** A sense of connection with others reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness. Positive friendships provide a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional support. This can lead to increased self-esteem and confidence.
- **Cognitive Development:** Playing together can stimulate cognitive development through shared problem-solving, exploration of new ideas, and exposure to different perspectives.
- **Reduced Challenging Behaviours:** Positive social interactions can provide a sense of comfort and security, potentially reducing challenging behaviours associated with frustration or isolation.



STAGES OF FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

While the pace of development may vary, here's a simplified breakdown of potential stages in peer-to-peer relationships for children with severe or profound learning difficulties:

- **Parallel Play:** Children play side-by-side with similar toys, but without direct interaction.
- **Proximity Seeking:** Children may actively seek to be near each other, even if not directly engaged in shared play.
- **Simple Interaction:** Children may begin to exchange simple gestures, smiles, or vocalisations.
- **Collaborative Play:** Children start to engage in shared play activities, taking turns or working together towards a common goal.
- **Friendship:** A deeper level of connection emerges, with evidence of reciprocal communication, shared enjoyment, and emotional understanding.

REMEMBER: THESE STAGES ARE NOT LINEAR, AND CHILDREN MAY REVISIT EARLIER STAGES AT TIMES. THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERACTION AND CELEBRATE PROGRESS, NO MATTER HOW SMALL.

Staff can play a vital role in nurturing peer-to-peer relationships at Witham Prospect School, by:

- **Modelling positive social interaction:** Demonstrate greetings, turn-taking, and sharing during activities.
- **Creating opportunities for interaction:** Organise group activities and paired play sessions.
- **Providing clear communication cues:** Utilise visuals, gestures, and simple language to support communication between children.
- **Celebrating successes:** Acknowledge and celebrate positive peer interactions, both verbal and nonverbal.

We can create a supportive environment that fosters the development of meaningful friendships for all our residents at Witham Prospect School.