There is little doubt that positive peer relations impact on a child’s academic success, emotional well-being and state of mind. A big claim but the truth is that we tend to reflect the views and attitudes of our peer groups. It is hugely beneficial if a child’s predominant peer group cares for him, has positive expectations about the future and places high value on helping others as well as personal improvement.

Children’s peer groupings can be quite complex and dynamic. Most children will have a prime peer group consisting of between two and up to five others. These children are generally referred to as best friends, buddies or best mates. These social relationships are often formed early in children’s lives and are strengthened by shared school experiences, extracurricular or informal activities.

Children also have one or two secondary peer groups, which can be larger and generally reflect shared interests or shared best friends. When these groups contain children from different grades and even different schools they have an insulating effect if adverse events happen and also offer exposure to wider peer groups.

Being a member of a positive peer group lessens the likelihood of a child being bullied or harassed. Children in positive peer groups look out for each other and don’t engage in such behaviours, whether verbal or physical, themselves. Having friends who care also lessens the impact of bullying and helps prevent it from impacting on other areas of a child’s life.

Parents and teachers can encourage positive peer groups to form and emerge by providing opportunities for children to mix and share experiences, drawing children’s attention to friendship behaviours and focusing on socialisation rather than achievement when they play sport or are involved in creative or group activities.

In this achievement-oriented society we need to value positive peer relationships and ensure that they are not ignored or undervalued in our efforts to provide the best possible start for our children.

There are no images or tables in this document.