

FRIENDSHIPS

Children with Neurofibromatosis Type 1 (Nf1) can struggle with social acceptance.

Friendships can have many benefits for the Nf1 child in terms of providing guidance on what is appropriate social behaviour, and helping to develop self-image and self-confidence.

Not having friends can make any child vulnerable to being teased and bullied.

Some children with Nf1 can appear withdrawn and solitary but this does not mean they don't seek friendship. However, they may not know how to go about it. Others may be more sociably able and try to "fit in" but lack knowledge and experience of the ways in which friendships develop.

Wanting a friend

It is important to practice the skills and understanding of what is involved in friendships.

The Nf1 child may find difficulties with:

- Sharing toys, games etc.
- Sharing a friend with others – the child may not understand that friends sometimes want to play or spend time with others and may react badly to this. They could become distressed or even end the friendship
- Misinterpreting kindness for friendship – the child can become attached to someone who does not consider them a friend
- Turn taking
- Waiting
- Winning and losing
- The unwritten rules
- Mistaking bullies for friends

It's important to provide practice in the skills and understanding of friendships.

Making new friends can be challenging for any child but if you find it difficult to read social cues like figures of speech, body language, hand gestures and facial expressions, this magnifies the problem.

Help the child understand what a friend is. Explain that friends treat you nicely and ask you what you like or what you want to do. They say things to make you feel better when you are having a bad day.

Talk about how bullies behave too and the differences between friends and bullies. Even draw up a chart e.g.

THINGS FRIENDS MIGHT DO	THINGS BULLIES MIGHT DO
Share sweets	Take your sweets
Ask how you are feeling	Make you feel uncomfortable
Ask you to join in their games	Say you can't join in their games
Help you when you are finding something hard	Laugh or call you names
Invite you to their birthday party	Exclude you from their party

Parents – practice social skills at home with siblings. Help your child become comfortable with typical social rules about sharing, turn taking etc. then try adding a close friend and build this circle.

Teachers – practice social skills with small groups and consider teaming the Nf1 child with a classroom buddy to act as a mentor and help the child navigate social situations both within and outside the classroom.