

BETTER TOGETHER

Joy in Community

INITIATIVE



Friendship course

Children (8-12)

Commentary for foreign teachers and
parents in Germany

Preface

Making friends and enjoying lots of fun and meaningful experiences within friendships is one of the most important aspects of childhood. Unfortunately, for various reasons, it seems harder than ever for many children to build and maintain good friendships over the long term.

We understand that the curriculum and time allotments for grades 3-6 are already packed with content, and adding additional material may not seem feasible. However, current statistics, such as the German School Barometer by the Robert Bosch Foundation, clearly highlight the benefits of improving social relationships and the associated mental health for students in Germany.

With this in mind, we hope to make a small contribution with this short friendship course.

The following definition forms the foundation of our understanding of friendship:

„Friendship is a free relationship of two or more people,

1. who bring into the friendship some personality strengths conducive to forming a relationship and attractive to the respective other,
2. who develop an attitude to, appreciation and understanding of each other through past interactions,
3. who repeatedly act out their friendship with and towards each other through a variety of activities.“

This definition at large determines the content of this booklet.

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This document is currently still a draft / Request for Comments.
Furthermore, it is intended as a template to give other providers, cities, and municipalities a starting point to attach or integrate their regional and local offerings.

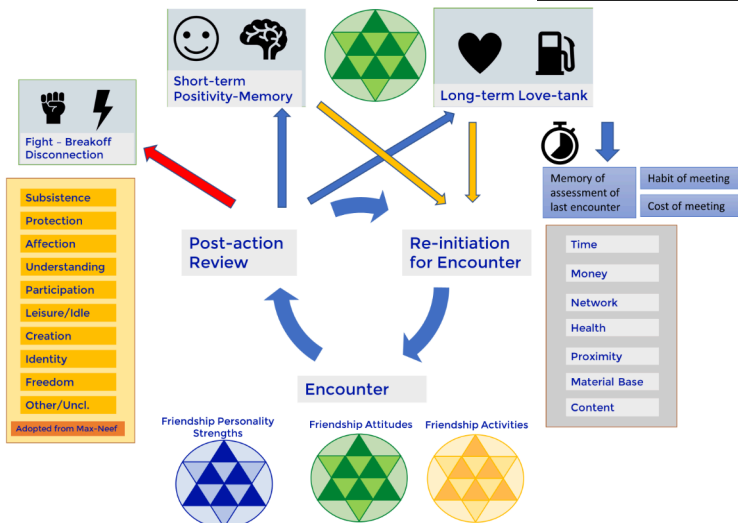
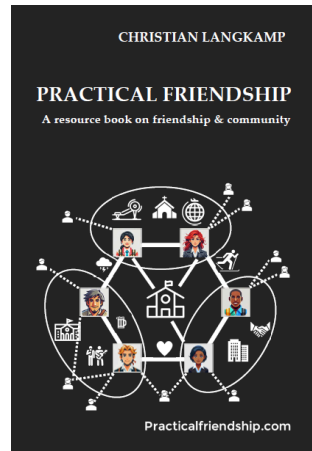
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2 Besser Zusammen - Freude in Gesellschaft

Theoretische Basis

The material is largely based on the theory developed and elaborated in the book „Practical Friendship“ (English) or „Freundschaft Leben“ (German). This online book is available as a free PDF, though it is quite extensive (410 pages) and not necessarily recommended for quick reading unless there is a specific interest in the topic. However, for in-depth discussions on individual topics with children who are genuinely curious, this book provides a wealth of material to enrich these conversations.

A key element is a process model for building and maintaining friendships, which places special emphasis on personality strengths, relationship attitudes, and activities. Additionally, it outlines resources (and the absence thereof as obstacles) as well as the social needs based on Max-Neef's framework.



Images – In theory, passport photos or other small pictures can be used, but if these are not available due to cost considerations, the following AI-generated icons can be printed as stickers and included in the material.



This is not the final word on the matter; future versions will likely aim for different templates.

What I admire about you – Virtues and character traits

Here, children should name character traits and personality features that they admire in their friend. This idea traces directly back to Aristotle, who emphasized that for a true friendship, there should be something admirable about the friend.

1. Honesty and authenticity
2. Acceptance and tolerance
3. Humility and interest in others
4. Reliability and consistency
5. Fun and humor
6. Kindness, warmth, and love
7. Virtue and good character
8. Intelligence, knowledge, and curiosity
9. Positivity, hope, and seeing the good
10. Proactive behavior
11. Energy, excitement, and adventure
12. Sociability, agreeableness, and connection-building skills
13. Patience, peace, and calmness

Improvement: Add example sentences that are more concrete than these abstract words, and possibly find other, simpler words for a chalkboard illustration.

It is not essential for the children to come up with everything. However, if you are familiar with these categories, you can better guess and ask about what the children want to express. Especially in the earlier years, children likely lack the vocabulary and ability to articulate their thoughts.

This activity with ____ is fun - Activities

Here, the children should name activities that make them so happy and glad to be friends with the other child.

1. Being together and playing
2. Working and creating together
3. Deep listening and sharing
4. Support and assistance in difficult times
5. Practical help
6. Connecting and merging friendship circles
7. Sharing meals and hospitality
8. Encouragement and challenges
9. Achieving change
10. Guidance and advice
11. Exploring and discovering
12. Teaching and learning
13. Generosity and giving gifts
14. Verbal or visible support

Improvement: Add example sentences that are more concrete than these abstract words, and possibly find other, simpler words for a chalkboard illustration.

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Thus ___ and I developed ... together - Relationship qualities

Here, the children should name relationship qualities that make their friendship with the other child particularly special.

1. Shared memories and common experiences
2. Love, affection, and intentional gratitude
3. Prioritizing the needs of friends
4. Loyalty
5. Enjoyment of each other's company
6. Mutual understanding
7. Reciprocity and the feeling of being needed
8. Trust and confidentiality
9. Openness and vulnerability
10. Respect, appreciation, and pride
11. Goodwill and caring for each other
12. Shared interests
13. Common beliefs and cultural background
14. Respect for privacy

Improvement: Add example sentences that are more concrete than these abstract words, and possibly find other, simpler words for a chalkboard illustration.

It might be harder for children to think about relationship qualities than about activities or "personal strengths." Teachers or parents will likely need to provide more guidance here, or alternatively, use a method where the six most important aspects can be selected by checking boxes.

It is not essential for the children to come up with everything. However, if you are familiar with these categories, you can better guess and ask about what the children want to express. Especially in the earlier years, children likely lack the vocabulary and ability to articulate their thoughts.

If I talk to ____ about their friends, they tell me the following:

Conversations with legal guardians or caregivers should provide insights into how friendships can change over time. They can also touch on feelings of loss and regret over neglected or past friendships.

When children, especially with their parents, discuss the parents' friendships, it also provides an opportunity for parents to reflect on the example they set for their children regarding friendships.

Since friendships, while culturally diverse in emphasis, are a universal phenomenon, this activity is also well-suited for involving parents of children with German as a second language.

Potential problems

In the case of orphans or challenging family situations, it may be difficult for the child to find an appropriate or suitable caregiver to engage with. Ideally, the teacher can directly suggest someone. In extreme cases, another child's parent might also step in as a possible support person.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

8 Besser Zusammen - Freude in Gesellschaft

Getting to Know New Children – Understanding and Building Rapport

Key Takeaways:

1. I must/should at least be interested in something about the other child.
2. This “something” should be based on their personality or who they are, not just the fact that they own a PlayStation or Barbie dolls that I can play with.
3. I also have something interesting to share about myself.
4. What I most like to talk about may not necessarily be what other children find most interesting. What truly defines me?
5. What characteristics should I pay close attention to? These are generally the personality traits mentioned on the earlier pages/worksheets. However, it is fascinating to note what the child identifies first or what they overlook that might also be important.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

Getting to Know New Children – Taking Initiative and Building Relationships

Key Takeaways:

1. What is my usual habit or standard suggestion for a first shared activity? What other suggestions exist in my environment or local social circle?
2. How do I handle taking initiative? Can I manage it on my own?
3. How dependent am I on my parents? Are they okay with it—do they want to know and help decide who I meet with? Or do they prefer that I take charge of planning and deciding my activities independently?
4. Do I feel confident enough to take the initiative?

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10 Besser Zusammen - Freude in Gesellschaft

Keeping social appointments

Anecdotally, the following pattern is currently being reported among teenagers: They make plans or social appointments and then cancel shortly before, to avoid being canceled on themselves. This is a strategy to avoid the pain of rejection but fails to recognize that this very mechanism creates the feelings of rejection they wish to avoid.

Many children learn from adults a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), the anxiety of potentially missing out on something better, leading to a reluctance to commit to plans.

For relationships and friendships, this is highly detrimental. Friendships can only thrive when spending time with the other person is seen as something explicitly desired by both sides and prioritized over other activities.

Unpredictable and erratic cancellations quickly render this trust meaningless, leading to complete distrust and, ultimately, an inability to build or maintain relationships.

Key message: A social appointment is a commitment. You should only cancel in extreme circumstances, and in such cases, rescheduling (but only once, as further delays seem unreliable) is acceptable but must be initiated by the person canceling.

Another important takeaway: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

A question to the adults in the room

What kind of example are you setting for your children? Do you make commitments to meet others? Do you keep them? Are you more of a postponer or a canceler of plans? Are your cancellations made casually (children pick up on this instantly), or are they truly a last resort?

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

Which of these actions really makes you angry?

This overview is divided into two parts. The first half contains statements that children typically notice themselves. This doesn't mean they feel guilty about them, but at least they can observe their reaction somewhat objectively.

Key insights should be:

1. It is perfectly okay to feel angry sometimes.
2. The question is whether the anger is proportional to the situation.
3. Did the situation really happen as perceived, or was it only felt or interpreted that way? While it's important not to doubt the child's experience, in cases of an inflated ego or a strong sense of ownership, things may often be misinterpreted.
4. Are there circumstances that make the child angry but in which they are often equally responsible for causing another child's anger (e.g., taking a toy but not sharing their own)?

There won't be a quick solution here. Emotional regulation is a skill learned slowly (after all, there are adults with short tempers in similar situations).

A more nuanced question, which is difficult to answer generally, is whether the anger—however it arises—triggers impulsive reactions that unnecessarily lead to the child ending a relationship or friendship.

Children often argue and reconcile just as quickly. However, they also notice recurring patterns in others' behavior and may eventually lose patience and interest in maintaining the friendship.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

Which of these games and activities do you prefer most?

An old English proverb states: "If you want to have friends, you need to learn to play with **their** toys."

In times of widespread societal self-optimization and egoism—patterns that are modeled for children daily and naturally absorbed by them—this realization is more necessary than ever.

If your child is complaining about a lack of friendships, this can serve as a useful quick check. Willingness to compromise and agreeableness are highly underrated traits, yet they are essential. Elementary school teachers widely report that these qualities are increasingly neglected in upbringing at home.

The key takeaway from this worksheet is for the child to reflect on whether they might need to become a bit more willing to compromise when choosing activities.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

Which places are best for playing or hanging out with friends?

Fifty, thirty, or even twenty years ago, the natural place to be after school (and after finishing homework) was “outside.” Playing soccer on the street, games in the woods, fields, playgrounds, and so on.

Parents had significantly fewer concerns about violence from other children and teenagers, speeding cars, and other dangers. And while the first gaming computers emerged thirty years ago, board games, Legos, and imaginative play with toys like He-Man or Barbie still held strong appeal.

This changed with the improvement in console and later smartphone graphics. In addition, there is a perceived or real (we cannot and do not wish to judge) increased level of danger for children in public spaces. Finally, many children’s “free time” is so over-scheduled that they simply lack time blocks to arrange outdoor playdates at places like playgrounds or parks.

Nonetheless, it is worth discussing with children which simple locations—such as playgrounds, swimming pools, youth centers, or other spots outside their own home—might be suitable for meeting classmates or neighborhood friends.

Debating the criteria for choosing such places, how parents are informed about their use, and the implications of these decisions is incredibly valuable both for discussions with children and among children themselves.

The context here is teaching kids about the concept of „Third places“ that are welcoming, at an early stage.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

14 Besser Zusammen - Freude in Gesellschaft

What were the best memories and experiences with friends?

The core function of friendships for children is growing together through shared experiences. While experiences with parents and other caregivers are also important, those with peers—same-age children—are crucial for exploring and testing one's personality and boundaries.

It is essential for children to enter a positive cycle of memories. A positive memory of playing together increases the likelihood that the child will say "yes" to the next invitation. Perhaps they will even initiate an invitation themselves and (ideally in coordination with their parents) extend it.

Without suggesting direct manipulation, this process can, of course, be significantly supported by parents asking about positive memories and experiences.

Key takeaway: It largely depends on my own initiative and reactions if I want to create future opportunities to have more positive experiences. And, generally speaking, it is more fun to do things in the company of others than to sit alone in front of TikTok or the computer.

The simple truth is this: Direct and joyful experiences create far more short- and long-term memories than social media or interactions with computer games ever could.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

Feedback

This resource is still very much in development; it is an initial draft. It is also written with the situation in Germany in mind, i.e. foreigners living in Germany with little or no command in German, as it has been translated from the German resource for school children and teachers and parents.

The basic model is that parents provide the main booklet to their children and assist them in completing it if reading and writing skills are not yet sufficient. Otherwise, they should remain available as a "lifeline" or background support, allowing the child to work independently or with a friend.

It is also conceivable to use this resource in classroom settings, after-school care programs, youth centers, institutions focused on youth pastoral care, or other supervised environments.

Careless distribution is not intended, especially at the beginning, since the material is still untested. It is also important to carefully consider in which public spaces engagement with this material can take place. For example, a classroom may not be a suitable space for children who are not well-integrated or are in the presence of bullying or mocking classmates. In such cases, safe retreat spaces and a simple exit option must be offered.

We are very interested in receiving feedback and suggestions for improvement. This is by no means a definitive solution but rather an attempt to contribute further to addressing the increasingly widespread issue of youth loneliness.

For inquiries and feedback:

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16 Besser Zusammen - Freude in Gesellschaft

Further Material

The Initiative GemEinsamkeit provides templates that can be adapted and used by municipalities, social service providers, local institutions, or even healthcare providers (general practitioners, psychotherapeutic practices, etc.).

The other key english resource is „**Finding ways out of Loneliness**“ (Non-German speaking in Germany) - Focus on offers in different languages for expats and migrants.

Other resources on loneliness, connection building and friendship are all in German.