

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS IN SUPPORT OF  
FRIENDSHIPS BETWEEN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT  
DISABILITIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

HEIDI LYNETTE HOLLINGSWORTH: Beliefs and Practices of Parents and Teachers in Support of Friendships between Preschool Children with and without Disabilities  
(Under the direction of Virginia Buysse, Ph.D.)

This qualitative study investigated the practices and beliefs of parents and teachers with regard to the support of reciprocal friendship dyads including one child with special needs (SN) and one typically developing (TD) child. The study addressed the following research questions through interviews completed by parents and teachers of preschool age children: (a) How do parents and teachers describe the nature and importance of the friendship between the SN child and the TD child? (b) What strategies do parents and teachers use to facilitate the SN-TD friendship, and what factors affect their use of these strategies? (c) What are the similarities and differences between parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the support of SN-TD friendships? and (d) What types of communication – if any – occur between parents and teachers about these friendships? Parents and teachers reported holding similar beliefs about the nature and importance of friendships, describing most of these preschool friendships as harmonious: characterized by children showing affection, playing well together, wanting to be together, talking about each other, having commonalities (e.g., similar interests), and being compatible (e.g., met each others' needs). The majority of parents and teachers believed specific friendships between two children were important because of the emotional benefits they provided children. Parents and teachers reported using a variety of strategies to help these preschool children

become and stay friends, including general strategies that set up the social environment such as encouraging children's social skills in general, strategies that provided opportunities for the two friends to play together such as assigning friends to the same center or arranging playdates, and strategies that helped the friends interact and play with each other such as helping the friends resolve conflicts. Most parents and teachers communicated with each other through informal conversation (and preferred to communicate informally) on a variety of topics relating to specific friendships and most reported being satisfied with this parent-teacher communication. Implications for practice include increasing parent and teacher awareness of the importance of friendship and strategies for promoting friendship.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	xii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xiii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW .....	1
Importance of Friendships .....	1
Friendships and School Success .....	2
Friendships and Social Interactions .....	3
Friendships and Future Development .....	6
Friendship Dyads Involving Children with Disabilities .....	7
Lack of Research .....	10
Defining and Identifying Preschool Friendships .....	11
Parent or Teacher Report .....	11
Sociometrics .....	12
Observation .....	14
Social Competence .....	15
Parental Support of Children’s Friendships .....	16
Parent Beliefs .....	16
Parent Practices .....	17
Childcare and Inclusion .....	20

Teacher Support of Children’s Friendships .....	21
Teacher Beliefs .....	21
Teacher Practices .....	23
Parent-Teacher Communication.....	25
Summary .....	26
Models of Parent and Teacher Influence on Children’s Social Development.....	27
Conceptual Model for this Study.....	29
Research Questions.....	30
II. METHOD.....	30
Overview of Study Design.....	33
Participants.....	33
Demographic Information.....	34
Parent and Teacher Characteristics .....	34
Child Characteristics .....	36
Recruitment and Gathering of Initial Information.....	41
Instrumentation.....	45
Semi-Structured Interviews.....	45
Questionnaires .....	46
Social Skills Rating System (SSRS).....	47
ABILITIES Index .....	48
Piloting the Procedures .....	48
Data Management and Collection .....	49
Data Analysis .....	49

Thematic Analysis .....	50
Analysis of Questionnaires.....	56
Processes for Validating Findings .....	57
III. RESULTS .....	59
Beliefs about the Nature and Importance of Preschool SN-TD Friendships .....	59
Parent Beliefs.....	60
Parent Beliefs Theme 1: Most Friendships Were Harmonious .....	62
Parent Beliefs Theme 2: A Few Friendships Were Inconsistent or Conflicted.....	65
Parent Beliefs Theme 3: Importance of Friendships.....	65
Summary.....	69
Teacher Beliefs .....	69
Teacher Beliefs Theme 1: Most Friendships Were Harmonious.....	71
Teacher Beliefs Theme 2: A Few Friendships Were Inconsistent or Conflicted.....	73
Teacher Beliefs Theme 3: Importance of Friendships .....	74
Summary.....	76
Comparison of Parent and Teacher Beliefs.....	76
Practices used to Support Preschool SN-TD Friendships.....	77
Parent Practices.....	77
Parent Practices Theme 1: Social Environment Practices .....	80
Parent Practices Theme 2: Providing Opportunities for Dyadic Interactions.....	82
Parent Practices Theme 3: Facilitating Dyadic Interactions or Play.....	84

Teacher-Reported Parent Practices .....	86
Factors Affecting Parent Use of Practices .....	86
Summary .....	89
Teacher Practices .....	89
Teacher Practices Theme 1: Social Environment Practices .....	92
Teacher Practices Theme 2: Providing Opportunities for Dyadic Interactions.....	94
Teacher Practices Theme 3: Facilitating Dyadic Interactions or Play .....	96
Parent-Reported Teacher Practices .....	99
Factors Affecting Teacher Use of Practices .....	99
Summary .....	102
Comparison of Parent and Teacher Practices.....	102
Questionnaire Results .....	103
Parent-Teacher Communication about Preschool SN-TD Friendships .....	105
Parent-Reported Communication .....	105
Parent Communication Theme 1: Teachers gave Parents Information Relating to Specific Friendships.....	107
Parent Communication Theme 2: Parents asked for or gave Teachers Information Relating to Specific Friendships .....	109
Parent Communication Theme 3: Barriers to Communication and Reasons for Lack of Communication .....	111
Comparison of SN and TD Parents' Communication.....	112
Summary .....	114
Teacher-Reported Communication.....	115
Teacher Communication Theme 1: Teachers gave Parents	

Information Relating to Specific Friendships .....	116
Teacher Communication Theme 2: Parents asked for or gave Teachers Information Relating to Specific Friendships .....	119
Teacher Communication Theme 3: Barriers to Communication and Reasons for Lack of Communication .....	121
Comparison of Teacher Communication with SN and TD Parents .....	122
Summary .....	124
Member Checks.....	124
IV. DISCUSSION .....	125
Linking Results with the Literature .....	126
Parent and Teacher Beliefs about the Nature and Importance of Friendships .....	126
Parent and Teacher Practices to Support Friendships.....	129
Parent Practices .....	129
Teacher Practices .....	131
Parent-Teacher Communication about Friendships.....	138
Implications for Practice.....	141
Study Limitations .....	143
Future Research Directions.....	144
APPENDIX A: Friendship Form.....	147
APPENDIX B: Interview Protocols.....	149
Protocol for Interview with Parents.....	150
Protocol for Interview with Teachers.....	155
APPENDIX C: Questionnaires.....	161

Questionnaire for Parents .....	162
Questionnaire for Teachers .....	165
APPENDIX D: Member Check .....	168
Letter to Participants.....	169
Summary of Results .....	170
REFERENCES .....	171

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Parent and Teacher Characteristics .....	35
2.2 Child Characteristics .....	36
2.3 Friendship Networks .....	37
2.4 Teacher Ratings of Social Skill and Problem Behavior Levels.....	39
2.5 Severity of Disability .....	39
2.6 Characteristics of Children in each Dyad.....	40
3.1 Parent Beliefs.....	57
3.2 Teacher Beliefs .....	66
3.3 Parent Practices.....	75
3.4 Teacher Practices .....	87
3.5 Mean Response to Questionnaire Items on a Four Point Scale (Never, Rarely, Occasionally, or Frequently).....	100
3.6 Parent-Reported Communication.....	103
3.7 Teacher-Reported Communication .....	112

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Conceptual Model for this Study .....	30

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research indicates that children's early friendships are important for success in school as well as later in life (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). This paper provides a review of the literature regarding preschool friendships and describes a study that investigated what parents and teachers believe about preschool friendships as well as what parents and teachers do to support such friendships. The significance of this topic is described through a literature review documenting: (a) the importance of friendships; (b) interest in friendship dyads including children with and without disabilities; (c) a lack of research on how to promote friendships; (d) how preschool friendships are defined and identified; (e) social competence as a broader construct including friendship; (f) what parents believe and do in support of preschool friendships; (g) increased use of childcare, and more inclusive preschools; (h) what teachers believe and do in support of friendships; and (i) parent-teacher communication around preschool friendships. Following the review of literature, models of parent and teacher influence on children's social development are described, and a conceptual model for this study is presented. Research questions addressed by this study are presented in the final section of this chapter.

#### **Importance of Friendships**

Friendships are important for young children for a number of reasons. This section describes research suggesting the importance of friendships for children's success in school,

for facilitating children's social interactions, and for children's future development.

### *Friendships and School Success*

A link between early friendships and school success is suggested in research findings that children who form more friendships tend to perform better in school (Ladd, 1990). Specifically, Ladd (1990) found that the number of new friendships kindergarten children formed during the first two months of school predicted gains in school performance over the course of the school year. Furthermore, children with early friendships that were maintained tended to show better adjustment to school in terms of more positive school perceptions (Ladd, 1990). Having friends is a protective factor for children at risk for early school failure according to a monograph by the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network ([FAN], 2001). The monograph summarizes research on social and emotional factors relating to school outcomes. It is not yet clear from the research exactly how such factors protect children from early school failure (FAN). Research also indicates a link between friendship and literacy learning (Pellegrini, Galda, Bartini, & Charak, 1998). Pellegrini and colleagues studied kindergarten children in friend and nonfriend dyads and found that friends generated more literate language than nonfriends, and that use of literate language was associated with school-based literacy measures. In a review of research on peer relationships in early and middle childhood, Ladd (1988) noted that friends can reduce children's stress in strange situations, and reviews by Hartup (1996) and Ladd and Coleman (1993) suggest that friends help children make transitions, for example, to kindergarten. Taken together, these studies present a picture of friendships as important for school success in that children with friends make better transitions to school, have better perceptions of school, and perform better in school, for example, with regard to literacy learning.

### *Friendships and Social Interactions*

Friendships matter for children because friendships are a source of socialization (Ladd & Coleman, 1993). In a meta-analytic review of the friendships of preschoolers and school aged children, Newcomb and Bagwell (1995) concluded that compared to nonfriends, friends exhibit “significantly greater amounts of social contact, talking, cooperation, and positive affect” (p. 330), and that friends are more concerned with resolution of conflict than are nonfriends. Following are examples of research studies documenting the importance of friendships for children’s social interactions.

Several studies suggest that friendships facilitate increased peer interactions. Hinde, Titmus, Easton, and Tamplin, (1985) conducted an observational study of preschoolers. Their findings indicated that interaction frequency was significantly higher for best friends than for other types of associates, and that rate of interactions was positively correlated with number of close friends (i.e., children with more friends were more sociable generally). Results of two studies of a population of Head Start children indicated that children in reciprocal friendship dyads initiated interactions with peers significantly more frequently than did those in non-reciprocal dyads (Vaughn et al., 2000; Vaughn, Colvin, Azria, Caya, & Krzysik, 2001).

Studies suggest that friendships are associated not only with increased peer interactions, but also with peer interactions of higher quality. George and Krantz (1981) studied the conversations of two types of preschool dyads: preferred play partner dyads, and nonpreferred play partner dyads. Compared with children in nonpreferred dyads, children in preferred dyads exhibited significantly more (a) talking, (b) eliciting of relevant responses, (c) conversations involving two or more utterances, (d) talking with a shared visual focus,

and (e) appropriate behaviors in response to utterances. “Therefore, in a given period of time, preferred partners were more successful in sharing information, sustaining each other’s attention, and influencing each other’s behavior” (George & Krantz, p. 252). In another study, Slomkowski and Dunn (1996) assessed children’s social understanding through false-belief, affective labeling, and perspective-taking tasks at 40 months, and their connected communication with friends at 47 months. Results of the study indicated that friend dyads exhibited much connected conversation, but that there was variability in that some friend dyads exhibited lengthy conversations while others exhibited shorter conversations. Howes (1983) studied children with and without emotional disturbances – in an outpatient program for children with emotional disturbances, and in community-based child care programs, respectively – over the course of a school year. By the final observation of the study, dyadic interactions were more complex for maintained and sporadic friends than for nonfriends. For example, friends exhibited increased time in reciprocal play and increased time exchanging positive affect compared to nonfriends. Taken together, these studies describe an association between preschool friendships and increased quantity and quality of social interactions in terms of complexity of interactions, not limited to – but including – conversations. The benefit of increased quality of interactions may be especially evident in friendships that endure over some time.

Children in dyadic friendships have been found to exhibit emotional responsiveness and prosocial behaviors (Costin & Jones, 1992). Costin and Jones presented preschool children with 8 hypothetical puppet scenarios in which their friend or acquaintance faced something anger- or fear-provoking. Children presented with a hypothetical situation involving a friend were significantly more likely to respond with sympathy than were

children presented with a hypothetical situation involving an acquaintance. Furthermore, children in the friend condition were significantly more likely to propose interventions to alter the child's state of fear or anger than were children in the acquaintance condition. Guralnick, Gottman, and Hammond (1996) also reported that typically developing preschoolers with friends in their study were significantly more likely to have higher positive social behavior scores than children without friends. Further evidence of the prosocial behaviors of preschool children with friends is provided by Farver and Branstetter (1994) in their study of preschool age children in child care programs. The researchers observed children's crying events and their peers' responses. Children with one or more friends responded prosocially to crying peers' distress significantly more often than did children without friends. (Components of prosocial response in this study included approaching, commenting, comforting, and taking action to resolve conflict.) In sum, children with friends appear to exhibit more prosocial behaviors than children without friends.

Evidence suggests that preschool children's responses to conflict differ according to friendship status. Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, and Eastenson (1988) observed conflicts that occurred in preschool classrooms during free play. Results found included the following: (a) conflicts between friends were less intense than those between nonfriends, (b) friends were more likely to disengage from conflicts – and thus achieve equality in resolutions – than were nonfriends, and (c) friends were significantly more likely to remain together following the conflict than were nonfriends. Vespo and Caplan (1993) also studied naturally occurring conflicts in preschool settings and found that children were significantly more likely to use conciliatory gestures to resolve conflicts with friends than with acquaintances, and conciliatory gestures were more likely than yielding to lead to peaceful outcomes thus

allowing the children to continue interacting following the conflict. Pellegrini and colleagues (1998) found in their study of kindergarteners that friends generated more resolutions to conflicts and resolved conflicts more efficiently than did nonfriends. These findings highlight the benefits of friendship for children's developing conflict resolution skills.

This section reviewed research suggesting that friendships are associated with increases in quantity and quality of peer social interactions. There is evidence that preschool age children with friends (compared to peers without friends) exhibit increased positive and prosocial behaviors, including responding to peers in distress and resolving conflicts. It is important to note that although the research documents an association between friendship and various benefits for children, correlational research cannot be interpreted as proving that friendship is the causal factor leading to these benefits.

### *Friendships and Future Development*

Many early childhood educators and researchers are particularly interested in learning about the friendships of very young children and the influence of those friendships on children's developmental trajectories. Forming friendships has recently been emphasized as an essential task in early child development by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000; Fenichel, 2001). Early friendships help children learn about establishing and maintaining relationships (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine), and children's experiences with peers can indeed influence children's adjustment (for a review, see Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995). In a review of research on resilience, Werner (2000) includes friendship as a protective factor in that children who exhibit resilience in the face of adversity tend to have at least one close friend. As documented in the previous section, there are many benefits associated with having friends, even at a young age, and

these benefits can influence children's early and future development. The following sections describe some of these influences on development.

### **Friendship Dyads Involving Children with Disabilities**

Preschool friendships occur between typically developing children, between children with disabilities, and between typically developing children and children with disabilities. Friendship dyads including children with disabilities are of particular interest to researchers because of the potential for friendships to enhance these children's development (e.g., social and communicative development), and because these children may be at risk for having (a) fewer friends than typically developing children, and (b) friendships that are shorter in duration than those of their typically developing peers.

Evidence exists pointing to the developmental benefits of friendships for children with disabilities in that particular social behaviors have been found to be associated with friendships. Field (1984) studied preschoolers with and without disabilities in daycare settings and found that children with disabilities who had friends were more verbal, were observed laughing more, and were "generally more assertive in initiating, leading, and terminating play interactions" (p. 158) than children with disabilities with no friends. On the other hand the researcher found that children with disabilities with no friends wandered around more and watched peers and teachers more than did those children with friends. Guralnick and Groom (1988) studied children with and without developmental delays and noted tendencies for children with friends in their study to engage in group play more, involve adults less, and exhibit more positive behaviors and less negative behaviors than children without friends. In a study of preschoolers with disabilities – such as speech/language impairments, autism, and developmental delays – Buysse (1993) reported

children with friends to have more optimal scores in the following areas of behavioral characteristics: “activity level, reactivity, goal-directedness, frustration, attention span, and responsiveness to adults” (p. 387) than children with no friends. Buysse also found that children with friends tended to have more optimal scores on “social orientation, participation, motivation, and endurance” (p. 388). Given the research documenting the developmental benefits associated with friendships, it may be especially important for a child with disabilities to have friends, including typically developing friends.

However, children with disabilities appear to be at a disadvantage compared to their peers with regard to number of friendships. Buysse, Goldman, and Skinner (2002) asked teachers to complete a questionnaire reporting the playmates and special friends of 213 typically developing children and 120 children with disabilities. Results indicated that children with disabilities were reported to have significantly fewer friends than typically developing children. A related finding was that the likelihood of having no friends was significantly higher for children with disabilities than for typically developing children in the sample. Observational methodology was utilized in Howes’ (1983) study of children with and without emotional disturbances. Results indicated that preschool age children with emotional disturbances were significantly less likely to have two or more friends than preschool age children without emotional disturbances. Guralnick, Gottman, and Hammond (1996) studied 126 preschool age children, including 60 typically developing children and 66 children with disabilities (communication disorders and developmental delays). Analysis of videotaped observations yielded results indicating that the fewest friendships were formed by children with developmental delays. In their study employing the same videotaped observation technique, Guralnick and Groom (1988) found that only two of the 16 children

with mild developmental delays in the sample formed friendships.

The results of the latter two studies are limited in their generalizability in that the researchers included only boys and only Caucasians in their samples. Furthermore, the studies were conducted in a laboratory classroom at a university and the children did not know each other before being placed in the research playgroups. However, when considered along with the studies by Buysse (1993) and Buysse and colleagues (2002) that included boys and girls of various ethnic backgrounds in community based childcare and preschool programs, the results do suggest that children with disabilities tend to form fewer friendships than their typically developing peers.

One study found that children with disabilities did not differ significantly from typically developing peers with regard to incidence of friendships. Lederberg, Rosenblatt, Vandell, and Chapin (1987) used observational methodology to study preschoolers without disabilities in a Head Start center and children with hearing impairment in a specialized program and found that both groups of children were similar in number of long-term, temporary, and nonfriend relationships.

Some studies have found preschool friendships for children with disabilities to be remarkably stable. In Buysse's (1993) study, parents and teachers were asked to report duration of the children's friendships. The average duration of friendships was 1.7 years according to parent reports, and .73 years according to teacher reports. For the 230 preschool friendships identified by teacher reports in another study, the average length of friendship was 15.83 months (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2003). However, these researchers found that disability status was significantly related to duration of friendships: Longer friendships were found for dyads involving two typically developing children than for dyads including

either two children with disabilities, or one typically developing child and one child with a disability. In her study, Howes (1983) defined maintained friendships as those formed during the early observations and maintained throughout the remainder of the study. Study results indicated that children with emotional disturbances did not form maintained friendships. Likewise, Lederberg and colleagues (1987) found that hearing children's long-term friendships tended to be maintained continuously, whereas long-term friendships of children with hearing impairment tended to resume after sporadic disruptions. The same researchers also found that long-term friends were significantly more likely to exhibit a higher level of peer play than nonfriends or temporary friends, providing support for the idea that enduring friendships are associated with increased quality of interactions. These studies provide documentation suggesting that although preschool friendships may be stable across some time, friendships including children with disabilities may not endure as long as friendships including typically developing children only. This is of concern given the benefits of enduring friendships suggested by the research.

Given the risks for children with disabilities in terms of increased likelihood of having fewer or no friends, and of having shorter friendships compared to typically developing peers, it is important to research how to help children with disabilities form and maintain friendships. There may be strategies that can help children with and without disabilities develop and maintain friendships at an early age. This study investigated such strategies.

### **Lack of Research**

Despite the importance of children's friendships suggested by research, little is known about how friendships are promoted (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). Most past

research on friendships has been conducted with typically developing children. Moreover, much of the research on friendships has been conducted with school aged children and adults, rather than preschoolers. The study of preschool friendships is critical in that understanding early relationships may help us learn how to promote children's friendships and prevent future socialization problems for children; "Problematic patterns of social interaction can be discerned well before school entry" (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000, p. 165). Indeed, according to a number of reviews, children who show difficulties with peer relations early in life are at risk for social adjustment problems later (Bukowski & Sandberg, 1999; Ladd, 1988; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Perhaps this is because once established, peer adjustment problems are likely to continue and to negatively affect children's life trajectories (see review by Parker et al., 1995).

### **Defining and Identifying Preschool Friendships**

Friendship has been defined as a reciprocated relationship that is voluntary and based on affection (Asher et al., 1996; Parker et al., 1995; Rubin et al., 1998). This dyadic construct that involves "reciprocity of affection" (Asher et al., p. 367) is not always easy to identify and measure in young children. Common methods researchers use to identify preschool friendships include (a) asking parents or teachers to report the names of children's friends, (b) asking children who they like, and (c) observing children to measure their proximity to each other and aspects of the social interactions between them (Hartup, 1996). These methods are described in the following paragraphs.

#### ***Parent or Teacher Report***

In the first method, parents or teachers or both are asked to name their children's best friend(s) or preferred playmate(s). The information may be requested in an interview or on a

questionnaire. An example of a study utilizing teacher report to identify young children's friendships is that of Buysse and colleagues (2002). These researchers used a structured interview procedure during which preschool teachers completed the Playmates and Friends Questionnaire for Teachers (Goldman, Buysse, & Carr, 1997). Buysse, Nabors, Skinner, and Keyes (1997) suggested that playmate preference may be how young children define friends: "A child who is selected as a preferred playmate is liked and labeled a friend" (p. 15). Buysse et al. (2002) later suggested that although playmate preferences may be less stable than friendships, access to playmates may be important for ensuing development of friendships.

### *Sociometrics*

The second method of identifying friendships uses sociometrics. Sociometric procedures typically use individual photographs of all members of one classroom and ask children to name their friend(s) or to name who they like and dislike. An example of a study utilizing sociometric methods is that of Vaughn and colleagues (2000). The researchers reported asking Head Start students to nominate their preferred peers using individual pictures of classmates. The researchers then asked the children to rate peers by sorting pictures of classmates into three containers according to the degree to which they liked to play with each peer. Finally, children were asked to select their preferred peers from pictures of pairs of classmates. Reciprocal friendships were identified as those children who chose each other in the top 20% of their preferred peers on the individual *or* paired-comparison task *and* gave each other the highest playmate rating.

Sociometric procedures are inexpensive and easy to use to identify friendships, but are not problem-free (Parker et al., 1995), and there is considerable debate concerning the accuracy of self-reported information and appropriateness of using sociometrics in early

childhood (Hartup, 1996; Ladd & Coleman, 1993). There is also concern that children with disabilities in particular may not be able to complete sociometric tasks. Buysse et al. (1997) reported that preschoolers with cognitive delays were not included in the sociometric rating task in their study because preliminary field work had determined that children with cognitive delays did not understand the task and did not differentiate between classmates. Vaughn and colleagues (2001) voiced the concern that some children's sociometric nominations may represent a "wish list of peers they would like as friends rather than an indication of established relationships" (p. 873). Parker and colleagues cautioned researchers to verify reciprocity; that is, count only friendship dyads in which both children nominate each other. Other problems with sociometric procedures include (a) asking children to nominate a specific number of friends, say three, because this could under- or over-estimate the children's actual number of friends, and (b) limiting the number of possible nominations by collecting data only within the early childhood classroom because friendships may occur in other settings (Rubin et al., 1998). Furthermore, Hartup (1996) asserted that labeling an individual as a friend or nonfriend probably does not reflect the reality that friendships may be described according to a continuum from best friend to nonfriend. In sum, researchers have noted a number of concerns relating to the use of sociometrics with young children with and without disabilities.

It is important to note that sociometric procedures are also used to provide a measure of children's peer acceptance – sometimes called peer or social status – within a group. This status is defined by how well each child is liked (popular), disliked (rejected), both liked and disliked (average or controversial), or neither liked nor disliked (neglected) by the members of the group (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Ladd, 1988). Researchers have stated that

peer acceptance and friendship are related, but do not overlap (Asher et al., 1996; Lindsey, 2002). For example, Walden, Lemerise, and Smith (1999) explained that even though preschool children with higher peer acceptance scores were more likely to have friendships, not all highly-accepted children in their study had a reciprocal friend and some children with low acceptance scores did have a reciprocal friend. Likewise, most rejected preschool children in a study by Rizzo (1988) had one or more friends. Numerous studies have been conducted on children's peer acceptance. However, the focus of this study is on friendship, based on the dyadic definition provided above, rather than on peer acceptance.

### ***Observation***

In the final method for identifying and measuring friendships, observational data are used. When observations are used to identify preschool friendships, some researchers use time sampling techniques and record proximity of children to each other or the nature of interactions occurring. One problem associated with using this method could be trying to ensure that observations during particular time segments are representative of typical interactions. Due to their brevity, glimpses of interaction patterns allowed by observational measures are insufficient for the study of enduring friendships (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). An example of a study utilizing observational methodology to identify young children's friendships is that of Guralnick and colleagues (1996). The researchers used videotaped observations of preschoolers to code the number and nature of interactions occurring during 10-second intervals. The researchers then defined reciprocal friendship dyads as those for whom at least 33% of the children's total positive social interactions occurred with each other.

Previous studies employing a combination of methods to identify friendship dyads

have documented some overlap between observational methodology and teacher or parent report of friendships. In the study by Howes (1983), 97% of the friendship dyads identified by using observational methodology to collect social behavior data were confirmed by teacher ratings as best or second-best friendships. Furthermore, Hinde, Titmus, Easton, and Tamplin (1985) found that interviews with mothers validated the researchers' identification of preschool children's friendships using observations of time children spent interacting together. However, other studies have found less congruent results when using different methods of identifying friendships of young children. Buysse et al. (1997) used teacher report and child sociometric ratings to identify children's preferred playmates. Their findings indicated that teacher and child reports did not overlap greatly. The researchers suggested using more than just teacher ratings in future studies. Some researchers have used a variety of measures including teacher and peer ratings to tap into different aspects of children's social competence (e.g., Odom et al., 1999). Many of the studies reviewed here used a combination of the above methods for identifying preschool friendships.

Given the concerns noted regarding use of sociometric procedures with young children, and evidence that parents and teachers do often report the same friendships identified by observational methods, friendship dyads were identified by teacher report and parent confirmation in this study.

### **Social Competence**

Social competence is a broader construct that is usually defined as including popularity or peer status as well as friendship (Katz & McClellan, 1997). The specific behavior of children in peer interactions is part of the conceptualization of social competence and research has indicated that there is a relationship between early problems with peer

relationships and negative outcomes later in life (Ladd & Coleman, 1993; Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992). Although the focus of this dissertation study is on friendships, there has been more research on social competence than on friendships. Research on social competence is therefore also referred to when relevant to this study.

### **Parental Support of Children's Friendships**

This dissertation study investigated parent support of children's friendships. Prior research on parent beliefs and practices regarding preschool friendships is described in the following sections, though there is little existing research on these topics.

#### ***Parent Beliefs***

“Beliefs are mental constructions imbued with cultural and personal meaning” (Sigel & Kim, 1996, p. 87), and as such, may vary considerably from parent to parent. Parents' ideas about children and parenting may be influenced by the culture in which parents live and their parenting experiences (Goodnow, 1985). In their chapter, Mills and Rubin (1993) suggested that parents' caregiving ideas and information-processing in caregiving situations are affected by their “internal working models of attachment caregiving” (p. 115), and that these models affect children's social competence with peers. The latter authors asserted that mothers with the following ideas tend to exhibit involved, responsive, and sensitive behaviors, and to have socially competent children: (a) belief in the importance of social competence, (b) belief in the importance of children's autonomous learning, and (c) belief that negative social behaviors in their children may be attributed to external – rather than internal – factors. In their review, Ladd and Pettit (2002) noted that more research is needed regarding direction of effect. For example, research is needed to answer the question: Do parental beliefs influence childrearing with regard to socializing their children, or do

children's social abilities influence their parents' childrearing beliefs?

A recent qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interview methodology reported parent beliefs regarding the importance of, and formation and maintenance of preschool friendships (Rhodes, 2002). Participants in Rhodes' study included parents of typically developing (TD) children and parents of children with special needs (SN). Results indicated that most parents placed high value on friendships for their preschool children for the current and future functions that friendships serve (e.g., as a context for development of social skills). Results also indicated most parents believed that commonalities (such as common interests) led to formation of friendships, and that common interests and affection were among the reasons that friendships endure. Interestingly, several parents reported the belief that their children's friendships had formed due to time spent together in the same daycare or preschool. However, teacher effort as important in maintenance of friendships did not emerge as a prevalent response. Rhodes' research suggested that parents do believe that shared interests and shared histories in preschool settings may contribute to friendship formation, but her research did not provide evidence that parents necessarily feel that teachers play an important role in facilitating friendship formation.

### ***Parent Practices***

With regard to parent practices, Rhodes' (2002) investigation involving families of children between the ages of 3½ and 5½ reported parents as using a number of practices to support preschool friendships. Parent practices included the following: providing opportunities for interactions, social coaching, acting as an interactive partner in interactions, reading books on the topic of friendship, and acting as a social model. Parents of children with disabilities in particular reported certain factors as affecting their use of strategies:

Parents wanted their children with disabilities to have friends and they believed that parental strategies were necessary in order to make that happen. Rhodes' research suggested that parents do employ a number of strategies in support of preschool friendships, and that disability status may be one factor affecting parents' use of strategies.

Rubin and Sloman (1984) suggested that parental efforts to influence their children's relationships are affected by the parents' values regarding children's friendships (e.g., how important they feel friendships are for their children, and how much control they think they should exert over their children's social relationships). The latter authors used existing literature as well as their own data from interviews with parents of 4- and 5-year-olds to determine five modes of parental influence on children's friendships. First, parents set the stage for friendships by choosing a neighborhood, school or daycare, and through the parents' own choice of associations. Second, parents arrange social contacts – such as playdates – for children. Third, parents coach children by providing advice about the *who* and *how* of friendships. Fourth, parents provide models of social relationships, in that the behaviors and strategies parents use are often adopted by their children. Fifth, parents influence children's friendships by providing a home base in which secure parent-child relationships facilitate children's readiness for peer relationships.

More recently, other researchers have described parental practices influencing children's peer relations that are similar to those described in the preceding paragraph. Ladd, Profilet, and Hart (1992) and Ladd and Pettit (2002) characterized parental influences on children's peer relations as management, and reviewed the literature suggesting that many parents do indeed manage their children's peer relations. According to Ladd and colleagues (1992; 2002), parents manage children's peer relations by creating formal and informal

opportunities for peer contact (childcare or preschool and community activities, playgroups, and choice of neighborhood), and by supervising children's interactions. Similarly, in their review of the literature, Ladd, LeSieur, and Profilet (1993) described four categories of direct parental influence on children's peer relations in which parents served as (a) designers of the environment in which children have contact with or access to peers, (b) mediators of peer contacts, (c) supervisors of children's peer interactions, and (d) consultants for children in giving advice about peer relationships. Following are descriptions of two studies investigating aspects of parental influence on children's relations with peers.

Bhavnagri and Parke (1991) conducted research in which 72 children (mean age = 3 years, 5 months) were observed in a laboratory setting. Each child was observed with his or her mother, father, and an unfamiliar child. During the observations, parents were asked to remain passive (condition A) or to help the children play together (condition B) and both conditions were included in the following research design: ABABA. Results of the study indicated that active parental supervision facilitated children's peer interactions, but that only the younger children in the study benefited clearly from parental supervision. The researchers suggested supervision as one of the matrix of strategies used by parents to facilitate their children's peer relationships, especially for young children.

Ladd and Golter (1988) used multiple methods – including, among others, interviews, observations, and sociometric procedures – to investigate the relationship between parents' management of peer relations and their children's social competence in preschool and kindergarten. Results indicated that indirect monitoring by parents of children's social interactions with peers was related to children's social competence in school. However, direct monitoring by parents was associated with social maladjustment. Further results

indicated that some parents initiated peer contacts for their children and others did not. Parents who arranged peer contacts for their children had children with a larger network of playmates and more consistent playmates in non-school settings, but not necessarily a higher number of peer contacts. The authors suggested that “parents who foster continuity in children’s peer contacts may provide a context that allows children to develop and master important social skills” (p. 116). This underscores the potential importance of the following aspects of supporting preschool friendships that were investigated in this study: home-school continuity and communication.

### **Childcare and Inclusion**

Children are now in contact with peers in childcare at an early age and often for large amounts of time (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000) because many mothers work and because parents enroll their children in programs to increase children’s preparedness for school (Ladd & Coleman, 1993). Furthermore, many preschool classrooms include children with and without disabilities as a result of policies promoting inclusion. Guralnick (1999) suggested that inclusive classroom environments can enhance the social integration of children with and without disabilities: “One expectation of inclusive practices is that meaningful social relationships will form between children with and without special needs as they become familiar with each other in early childhood settings” (p. 70). Given the increased exposure to peers (with and without disabilities) in childcare and preschool programs, it is important to increase our understanding of friendship dyads including typically developing children and children with disabilities. In child care and preschool classrooms, teachers play an important role in helping children develop and maintain early relationships.

## **Teacher Support of Children's Friendships**

Research on teacher support of preschool friendships is scarce. Most of the literature is in the form of classroom guides for teachers, rather than research. Furthermore, most of the literature focuses on the broader construct of social competence, rather than friendship.

### ***Teacher Beliefs***

It is important to research teacher beliefs because beliefs can influence classroom practice (for a review of research on the interplay between beliefs and practices of teachers of school aged children, see Fang, 1996). Results of a qualitative research study involving observation of and interviews with kindergarten children and two teachers suggested that friendships between typically developing children and children considered to be at-risk were affected by classroom activities and environment, which were themselves affected by teacher beliefs (Pruitt, Hollums, & Wandry, 1996). For example, the teachers' philosophical beliefs concerning the purposes for kindergarten affected their activity choices: in one classroom, interactive and play activities were common, while in the other classroom, more school oriented activities dominated. More friendships between typically developing children and children at risk were maintained in the former than in the latter classroom. Although the research conducted by Pruitt and colleagues involved kindergarten teachers, it may be the case that preschool teachers' beliefs concerning the purposes for preschool likewise influence the activities they choose and the relationships that develop in their classrooms.

Another study investigated teacher beliefs on a larger scale. Kowalski, Pretti-Frontczak, and Johnson (2001) researched the beliefs of 470 preschool teachers including three groups of teachers: (a) Head Start, (b) public school preschool, and (c) preschool special education teachers. The teachers were asked to rate on a survey the importance of a

variety of developmental skills and abilities in the following three categories: (a) social-emotional, (b) language and literacy, and (c) early math. Teachers in all three groups rated social-emotional items significantly higher than language and literacy or early math items. The teachers' level of education correlated with beliefs of importance of social-emotional items. In other words, preschool teachers believed it is more important for preschool children to learn social-emotional skills and abilities than language and literacy or early math skills and abilities, and the higher the teacher's level of education, the higher the teacher rated social-emotional skills and abilities.

A recent qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews reported teacher beliefs and practices regarding promotion of preschoolers' social-emotional competence (Sparkman, 2003). Results of the study indicated that overall, beliefs were undeveloped and not easily articulated by the teachers. Teachers' responses indicated a belief that friendship and positive peer relations aspects of social-emotional competence were not easy to address with young children, particularly young children with disabilities. Furthermore, teacher responses suggested an understanding of friendship as everyone getting along, rather than as a dyadic, special relationship.

Kemple, Hysmith, and David (1996) investigated the beliefs of 22 preschool and kindergarten teachers regarding the promotion of peer social competence. Interview and questionnaire data revealed that teachers believed children's peer social competence to be important. For example, teachers were asked to report what they felt were the five goals that were most important for young children. All teachers who listed five goals included at least one social goal. Although academic goals were listed more frequently than social or emotional goals, academic goals were reported less frequently than social and emotional

goals summed. However, the data also revealed that teachers believed they had only a moderate amount of influence on children's peer social competence and did not perceive exerting that influence to be easy. Moreover, helping children make friends was the specific area in which teachers reported having the lowest influence, with the child's inherent nature reported by teachers as having the greatest influence. This is of concern because if teachers believe they have little influence, they may be unlikely to engage in practices aimed at helping children form friendships.

The studies reviewed suggest that although research on teacher beliefs indicates that teachers do assign importance to children's social development, teachers may believe they have little influence on children's social-emotional competence, particularly with regard to children's development of friendships.

### *Teacher Practices*

There is little research on preschool teachers' practices to support children's friendships. Several authors have suggested that early childhood teachers play an important role in creating opportunities for children to play together thus influencing their tendencies to interact with each other (Haring, 1992; Niffenegger & Willer, 1998; Sainato & Carta, 1992). Diamond (2001) proposed specifically that teachers can observe children's social interactions and then help structure composition of student groups for participation in activities in the classroom to ensure that all children have opportunities to be included in the group. Kemple and Hartle (1997) suggested that early childhood educators can foster the development of friendships for children with and without disabilities through direct and indirect strategies. An example of a direct strategy is helping students with conflict resolution. Examples of indirect strategies include provision of materials or activities that enhance interactions, and

provision of free-play time. However, there has been little empirical research on the role of the early childhood educator in facilitating preschool friendships.

Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog (1997) conducted a quantitative study investigating influences on preschoolers' competence. A scan sampling observational technique was used during periods of free play. Findings of the study revealed that increased presence of teachers was negatively related to children's social competence, but that optimal teacher involvement was positively related to children's social competence: "the data suggest that social competence is best when children play with greater peer presence and lesser teacher presence in combination with responsive, stimulating involvement from teachers when they are present" (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, p. 260). The latter results suggest that teachers do play a role in influencing young children's social-emotional development.

With regard to teacher practices, in Sparkman's (2003) investigation, preschool teachers reported using several practices relating to children's peer friendships. Teacher practices included the following: (a) placing a maximum on the number of children allowed to play in certain areas; (b) use of friendship stories, puppets, and role-play activities; (c) use of modeling, demonstrating, and prompting of social skills and play skills to promote friendship; and (d) allowing special friends to transition to the same classroom so that they would remain together. Other reported practices such as assigning children specific play partners and separating friends with the goal of all children playing together suggest the understanding noted above of friendship as everyone getting along, rather than as a dyadic, special relationship.

One research study focused on investigating the teacher's role in preschool friendships was located. Buysse et al. (2003) asked 45 general and special early childhood

educators to complete a questionnaire about children's playmates and friends, and about active and passive strategies that teachers used to facilitate friendships. Analyses of the questionnaires revealed that in general, teachers frequently employed strategies that did not interfere with children's friendship formation. Teachers were more likely to employ passive strategies such as allowing children to play together on their own, than active strategies such as helping to arrange for children to play together outside of the preschool setting. Another finding of this study was that teachers were significantly more likely to use active strategies to promote friendships if the friendship dyad included a child with a disability or two children with disabilities, than if both members were typically developing children. However, arranging for friends to play outside of the school setting was a strategy most teachers reported rarely or never using. The authors suggested that it may be especially important for teachers to share information about friendships formed in the preschool setting with parents when children with disabilities are involved: "The notion of home-school continuity to promote friendship formation may be particularly important for parents of young, pre-verbal children or children with language and cognitive delays who have difficulty communicating who their friends are and the activities and interests they share" (Buysse et al., p. 496).

The research studies described above document practices in which some teachers engage in support of children's friendships, and possible teacher influences on children's social competence. The studies do not document home-school continuity with regard to teacher and parent support of preschool friendships. Nor do the studies document communication between teachers and parents with regard to strategies used.

### **Parent-Teacher Communication**

This study documented parent-teacher communication around preschool friendships

between children with and without disabilities. No other studies focusing on parent-teacher communication with regard to friendships were located. Webster-Stratton (1999) described research aimed at increasing the social competence of aggressive children. Webster-Stratton asserted that (a) parent use of particular child management skills resulted in improved child outcomes in terms of increased prosocial behavior, and (b) preliminary data suggested parent and teacher use of a particular social skills program resulted in improved social outcomes for individual children as well as the classroom as a whole. Continuity of efforts at home and at school may also be important for supporting preschool friendships. Powell and Stremmel (1987) conducted a small scale interview study on the topic of parent-teacher interactions. Although their study was not focused on communication regarding friendships in particular, the authors noted that early childhood educators in their study indicated that they were comfortable talking with parents about child-related topics. However, despite theory advocating – and guides recommending – a collaborative partnership between teachers and parents, this may not be occurring in practice, and the view of reality “is one of child care programs and families functioning as relatively separate systems with minimal coordination” (Powell & Stremmel, p. 115). This study begins to fill a gap in the research by documenting parent-teacher communication regarding the preschool friendship dyads studied.

### **Summary**

According to the research cited above, parents and teachers do engage in a variety of practices in support of young children’s peer socialization, and parents’ and teachers’ ideas may be related to children’s social functioning. However, much of the research to date has focused on social competence or peer relations in general. Needed is research on parent and teacher beliefs and practices in support of reciprocal friendships in particular. Moreover, no

other studies were found documenting how parents and teachers support reciprocal friendships between children with and without disabilities in particular, or focusing on communication between parents and teachers on the topic of friendship. Thus, research is needed on home-school continuity in the use of strategies to support friendships, especially given increased enrollment of children with and without disabilities in childcare.

### **Models of Parent and Teacher Influence on Children's Social Development**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on models of parent and teacher influence on children's social development as well as on a model suggesting the importance of the combination of both parent and teacher influence. Following a description of these models, the conceptual model for this study is presented.

Parke and colleagues (2002) described the "Tripartite Model" (p. 159) of family contributions to children's social development as including (a) parent-child relationship and interactions; (b) parental advising, consulting, and instructing; and (c) parental management and supervision. With regard to the first component, the latter authors explained that quality of parent-child attachment has been related to quality of children's peer relationships, and that warm, sensitive styles of interaction – rather than controlling, intrusive styles – have been found to be related to positive social outcomes. In the second component, parents provide direct instruction on how to initiate and maintain social relationships. In the third component, parents influence children's peer relations through monitoring, play rules, arranging social contacts, and through the parents' own social networks. Similarly, Pettit and Mize (1993) proposed a model for understanding the socialization of peer competence in which "parenting style and content typically operate conjointly, such that children who are participants in warm, synchronous relationships with caretakers and who receive explicit

guidance on handling peer relationship issues are especially competent with peers” (p. 148). The latter models suggest the potential importance of parental contributions to the support of children’s friendships.

Guralnick, Neville, Connor, and Hammond (2003) described and tested a model of family influences on the peer social competence of preschoolers and kindergarteners with mild cognitive delays. For their path analysis evaluation of the model, assessments with children, maternal report on rating scales and other measures, and coded responses to interviews with mothers were used to determine significant direct paths between constructs in the model. Among the results were associations between higher parent stress and lower peer competence, higher child risk and lower peer competence, and mother endorsement of more controlling socialization strategies and lower peer competence. Interestingly, parent arrangement of play with peers was not found to be associated with peer competence. It should be noted, however, that the construct of parent arranging was measured with only one item. The authors also noted maternal report as a possible limitation and suggested that direct observations might be used in the future. The model evaluation makes an important contribution in examining child and parent influences on children’s competence with peers, and in focusing on young children with delays. Perhaps future research could propose for evaluation a similar model of teacher influences on children’s peer social competence.

Although no models outlining teacher influence on children’s friendship development in particular were located, the following model outlines teachers’ possible influences on the more general construct of social competence. Howes and James (2002) proposed a conceptual model of the processes of socialization within childcare and early childhood education in which three levels lead to the fourth and final level, which is the development of

children's social competence. In the first level of the model, children bring to childcare individual dispositions and relationship histories that affect how they will behave with a new caregiver. These dispositions and histories influence the second level of the model: the quality of the child-caregiver relationship and the interactions and relationships with peers. Moreover, the child-caregiver relationship influences peer relationships. In the third level of the model, the elements of the first two levels contribute to the "social and emotional climate" (p. 148) of the childcare setting. The model suggests the potential importance of teacher contributions to the support of children's friendships.

A final model suggests the importance of both parent and teacher influence on children's development. Bronfenbrenner (1986) asserted that development occurs in a variety of contexts. Bronfenbrenner described several research paradigms including mesosystem models in which the family is the main, but not the only, context for development, and processes occurring in different settings – for example, home and childcare or school – are not independent of one another. Bronfenbrenner's model suggests the potential importance of the continuity between parent and teacher contributions to the support of children's friendships.

### ***Conceptual Model for this Study***

The models described previously all contributed to the conceptual model for this dissertation study, illustrated in Figure 1.1. The purpose of the study was to explore the following components of the conceptual model: parent and teacher beliefs, strategies, and factors affecting the use of strategies. The dotted line between the sides of the model representing parents and teachers is intended to indicate that there may be similarities in parent and teacher beliefs and strategy use and that there may be communication between

parents and teachers with regard to preschool friendships. Determining the extent of such similarities and communication was also one of the purposes of this study.

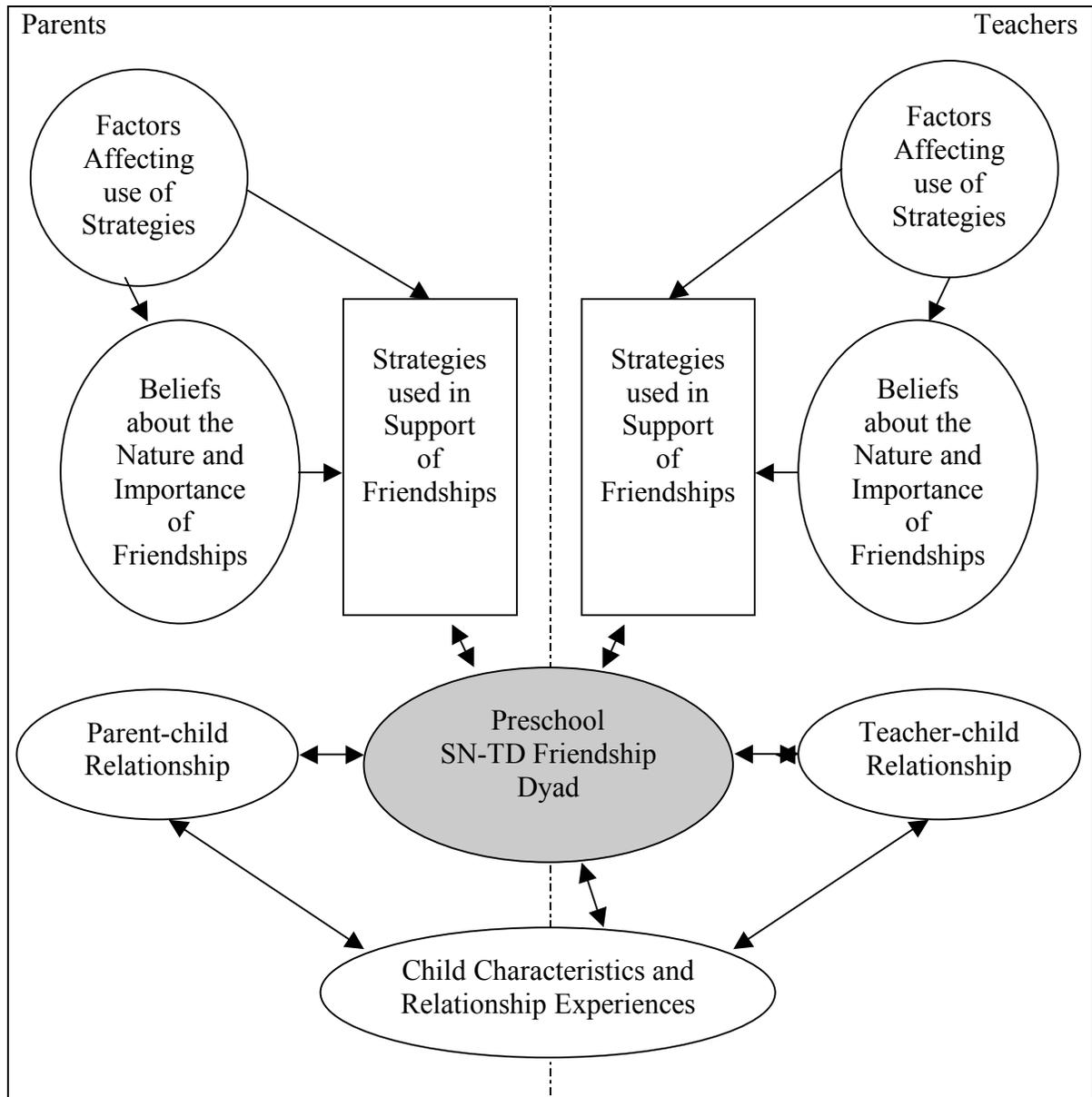


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Model for this Study

### Research Questions

This dissertation study examined parent and teacher beliefs and practices regarding the support of reciprocal SN-TD friendship dyads in preschool. In addition, the overlap

between parent and teacher beliefs and practices and the extent to which parents and teachers communicated with each other regarding preschool friendships was documented. This study was designed to advance current knowledge about and understanding of the support of young children's friendships through its investigation of specific beliefs and practices of parents and teachers. Much of the research that has been conducted to date has been descriptive or correlational in nature and has not provided information on causal influences on child outcomes (Ladd et al., 1992; Ladd et al., 1993). Whereas this study also provided descriptive data, it was intended to make crucial contributions to our understanding of the strategies used to support early friendships and the factors affecting use of those strategies so that future research may examine the influence of specific strategies on child outcomes.

Although there has been research examining parent influences on children's social competence, similar research examining teacher influences is limited. Katz and McClellan (1997) "found no experimental studies of the general effects of teachers on young children's social development" (p. 19). This study was intended to provide documentation of some of the strategies used by teachers on which such empirical research might focus in the future.

One of the vital contributions of this study was its examination of the continuity between home and school with regard to support of preschool friendships. No other studies documenting home-school continuity with regard to friendships have been found to date. Thus, this study was designed to contribute to the knowledge base and to the advancement of theory in this area.

Recently, Kowalski and colleagues (2001) pointed out the need for research on effective strategies or interventions to help preschoolers develop social-emotional competence. This study was conducted to provide information useful for researchers as well

as early childhood professionals by documenting strategies and communication used by parents and teachers. It was expected that this documentation of strategies would lead to further research and to the development of specific interventions for parents and teachers to use in facilitation of preschool friendships for children with and without disabilities.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do parents and teachers describe the nature and importance of the friendship between the SN and TD child?
2. What strategies do parents and teachers use to facilitate the SN-TD friendship, and what factors affect their use of these strategies?
3. What are the similarities and differences between parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the support of these SN-TD friendships?
4. What types of communication – if any – occur between parents and teachers about these friendships?

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHOD**

#### **Overview of Study Design**

A qualitative research design was chosen to answer the research questions of this dissertation study. The study explored how parents and teachers described the nature and importance of reciprocal SN-TD friendship dyads, the strategies that parents and teachers used to facilitate the friendships, and the factors that affected parent and teacher use of these strategies. This study also examined the extent to which parent and teacher beliefs and practices overlapped and the extent to which parents and teachers communicated regarding friendships. In order to understand the beliefs and practices of parents and teachers – as well as their communication – with regard to the support of reciprocal SN-TD friendship dyads, I conducted interviews with those adults. Following the interviews, brief questionnaires were completed by parents and teachers in order to (a) further document strategies used to facilitate friendships; (b) document other friendships of each child in the dyad; (c) collect demographic information about parents, teachers, and children; and (d) obtain information about the nature and severity of the disability for the SN child in the friendship dyad.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were the parents and preschool teachers of children between the ages of 3 and 6 years in reciprocal SN-TD friendship dyads. The parents and teachers of 12 dyads were recruited for a total of 12 interviews with teachers and 24

interviews with parents (i.e., the teacher of the dyad was interviewed, the SN child's parent was interviewed, and the TD child's parent was interviewed).

The 12 child care programs that children in these friendship dyads attended – and where participating teachers were employed – were located in central North Carolina in the following counties: Alamance, Guilford, Orange, and Wake. Overall, these programs may be considered to be of fairly high quality. Six of the teachers worked in programs with a 5-star rating (the highest rating) according to North Carolina's childcare licensing system. Four of the teachers worked in programs with a 4-star rating, one teacher worked in a program with a 3-star rating, and one teacher worked in a church-affiliated preschool that did not have a star rating.

### ***Demographic Information***

Questionnaires completed by parents and teachers provided information about the adult and child participants in this study in terms of age, ethnicity, education, and income level. Information about adult participants is presented here first, followed by information about the children in the SN-TD friendship dyads.

#### ***Parent and Teacher Characteristics***

The majority (94%) of participants were females. All participating teachers were females and only one SN parent and one TD parent were males. Adult participants are referred to using feminine pronouns in the remainder of this dissertation because females comprised the majority of participants. All parents were mothers or fathers of the focal children with one exception: one child's grandmother participated. She was the child's legal guardian and was included in the parent category for the purpose of reporting results of the analyses in this study. For one interview, the mother and father were present. However, the

mother answered all interview questions relating to the friendship and because the father did not contribute any data, his demographic information was not included here. Participating SN parents, TD parents, and teachers were similar in age. The 12 teachers ranged in age from 21 to 57 years ( $M = 37, SD = 11$ ), the 12 SN parents ranged in age from 23 to 53 years ( $M = 35, SD = 9$ ), and 11 of the 12 TD parents ranged in age from 23 to 55 years ( $M = 36, SD = 10$ ). One TD parent elected not to provide her age.

Parents were asked to name their occupation on the questionnaire and 75% of the parents noted employment outside the home. The remaining 25% said they were a stay at home mother or full-time student, had no occupation, or did not list an occupation. Table 2.1 provides additional information describing parents and teachers. The majority of adult participants were Caucasian, non-Hispanic white. Most participants had completed vocational school or college degrees, and more teachers reported higher family income levels than did parents. One parent chose not to provide income information, and education level was not recorded for one parent because the response was unclear on the questionnaire.

Table 2.1

*Parent and Teacher Characteristics*

Characteristic	Number of participants ( $n = 12$ in each group)		
	SN parents	TD parents	Teachers
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Caucasian, non-Hispanic white	8 (67%)	7 (58%)	8 (67%)
Black/African American	4 (33%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)
Caucasian & Latino/Hispanic		1 (8%)	
<b>Highest education level completed</b>			
High school graduate	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	1 (8%)
Some college/vocational school	6 (50%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)
Bachelor's degree	3 (25%)	3 (25%)	7 (58%)

Master's degree		2 (17%)	
Doctorate	1 (8%)	1 (8%)	
Family income			
\$20,000 or less	3 (25%)	4 (33%)	1 (8%)
\$20,000 to \$40,000	2 (17%)	2 (17%)	3 (25%)
\$40,000 to \$60,000	3 (25%)	2 (17%)	3 (25%)
Over \$60,000	4 (33%)	3 (25%)	5 (42%)

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### *Child Characteristics*

**Demographic information.** Demographic information for SN and TD children is presented in Table 2.2. The majority of children – particularly the SN children – in these friendship dyads were males. Participating SN and TD children were similar in age. The 12 SN children ranged in age from 42 to 67 months ( $M = 58$ ,  $SD = 8$ ), and the 12 TD children ranged in age from 49 to 67 months ( $M = 58$ ,  $SD = 6$ ). Approximately two-thirds of the SN children were Caucasian, and half of the TD children were Caucasian. The majority of SN children were only children, whereas this was true for less than half of the TD children. One TD parent reported one child in her family and noted that two half-siblings are older and live outside the home. This response was included in the one child in family category.

Table 2.2

### *Child Characteristics*

Characteristic	Number of children ( $n = 12$ in each group)	
	SN	TD
Gender		
Male	11 (92%)	6 (50%)
Ethnicity		
Caucasian, non-Hispanic white	8 (67%)	6 (50%)

Black/African American	3 (25%)	4 (33%)
Caucasian & Black/African American	1 (8%)	
Caucasian & Asian/Asian American		1 (8%)
Caucasian, Black/African American, & Latino/Hispanic		1 (8%)
Number of children in family		
1	8 (67%)	5 (42%)
2	4 (33%)	5 (42%)
3		2 (17%)

**Friendship networks.** Parents and teachers reported the number and characteristics of participating children’s special friends on the questionnaire described under Instrumentation below. The information this provided about children’s social networks is summarized in Table 2.3. According to parent and teacher report, the TD group had a slightly higher average number of special friends than did their SN counterparts. The majority of friends listed by both parents and teachers for SN and TD children were same gender classmates who were not rated as having a disability (i.e., “no disability,” and “don’t know” responses). Parents and teachers reported slightly longer friendships on average for TD children than SN children. However, this latter information is based on fewer than 12 responses per group, because if respondents did not know the duration of a friendship they listed or if the response was unclear, an average length of friendships was not calculated.

Table 2.3

*Friendship Networks*

Friendship network characteristic	SN children	TD children
	<i>(n = 12 for each group)</i>	
	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )
Parent report		
Number of friends	5 (1)	6 (3)
Percentage of friends that were classmates	65 (29)	61 (29)

Percentage of same gender friends	68 (22)	79 (18)
Length of friendships in months	22 (9) <sup>a</sup>	25 (10) <sup>b</sup>
Percentage of nondisabled friends	91 (13)	82 (27)

Teacher report

Number of friends	4 (2)	5 (2)
Percentage of friends who were classmates	84 (27)	92 (12)
Percentage of same gender friends	68 (22)	63 (20)
Length of friendships in months	12 (6) <sup>c</sup>	14 (5) <sup>c</sup>
Percentage of nondisabled friends	91 (15)	68 (17)

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<sup>a</sup> $n = 10$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 8$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 9$ .

**Level of social skills and severity of disability.** Teachers were asked to rate the children's social skills using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990b; details are provided in the Instrumentation section below). Results of teacher ratings indicated that, overall, the SN and TD children in this study performed in the average range in terms of social skills and problem behaviors compared to preschool children in the instrument's standardization sample (Gresham & Elliot, 1990a). Table 2.4 shows the number of children in each group whose ratings fell within behavior levels described as fewer, average, and more social skills or problem behaviors compared to the normative peer group. For example, 10 of the 12 SN children exhibited an average level of social skills (within one standard deviation of the mean of the standardization comparison group), and 4 of the 12 TD children exhibited more social skills (one standard deviation above the mean of the standardization comparison group or higher). Problem behaviors are interpreted similarly, but reflect negative performance, so 9 of the 12 SN children exhibited an average level of problem behaviors, and 2 SN children exhibited more problem behaviors. As a group, the TD children in this study were rated by teachers as exhibiting more social skills (mean standard score = 109,  $SD = 18$ ) and fewer problem behaviors (mean standard score = 100,  $SD = 15$ )

than the SN children in this study (mean standard score for social skills = 99,  $SD = 11$ ; mean standard score for problem behaviors = 104,  $SD = 11$ ), but mean standard scores for both groups fell within the average range. Analysis of the subscales comprising the total social skills score revealed that 7 of the 12 TD children's scores fell in the more than average level of social skills for the assertion subscale. In other words, over half of the TD children in this study were rated by teachers as having strengths in skills such as initiating conversation with other children and inviting peers to join activities. Most SN and TD children's scores on other subscales fell within the average range with only a few falling higher or lower.

Table 2.4

*Teacher Ratings of Social Skill and Problem Behavior Levels*

Characteristic	Number of participants rated at each behavior level (n=12 for each group)					
	SN children			TD children		
	Fewer	Average	More	Fewer	Average	More
Social skills	2	10	0	2	6	4
Problem behaviors	1	9	2	2	8	2

Teachers were also asked to rate the severity of the disability for SN children in participating dyads using the ABILITIES Index (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1991). Details about this measure and ratings are provided in the Instrumentation section below. Results of teacher ratings are provided in Table 2.5. Almost all SN children (92%) were rated by teachers as having a mild or moderate disability.

Table 2.5

*Severity of Disability*

Severity	Number of children (n=12)
Mild	6 (50%)
Moderate	5 (42%)
Severe	1 (8%)

*Characteristics of dyads.* Gender and ethnicity of both children in each dyad were compared. Most dyads were composed of two children of the same gender (58% of the dyads) and same ethnicity (75% of the dyads). The age difference between the two children in each dyad ranged from less than one month to 16 months. Although the mean age difference was 4 months ( $SD = 5$ ), this reflects the influence of a couple of dyads with large age differences. In fact, the majority of dyads were comprised of children one month or less than one month apart in age. Child characteristics by dyad are presented in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6

*Characteristics of Children in each Dyad*

Dyad	TD		SN		Characteristics reported on ABILITIES Index
	Age <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Age <sup>a</sup>	Gender	
1	61	F	61	F	Mild disability: Communicating with others
2	52	F	53	M	Severe disabilities: Social Skills, Intellectual Functioning, Communicating with others Moderate disability: Use of limbs Mild disability: Inappropriate Behavior
3	52	F	59	M	Mild disability: Communicating with others
4	61	F	61	M	Moderate disability: Communicating with others Mild disabilities: Behavior & Social Skills, Intellectual Functioning
5	65	F	49	M	Moderate disability: Inappropriate Behavior Mild disabilities: Social Skills, Intellectual Functioning,

					Understanding others, Communicating with others
6	62	M	62	M	Mild disabilities: Behavior & Social Skills, Muscle Tone (Degree of tightness) Suspected disabilities: Hearing, Understanding others, Use of arms, Muscle Tone (Degree of looseness)
7	67	M	67	M	Moderate disability: Communicating with others
8	66	F	67	M	Moderate disability: Communicating with others
9	59	M	60	M	Mild disability: Communicating with others
10	54	M	66	M	Severe vision loss (corrected) Moderate disabilities: Behavior & Social Skills, Intellectual Functioning, Understanding others, Communicating with others, Use of limbs, Muscle Tone, Integrity of Physical Health, Structural Status
11	50	M	45	M	Mild disability: Communicating with others
12	49	M	42	M	Mild disability: Social Skills Suspected disabilities: Intellectual Functioning, Understanding others, Communicating with others

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<sup>a</sup>In months.

In general, the children in these dyads had been friends for some time, though there was considerable variability in the reported length of friendships. According to teacher report in interviews, 10 of these 12 dyads had been friends for between 6 and 24 months (mean length of specific friendships = 13 months,  $SD = 7$ ). For two dyads, teachers did not report a specific number of months for the length of the friendship. According to SN parents, these 12 dyads had been friends for between 6 and 36 months ( $M = 15$ ,  $SD = 8$ ). According to TD parents, 9 of these 12 dyads had been friends for between 1 and 36 months ( $M = 17$ ,  $SD = 11$ ). Three TD parents' responses about the length of the friendship were unclear.

### ***Recruitment and Gathering of Initial Information***

I approached the directors of many different childcare programs in the area for

permission to recruit teachers and parents to participate in this study. Teachers within a particular program may hold similar beliefs and employ similar practices with regard to supporting preschool friendships as a result of common professional development and training activities. Thus, I believed that recruiting participants from numerous programs would help to provide a broader understanding of the teacher beliefs and practices explored in this study. Community-based childcare programs were considered, rather than public school pre-K programs or Head Start programs because I expected that permission and access would be difficult to obtain from public school systems and Head Start programs. Programs of high quality – with a 4- or 5-star rating according to North Carolina’s childcare licensing system – were initially targeted for participation. However, as it became evident that recruitment was less successful and more time-consuming than initially expected, the 4- or 5-star rating requirement was dropped.

Directors of 65 different childcare programs in the area were sent or handed a letter about the study and were soon after contacted by phone for permission to recruit teachers. (I contacted over 100 different programs in all, but some programs were not inclusive or did not currently have any SN preschool children enrolled and thus did not receive a letter.) Some directors of inclusive programs did not provide the name of a teacher for me to contact for a variety of reasons (e.g., they were not interested in participating in a research study, their center had already participated in a study that year, their teachers were too busy, or they were going through transitions of personnel at the time). Other directors said they would pass the information along to their teachers and in some cases I did not hear back from the teachers.

I talked to one teacher from each inclusive program where the director had given me permission to recruit. This initial conversation with the teacher occurred by phone using a

script and provided information about the study and an invitation to participate. Some teachers expressed interest in this study, but were not included for a variety of reasons (e.g., no children with IEPs were enrolled in their classrooms. Several teachers said the SN child enrolled in their class did not have any special friendships. Others chose not to participate because they were too busy, or they had gone ahead and spoken with parents about the study and parents did not wish to participate. In one case the teacher said the SN parent did not consider her child to have a disability.

If the teacher agreed to participate, I met individually with her. At our initial meeting, the teacher signed a consent form and provided friendship information – including name, age, and disability status of any special friends – for each child with an Individualized Education Plan in the teacher’s class using the Friendship Form (see Appendix A). Through this process, any reciprocal SN-TD friendship dyads among the children in the teacher’s classroom were identified. Most of the participating teachers readily noted friendships among the children in their classrooms on this form, but some teachers (including some who did not end up participating for reasons noted above and below) took considerable time to think about friendships among students when approached about this study. My sense was that this may have been the first time some teachers were asked to name special friendships for individual students in their classrooms, and that friendships were not in the forefront of their minds. However, it may also have been the case that they were simply being thorough in considering all of the children in their classrooms. If the teacher identified several, the first SN-TD friendship dyad listed on the form including children at least 3 years old and not yet 6 years old was selected, unless the teacher recommended a particular dyad listed.

The teacher was provided with a letter for the parents of the children in the chosen

dyad to send home with the two children. If both parents returned signed consent for me to contact them about this study, I followed up by telephone using a telephone script. I talked to each parent and asked if he or she was familiar with the target friend and considered that child to be one of their child's friends. If parents responded positively to the latter questions, I provided them with information about this study and an invitation to participate. If the parents of the members of the dyad chose not to participate, the next friendship dyad was chosen from those listed by the teacher. The next friendship dyad was also chosen if one or both sets of parents were not familiar with the child in the dyad identified by the teacher or did not consider that child to be one of their child's friends. One parent said she had not previously known that her child had a special friendship with the target friend, but she said she was familiar with the target friend. After talking with her child and her child's teachers she said she did consider the target friend to be one of her child's friends. Each teacher and parent was promised and received \$40 following the collection of interview and questionnaire data.

Recruitment efforts continued until 12 teachers and the parents of children in 12 friendship dyads consented to participate. Recruitment and data collection efforts were discontinued because it was then August and preschool students were beginning to move to different classrooms for the beginning of the new academic year. Many participating teachers had noted several SN-TD dyads on the Friendship Form whose parents were not contacted because the parents of children in one dyad within the classroom had already consented to participate.

Nine additional teachers consented to participate but were not included in this study because one or both parents of the children in the selected SN-TD dyads chose not to

participate. In four of these nine cases, one or both parents simply did not respond to my letter requesting consent for me to contact them about the study. In two cases, parents were uneasy about participating or were unsure what the information would be used for. In one case, the TD parent was unfamiliar with the SN child, and in another case, the SN parent said that because her child was nonverbal she as a parent could not confirm that the TD child was one of her child's friends. In the final case, the teacher and SN parent declined to participate after initially consenting because they said the SN child was not sufficiently social for them to consider the dyad to be friends.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative methodology was employed in order to collect the majority of data in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers. In addition, questionnaires were completed by parents and teachers following the interviews. Finally, teachers were asked to rate the social skills of each child and the functioning of each SN child using established instruments described below.

#### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

The majority of data regarding parent and teacher beliefs and practices, and communication between parents and teachers was collected using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected for this study because they allowed participants to provide open-ended responses in their own words – rather than choosing from a set of responses limited by the researcher's ideas – while still using a structured set of questions (Davies, 1999). The interviews thus allowed for collection of data directly relevant to the research questions. Responses to initial interview questions provided answers to research questions concerning parent and teacher beliefs. Research questions regarding practices

could have been answered through observational methodology. However, observations of parent and teacher practices in support of the friendships of their preschool children would likely have involved complex scheduling of extensive observations that still might not have captured practices representative of strategies used by those adults. Therefore, interview questions addressed not just beliefs, but practices as well. In addition, research questions regarding communication between parents and teachers were addressed in the interviews.

The semi-structured interview protocols (see Appendix B) were adapted with permission from one developed by Rhodes (2002) in a study of family practices and beliefs regarding preschoolers' friendship socialization. Rhodes' protocol was adapted for use with teachers in addition to parents and to address the specific questions of this study.

### *Questionnaires*

At the end of the interview session, parents and teachers completed a brief questionnaire having three components (see Appendix C). The first component consisted of a checklist of strategies that may be used to facilitate preschool friendships. This checklist of strategies draws from previous research suggesting practices used by parents and teachers (see Rhodes, 2002; and Sparkman, 2003), and from the Playmates and Friends Questionnaire for Teachers, Revised (Goldman & Buysse, 2002). Parents and teachers were asked to indicate how frequently they used these strategies to support the SN-TD friendship dyad. This allowed parents and teachers to report strategies they may have neglected to mention in the interview and served as an additional method of documenting parent and teacher practices in support of preschool friendships, thus triangulating data reported in the interviews. The second component of the questionnaire was drawn from part two of the Playmates and Friends Questionnaire for Teachers, Revised (Goldman & Buysse) and asked

parents and teachers to list the names and characteristics of other friends of each child in the dyad in order to provide an idea of the extent and nature of each child's friendship network. The final component of the questionnaire collected demographic information from teachers and parents. Parents were also asked to report demographic information for the children in the friendship dyads.

Participants were contacted to schedule interviews at times and in places convenient for the participants. SN parent interviews took between 14 minutes and one hour twenty-eight minutes to complete ( $M = 34$  minutes,  $SD = 21$  minutes), whereas TD parent interviews took less time: 13 – 38 minutes ( $M = 23$ ,  $SD = 8$ ). Teacher interviews were longer, ranging from 30 to 64 minutes in length ( $M = 45$ ,  $SD = 11$ ). With participant permission, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### ***Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)***

Teachers completed the SSRS (Gresham & Elliott, 1990b) for each child in the dyad. This rating system includes screeners for problem behaviors, but focuses mainly on prosocial behaviors, and “enables a rater to quantify ... the degree to which a child has acquired landmark social skills (e.g., cooperates with peers without prompting, waits turn in games or other activities, ... makes friends easily)” (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Munson, 1997, p. 283). Ratings range from 0 (the student never exhibits the behavior) to 2 (the student very often exhibits the behavior). Using the SSRS manual (Gresham & Elliott, 1990a), raw scores were converted to standard scores in order to compare the social skills and problem behaviors of the SN and TD participants to those of preschoolers in the standardization sample. To consider potential errors of measurement, 95% confidence intervals were computed and children's scores were then interpreted in terms of where they fell in the normal distribution.

### ***ABILITIES Index***

Teachers completed the ABILITIES Index (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1991) for the SN children in participating dyads. This index provides a measure of the child's abilities with regard to the following functions: audition, behavior, intelligence, limb control, intentional communication, tonicity, integrity of physical status, body structure, and sight. Ratings for each of the functions range from 1 to 6 with 1 representing normal abilities and 6 representing profound lack of ability. The reliability of this instrument has been documented by previous research involving teachers of young children with disabilities in addition to other raters (Bailey, Simeonsson, Buysse, & Smith, 1993). Children receiving ratings of 1 through 3 in each area of functioning were considered to have a mild disability, whereas children receiving ratings up to and including 4 were considered to have a moderate disability. Children receiving any ratings of 5 or 6 were considered to have a severe disability, with the exception of one child whose only rating of 5 was received for sight and the teacher noted that his sight was corrected with glasses. This child was considered to have a moderate disability because he did receive ratings of 4.

### **Piloting the Procedures**

The procedures described above were piloted with a teacher from an inclusive community-based childcare program in the area and the parents of children in a reciprocal SN-TD friendship dyad. Piloting the procedures for gathering initial information, selecting a friendship dyad, conducting interviews, and having parents and teachers complete the questionnaire, rating of social skills, and index of functional abilities allowed me to refine the procedures and to develop my interviewing skills. No changes to the Friendship Form, interview questions, or questionnaire items were made following this pilot procedure.

## **Data Management and Collection**

All data were collected by me and were managed in an organized manner to facilitate data analysis, as well as with the purpose of ensuring participant confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to participating parents and teachers and to the children in each dyad and only those pseudonyms were used to identify collected data. In this dissertation, all names mentioned in quotations from the data are pseudonyms. Interview data collection was completed during the latter half of the school year (beginning in April and ending in August) to allow teachers and friends several months at the beginning of the year to get to know each other. Interviews were transcribed and responses on questionnaires were entered into confidential computer files following data collection. I transcribed 24 of the 36 interviews, and two graduate students transcribed the remaining 12 interviews. I listened to the digital recordings and proof read the transcriptions for all 12 of the interviews transcribed by the graduate assistants.

## **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to explore parent and teacher beliefs and practices with regard to the support of preschool SN-TD friendship dyads. Interview data was systematically analyzed to identify themes describing parent and teacher beliefs and practices that facilitate preschool friendships between children with and without disabilities (research questions 1, 2, and 3). Information reported on questionnaires was included in the data analysis plan for research questions 2 and 3, and to describe the demographic characteristics of the participants. Finally, interview data was analyzed to determine the extent of communication between parents and teachers regarding specific friendships (research question 4). Results of these analyses are reported in the following chapter in order of the

research questions.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Qualitative methodology was used to analyze the interview data gathered in this dissertation study. Miles and Huberman (1994; 2002) describe qualitative data analysis as an ongoing and iterative process, as researchers engage in reducing data, drawing conclusions, and verifying conclusions. For thematic analysis, it is not necessary to obtain a frequency count for each theme, but rather: “It is simply reported that a specific theme was shared by most, a majority, about half, some, or a few respondents” (Skinner, Rodriguez, & Bailey, 1999, p. 274). This approach made sense for the data collected in this study. For example, I did not count the number of times each participant mentioned each different practice theme during the interview because many probing questions were built into the interview protocol and some participants chose to provide multiple examples of the same practice while others simply said their response would be similar to the example they had already given. The analysis process for this study occurred through initially reading through the interview transcripts, noting possible codes to identify pieces of data, narrowing those codes to selected themes through careful re-readings of the data as recommended by Creswell (2002), and engaging in a process of coming to consensus with other researchers on codes and major themes. These procedures are described further below.

An initial reading of all data gathered to gain a sense of the data as a whole is recommended in qualitative research analysis (Creswell, 2002; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Interview transcripts were read through to gain this initial overview. Following this initial reading, I re-read the transcripts and began the process of coding, analyzing one major research question at a time. (Note: Research question 3 was a comparison of parent and

teacher results for research questions 1 and 2 and did not entail separate thematic analysis.) I concentrated on interview protocol items targeting each research question, but read through every transcript in its entirety and coded all responses relevant to the research questions.

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe codes as categories usually applied to words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs of the transcription text, and Creswell (2002) describes coding as “the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (p. 266). Codes for classifying chunks of text may be developed prior to data collection and analysis, but researchers should be mindful of and explicit about the sources of the categories they develop for organizing qualitative data (Davies, 1999). The codes that I anticipated using to begin with were those aligned with the research questions (as recommended by Miles & Huberman): the code *beliefs* to mark parent and teacher responses describing their beliefs about the nature and importance of these preschool friendships, the code *practices* to mark responses that described things that parents and teachers reported doing to support specific friendships between two children, the code *factors* to mark responses reporting factors affecting parent and teacher use of strategies to support friendship, and the code *communication* to mark responses relating to parent-teacher communication regarding their preschoolers’ friendships. Interview transcripts were formatted with room in the left and right hand margins to facilitate data analysis and codes were noted in the left hand margins as interviews were read. I used the right hand margin to record additional notes such as ideas that may lead to further data analysis, thoughts about patterns that appeared to be emerging, and memos noting connections between pieces of data (Miles & Huberman). For example, I wrote notes about how responses might fit into the overall analysis and questions about analysis issues that needed to be resolved in the right

hand margins.

My review of the literature was the source for additional codes that were anticipated prior to analysis within each of the above broad categories. For example, I anticipated making note of responses indicating teacher use of active strategies such as helping to *arrange* for children to play together outside of the preschool setting because that strategy was included in the research by Buysse and colleagues (2003). Indeed, the interview was organized with the research literature in mind. For example, in question 13 parents were asked whether they *arrange* play opportunities for their children; a strategy researched by Ladd and Golter (1988). However, my initial coding efforts were also open and flexible – as recommended by Emerson and colleagues (1995) – to allow additional codes or strategies beyond those suggested by current research to emerge from the data.

I completed coding for research question 2 first because I was most interested in parent and teacher use of practices and I felt this research question would be the most complex, providing the bulk of the data in this study. Coding for research question 4 was completed next followed by coding for research question 1.

For each research question, I began by reading a small sample of parent or teacher interviews and developing codes to describe participant responses. My codes were single words or brief phrases to describe the content of participants' responses relating to the research question. I developed a list of codes along with descriptions, examples, and quotations from transcriptions for each code and referred to this list throughout the initial coding process. When no code on the list captured a participant's response, I added an additional code to the list. If I had started the coding process with teacher data, I later used the list of codes developed from teacher data to begin the list for parent data (to the extent

that similar codes fit both sets of data) and vice versa. Each code was designated with an initial letter according to the research question to which it related. For example, *p.put together* was a *practice* code, *c.let know friends* was a *communication* code, and *n.affection* was a code about the *nature* of the friendship. These initial letters served the purpose of helping me to identify and organize the data in tables, but are not included with codes mentioned throughout the remainder of this study. For practice codes, I also attached the letters *SN*, *TD*, *FS*, or *CL* to the end of the code to indicate whether the teacher or parent used the practice with the *SN* child, the *TD* child, both *friends*, or the *class*. For example, the code *talkSN* was used if a teacher told the SN child to be nice to all his friends, whereas the code *coachFS* was used if the teacher coached the two friends about sharing.

I kept notes about ideas that emerged during this coding process. For example, I noticed that many teachers made comments about reported practices such as, “but I would do this for any of my children, not just Joel.” I returned later to the transcripts and marked such comments so that I could examine this idea that teachers did report using friendship practices, but that they were not necessarily doing so with forethought or planning especially targeting this dyad.

Early in the coding process, I also developed a table listing interview protocol questions down the left hand side and teachers 1 through 12 across the top. I entered codes in the table during this process. This table allowed me to see an overview of the codes assigned to participant responses and made it easy to find the chunks of text representing particular codes because I could look to the left of the table and note, for example, that a teacher’s response to interview question 4m. was assigned a particular code. Such tables were also used for entering brief versions of participant answers such as “very important” and

“informal;” responses to questions 4l. *How important do you think this friendship is for your child?* and 22c. *What are the ways you prefer to communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?* respectively. Three tables were developed for each research question; one for TD parents, one for SN parents, and one for teachers.

Although I was influenced by the research literature, my initial coding – particularly regarding practices and communication – was inductive in that it was very closely based on participants’ actual words and more abstract categories emerged from these codes (as described by Miles & Huberman, 1994). Having remained very close to the participants’ own words, my initial list of codes developed for each research question was lengthy.

After coding a small sample of interviews, I reviewed and refined my list of codes before proceeding with remaining transcripts. I collapsed codes that were very similar into broader codes. For example, *buddies*, *assign play area*, *assign less crowded play area*, and *ask friend next* were all codes describing teacher practices to intentionally put friends together in the classroom. Thus, the code *put together* was used to replace the previous four codes. I re-coded the transcripts using these broader codes in place of the previous four and made the corresponding adjustments to the coding table. I also revisited the literature and questionnaires frequently to remind myself of previous findings. The work of Rhodes (2002) and Buysse, Goldman, West, and Hollingsworth (in press), for example, informed my combining of previously similar codes *positive affect*, *like/enjoy*, and *friendly* under the code *affection*. Thus, during the initial coding process, I returned to the list of codes often and clarified ones that were confusing or overlapping. When a change was made to the list of codes, I returned to the transcripts and made adjustments to assigned codes as necessary.

Throughout the coding process, I met with my faculty advisor to discuss my procedures, codes, themes, and the literature that had informed the development of codes and themes. As a result of these regular meetings, further decisions were made regarding collapsing, refining, and clarifying coding and thematic categories. For example, I had initially attempted to code possible factors affecting use of practices (when participants gave rationales for their use of practices). However, in a meeting with my faculty advisor we decided that I should concentrate on codes for practices and only give examples of factors or rationales rather than code them, partly because of the idiosyncratic nature of the rationales given by participants for using certain practices and partly because we wanted the focus of the analysis to be on practices. Therefore, I maintained a list of rationales participants gave for using practices – when rationales were given – but did not code rationales.

As I grouped individual codes into thematic categories, the development and naming of these categories was informed by my review of the literature. For example, for the reasons why parents believed friendships to be important, I found the categories of friendship function (Hartup cited in Rhodes, 2002) used by Rhodes to be helpful for organizing parent responses and used the codes *emotional resource*, *cognitive resource*, and *learn about relationships*, for responses to the question *Why do you think this friendship is important for [child]?* In addition, I drew from analyses conducted by Rhodes and by Sparkman (2003) in categorizing the data from this study into practice themes. The exception was research question 4 – addressing parent-teacher communication – as the literature review did not yield any studies focused on parent-teacher communication on the topic of friendships. Therefore, codes were developed from the content of participant responses alone.

After I had completed the coding for each research question, I provided my

dissertation advisor with my list of codes and descriptions and with a sample of parent and teacher transcripts with chunks of text relating to the research question highlighted. My advisor then independently coded the sample of transcripts. Following this, we discussed any disagreements and engaged in a process of providing our rationales for the codes we assigned and coming to consensus on codes and themes that were representative of participant responses for chunks of text. For the first research question analyzed, I also provided a sample of transcripts with chunks of text highlighted to my second faculty reader for coding. Some changes were made to the coding and thematic categories following feedback from my dissertation advisor and second faculty reader. However, because there were very few coding discrepancies at the level of main themes, for the remaining research questions analyzed, the second faculty reader validated – rather than independently coded – the transcripts. This validation process consisted of me providing the second faculty reader with (a) a sample of transcripts with chunks of text relating to the research question highlighted and assigned codes noted, and (b) my list of codes and descriptions. The second faculty reader read these and provided me with feedback. As a result, clarifications were made, but the general coding scheme was not changed. Final themes and codes within each theme are described in detail in the results section.

### *Analysis of Questionnaires*

In addition to interview data, questionnaire data was used to answer research question 2. The first page of parent and teacher questionnaires asked participants to indicate how often they used each of the strategies listed with this friendship using a four point scale: never, rarely, occasionally, or frequently. Mean responses for each strategy were calculated per group (SN parents, TD parents, and teachers). Strategies that were marked on the

questionnaires that had not come up during interviews were noted, and responses to the final item on the questionnaire (*Other strategies I use*) were noted. Questionnaire results are presented following results of the thematic analysis of practices used in support of specific friendships.

### ***Processes for Validating Findings***

Several processes were used to determine the “accuracy or credibility of the findings” (Creswell, 2002, p. 280). Documentation of procedures, consultation with my faculty advisor and second faculty reader, and member checks were processes for validating findings. In addition, findings from questionnaire data regarding parent and teacher use of strategies to support SN-TD friendship dyads served to triangulate findings from interview data pertaining to research question 2.

I maintained a log documenting each step taken throughout the analysis procedure, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). This log was used to provide the detailed explanation of steps used in the thematic analysis described above to draw conclusions from the data.

As described in the previous sections, I met with my faculty advisor during and following coding in order to engage in a process of validating the codes and major themes that were determined to answer the research questions of this study. During this consensus process, my advisor examined a sample of the data collected and offered advice for fine-tuning any categories that need to be combined or disentangled. The goal of this process was to ensure that the themes developed were reflective of participant responses. A second faculty reader independently coded a sample of transcripts for research question 2 – the first question analyzed – and validated the coding for a sample of transcripts for the remaining

research questions.

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend getting feedback from participants following data analysis. Findings of the thematic analysis were summarized and the summary was mailed to all participants for their feedback (see Appendix D for letter and summary).

Participants were asked the following questions based on those used in a qualitative study by Wesley, Buysse, and Skinner (2001): (a) Do these findings generally reflect your beliefs and practices regarding this preschool friendship?; (b) Were any of these results surprising to you? If yes, which ones?; and (c) Are any important beliefs and strategies regarding this friendship missing from these results? If yes, which ones? Feedback provided on these member checks is reported with the results below.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

Interviews with parents and teachers of preschool children in SN-TD friendship dyads provided the majority of data analyzed in order to answer the research questions of this study. Results of the thematic analysis of interview transcripts are organized in the following sections according to the major research questions: (a) beliefs about the nature and importance of preschool SN-TD friendships, (b) practices used to support preschool SN-TD friendships, and (c) parent-teacher communication about preschool SN-TD friendships. Results from questionnaires are reported in the practices section, and results from member checks are presented at the end of the chapter.

#### **Beliefs about the Nature and Importance of Preschool SN-TD Friendships**

The first research question in this dissertation study focused on parent and teacher beliefs about specific friendships between two children: *How do parents and teachers describe the nature and importance of these friendships?* Thematic analysis focused on interview question four, but responses to other questions on the protocol were also examined and coded if specifically relevant to the nature and importance of specific friendships. Although the major themes were the same for parents and teachers, results of the analysis for research question 1 are presented separately: first for both groups of parents together (SN and TD) and then for teachers. Following this, comparisons of parent and teacher beliefs are made in order to address the beliefs component of research question 3: *What are the*

*similarities and differences between parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the support of these SN-TD friendships?*

### ***Parent Beliefs***

Two questions about the friends on the interview protocol were focused on participant beliefs about the nature of these friendships: (a) *What are their interactions like?* and (b) *What kinds of things do you see or hear that lets you know they are friends?* In addition, two questions were focused on parent beliefs about the importance of the friendships: (a) *How important do you think this friendship is for [child]?* and if the response indicated a parent believed the friendship to be important, then this question was asked (b) *Why do you think this friendship is important for [child]?* Thematic analysis of interview transcripts resulted in three themes describing parent beliefs about the nature and importance of specific friendships: (a) most friendships were harmonious, (b) a few friendships were inconsistent or conflicted, and (c) importance of friendships. The first theme emerged from codes for participant responses giving numerous indicators of the harmonious nature of specific friendships (e.g., the friends played well together). The second theme reflected responses in contrast to the first theme. The final theme is comprised of codes providing information about why parents believed specific friendships and friendships in general were important for their children. Table 3.1 lists the three themes and codes within the themes. Sample quotations are included under each theme to give readers an idea of the types of responses assigned to each code and theme. Each theme is further described below.

Table 3.1

#### *Parent Beliefs*

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Belief code	Sample response(s)
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Theme 1: Most friendships were harmonious

Play and play well	They play together nicely.  They always say, “Come here and see this,” “Help me do this,” “Bring that over here and let’s do this together.”
Talking about each other	He’ll say, “She’s my friend.”  Well, she always talks about him, “Marquis did this; Marquis did that.”
Commonalities	Both of them are very easygoing.  I think Sam was young compared to the other kids, and Beren was developmentally young, so they were kind of drawn to each other.
Affection	When she says goodbye she’s telling her that she loves her.
Proximity	Any kind of games we were playing, they were just side-by-side the whole time.  They always want to get together.
Compatibility	Frank is kind of quiet and Christopher’s outgoing. It’s kind of like a balance.

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Theme 2: A few friendships were inconsistent or conflicted

Inconsistent	There’s some days Saffie’s very tolerant and very capable and willing to play with him, and there are some days where she doesn’t want to. She doesn’t want him to bother her at all.
Conflicted	Fuss all the time. They fuss a lot towards each other.

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Theme 3: Importance of friendships

Emotional resource	I think it just gives him confidence and helps him fit in. And he enjoys it. It’s fun for him.  Now from her standpoint, I think she gets validation and I think she just- it’s fun to play with kids her own age not with mom and dad.
Learning about	It’s important for children or anyone to be able to spend time

relationships	with and develop a relationship and to have something in common with- to be able to work out differences.
Cognitive resource	Someone that can help him see things a little different from the way he may see them. To help him in his learning, or just everyday things, if he has any struggles or whatever.
Friendships in general important	I think friendship's always a good thing.  It's very important, because he's the only child, and he doesn't have anybody at home to play with.

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***Parent Beliefs Theme 1: Most Friendships Were Harmonious***

Most parent responses to questions about the nature of specific friendships indicated that the friendships were characterized by play, positive affect, prosocial interactions and discourse, proximity, commonalities, and compatibility. Taken together, these characteristics paint a picture of harmonious relationships between friends. Following are descriptions of the codes for parent responses included under this theme. In general, these and codes for other themes are presented in order according to the number of participants who provided responses assigned each code from most parents or teachers to fewest parents or teachers (some codes were represented by responses from a similar number of parents or teachers).

***Play and play well.*** Almost all SN and TD parents talked about the two friends playing together. Some parents described the friends engaging in active play (e.g., “They like to run and play....I see them playing on the swings out here and running around, and he chases her and she chases him”), and others described the friends talking with each other or showing each other favorite toys. Responses coded in this category included parents describing children inviting their friend to play (e.g., “Let’s go play this”).

Some SN and TD parents also made a point of mentioning how well the friends played together. For example, the friends shared, listened, had few or no conflicts, resolved

conflicts they did have, got along with each other better, or talked with each other more than with others. Thus, not only were specific friendships characterized by much play, but the play interactions were positive.

The play interactions of a few dyads were characterized a little differently. A few parents said the children's interactions were very brief – though friendly – or said the children engaged in parallel play in addition to interactive play. Parents referred to the SN child's short attention span or tendency toward solitary play in their responses describing very brief interactions.

***Talking about each other.*** The majority of both SN and TD parents said that specific friends talked about each other, including at home or when not together. Parents said their children talked about what the friends did during the day (e.g., “He came home and was telling me how the party was and what she had and how she dressed”). Parents also reported children talking about things the target friend would like and asking where the target friend was if absent. A number of parents said their children would tell them the target friend was their friend or best friend. Others mentioned the SN child talking about the target friend when he saw his friend's picture at home, or mentioned children talking at home about conflicts or behavior issues involving the target friend. However, the majority of parent responses coded in this category were positive.

***Commonalities.*** At some point during the interview, a majority of SN and TD parents indicated that specific friendships were characterized by commonalities in terms of demographic characteristics, temperament, interests, or some combination of the previous characteristics. For example, the friends were similar in age, developmental age, gender, or culture. Many parents said the friends had common interests (e.g., both liked outdoor play or

liked the same games or toys). Many parents also referred to child characteristics, activity level, or temperament in their descriptions of commonalities (e.g., both children were outgoing, easygoing, active, talkative, or tough).

***Affection.*** The majority of parents (both SN and TD) described specific friendships as characterized by children's expressions of affection, positive affect, liking, and enjoyment. Signs of affection and positive affect noted by parents included these friends giving each other hugs, holding hands, telling each other that they loved one another, as well as smiling, laughing, and joking with each other. Parents believed the friends liked or enjoyed each other, had fun together, and thought one another were funny. Friends also were described as being friendly to each other in general, greeting each other in the morning, and being excited to see each other.

***Proximity.*** Some SN and TD parents described the two friends as seeking to be near each other. Parent responses coded in this category described children as choosing to play with or near each other (e.g., "Just the way they gravitate to each other"). Also included in this category were parent responses indicating that children requested playdates or sleepovers with their target friends.

***Compatibility.*** Several parents provided additional information about the nature of specific friendships, some suggesting the friends were compatible for reasons other than commonalities. Such responses indicated that the friends complemented each other or met each other's needs. A few parents described the TD child taking a nurturing role in the relationship (e.g., the TD child mothered or looked after the SN child, took charge, told the SN child to stop doing something, or led the SN child). The following is an example of such a response, "I'd have to say she's nurturing over him and she looks out for him; encourages

him to play a little bit more.”

### ***Parent Beliefs Theme 2: A Few Friendships were Inconsistent or Conflicted***

Although most parent responses to questions about the nature of specific friendships provided indicators of harmonious relationships, a minority of parents suggested the friendships were inconsistent, conflicted, or inconsistent and conflicted. At least one parent as well as the teacher for four of the SN-TD dyads gave information suggesting that these friendships were characterized by inconsistencies, conflicts, or both.

***Inconsistent.*** Only a few TD parents described specific friendships as on and off, saying their child went through periods of not wanting to play with the target friend. However, the same parents also said their child sometimes did play with the target friend.

***Conflicted.*** A few parents described specific friends as having many conflicts, or described specific friendships as inconsistent as well as conflicted. One of the latter parents believed the friendship was not so much a real friendship, but more a friendship in theory: that her SN child had a verbal script about his friend, but that they did not play together especially well or often.

Thus, not all friendships were always harmonious. However, one or both parents for all four of the dyads noted under this theme also provided responses indicating that these children did play together and some even played well together at times.

### ***Parent Beliefs Theme 3: Importance of Friendships***

Parent beliefs about the importance of specific friendships were analyzed by examining answers in the coding table for the question *How important do you think this friendship is for [child]?* and by thematic analysis of parent responses to the question of why they thought it was important. Most parents in this study believed these friendships to be

“important” (including responses such as, “Oh, I think it’s good for Sam”), or “very important” for their children. In contrast, only a few TD parents said it was not especially important (e.g., “It’s not that important”). No SN parents reported the belief that it was unimportant. However, a few parents (SN and TD) said they did not know how important this friendship was for their child (e.g., “He doesn’t talk about her when he’s not at school and I don’t know if he thinks about her; with the autism, you just really don’t know what’s going on in his head”).

A number of reasons why specific friendships were important were suggested by parents. Consistent with findings from a previous study (Rhodes, 2002), these were coded in the following categories: emotional resource, learn about relationships, and cognitive resource. Although interview questions were asked about the dyads of focus in this study, many parent responses indicated the belief that friendships in general were important for their children and these responses were given a separate code. Importance codes are described below. Parent comments about the importance of these and other friendships given children’s limited access or limited exposure to peers in settings outside of school are also described below.

***Emotional resource.*** Parents believed this friendship to be important because it served as an emotional resource for their children. This reason seemed particularly salient to SN parents in that it was reported by more SN than TD parents. The types of responses that were coded in this category indicated that it was important for children to have someone – maybe with some commonalities – to play with, talk to, or share things with other than adults, and that children had fun or enjoyed playing with their friend. Having a friend like this was believed to be important for helping one parent’s child feel comfortable at school.

Specific friendships were also believed to be important for a child's social acceptance, helping a child to feel like he or she fit in, and for a child's self-esteem and confidence. Also coded in this category were responses indicating that the target friend understood a child's speech while other peers did not, as well as responses indicating that children helped each other:

I think it's good because I've seen Monique kind of help him some ... like she says, "Mommy's getting ready to leave – you've got to go tell her bye, David." Stuff like that.... Then I've seen him- once I came and observed them. They were getting up from their nap. He went and woke her up because they were getting ready to have their Easter party and stuff.... He was like, "Come on, Monique, it's time for the Easter party; we're going to do our Easter egg hunt." So, I think they look out for each other.

Other responses included parents noting that their children thought it was important to have a friend, or that it was important for a child to have this friendship continue from a previous class.

***Learning about relationships.*** Less common was the notion of specific friendships being important as a context for children's learning about relationships. For example, some parents said the friendship was important because children learned how to treat others and interact despite differences, or learned to work out differences. Among the responses coded in this category were parent responses indicating that they wanted their child to accept a variety of friends or learn to get along with a variety of friends, (e.g., "Developing social skills with people that are not like herself"). In addition, some parents noted specific friendships were important for their children's learning about relationships because their children had limited exposure to same age peers outside of school because their children were only children or had no siblings close in age (e.g., "I guess because he's not around other kids, and it gets him around the kids to learn to become friends").

***Cognitive resource.*** Only a few parents noted that specific friendships were important because they served as a cognitive resource for children. For example, parents said the friendship was important to help a child with learning, or because the children could learn from each other. These responses were vague in that no specific examples of the types of things children could learn from each other were noted.

***Importance of friendships in general.*** Approximately half of the SN parents and several TD parents mentioned during the interviews that friendships in general were important. Parents who gave reasons why friendships in general were important mentioned reasons similar to those described above for why the particular friendship dyads in this study were important: for the emotional, relationship development, and cognitive resources they provided. One SN parent felt that her child's friendship with the target friend was inconsistent and conflicted, but believed that friendships in general were of great importance and wished for close friendships for her child. As shown in the quote below, a combination of reasons were provided for why she believed friendships in general were important for her child:

When you say 'friendship' it sounds like it's a lighthearted, social topic. And in fact I just can't emphasize how key and central an issue it is and a factor in his development and overcoming some of his disabilities; establishing a connection at a peer level. He's got tons of connections with therapists and parents and family and adults, but at a peer level of having a meaningful personal relationship with a peer that he feels that's unique to him and that he has some control and autonomy in, but that he can give to and get back from on his own level in his own way.

Finally, a majority of parents who gave responses coded in this category noted their child's limited access to same age peers as a reason for believing friendships in general were important for their children (e.g., "It's important because she doesn't play with too many kids, I don't think, and she's mostly surrounded by younger kids, actually, when she's at

home”).

### ***Summary***

In general, most parents described the nature of their children’s specific friendships as harmonious, but a few believed the friendships to be inconsistent or even to have many conflicts. Most parents believed that these friendships were important for the emotional support that they provided their children. Some parents also believed that these friendships were important as a context for learning about relationships and as a cognitive resource. Furthermore, children’s limited access to peers outside of the school setting was mentioned in combination with the above reasons and as a reason why friendships in general were important for children.

### ***Teacher Beliefs***

The same questions asked of parents about the nature of specific friendships were also asked of teachers: (a) *What are their interactions like?* and (b) *What kinds of things do you see or hear that lets you know they are friends?* In addition, questions focused on teacher beliefs about the importance of specific friendships were asked regarding the SN and TD child separately: (a) *How important do you think this friendship is for [SN child]?* and if important, then (b) *Why do you think this friendship is important for [SN child]?* (repeated for TD child). Thematic analysis of interview transcripts resulted in the same three themes for teacher beliefs as for parent beliefs about the nature and importance of specific friendships. Table 3.2 lists the three themes and codes within the themes along with sample quotations from teachers. Each theme is further described below.

Table 3.2

### ***Teacher Beliefs***

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Belief code	Sample response(s)
Theme 1: Most friendships were harmonious	
Play and play well	<p>Outside it's nothing but running. . . . And inside they do a lot of pretend in housekeeping. Christopher is- he likes to rap, and he's gotten a bunch of kids into rapping. And they'll dress up, and they rap.</p> <p>They get along very well.</p>
Proximity	<p>They will request to go where the other one is.</p> <p>And they always – when the parents come – they always want to go home with one another.</p>
Talking about each other	<p>If she's not there she asks about her. She's always asking, "Where's Hannah?" And vice versa.</p> <p>They say that each other is their best friend.</p>
Commonalities	<p>I just think they like the same things. They like playing in the large sandbox out here and the blocks like I said with the cars.</p> <p>They enjoyed pretty much the same things.</p>
Compatibility	<p>They are helpful to each other. When one is high, the other one's low. They're a made-in-heaven couple is what I say.</p>
Affection	<p>The way they greet; smile at each other when one comes. Daniel is already here, he tends to come earlier, and James does arrive later. Just you see him perk up like, "There's my bud."</p>
Theme 2: A few friendships were inconsistent or conflicted	
Inconsistent	<p>They're like a tag team, off and on relationship, I guess. They try it, and they get along for half an hour, and then they have to separate.</p>
Conflicted	<p>They had many, many conflicts.</p>
Theme 3: Importance of friendships	
Emotional resource	<p>I think it makes her feel good as far as her self-esteem because she knows she- from the beginning, she had someone who</p>

really, really liked her.

He was new to town. And he needed to feel accepted. And I think Beren was his first real contact in the classroom. And he would look for Beren when he would come to school each day. It helped him transition, and separate from Mom, because there was Beren, and they could play.

Learning about relationships

He's made a lot of progress in friendships and his relationships.

Cognitive resource

I think it's very important to work with- to have- to play with Sally who doesn't have a disability so he can learn from her.

Friendships in general important

Or with any other child, actually, doesn't have to even be James.... Because it's just her and the husband and there are no other children around. And so he needs to have some friends to come and play with not just here, because we have Saturdays and Sundays, too.

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***Teacher Beliefs Theme 1: Most Friendships Were Harmonious***

As did parents, most teachers indicated that specific friendships were characterized by play, positive affect, prosocial interactions and discourse, proximity, commonalities, and compatibility. In other words, these were harmonious friendships for the most part. Details about the codes for teacher responses included under this theme are presented in the next section.

***Play and play well.*** Almost all teachers talked about specific friends playing together and indeed playing well together. Teachers talked about the friends reading books together, engaging in active play, talking with each other, and asking each other to play something in particular. With regard to how well the friends played, teachers noted that the friends played easily together, shared, had few or no conflicts, resolved conflicts they did have, helped each other, understood each other, and got along with each other better than with others. Teacher beliefs were consistent with parent beliefs that specific friendships were characterized by

play and the play interactions were positive.

***Proximity.*** Many teachers described one or both friends seeking proximity with each other. Teacher responses coded in this category described children as always being near or with each other, sitting together at lunch, seeking each other out (e.g., asking to play with the target friend or where the target friend was), and choosing each other when given a choice of playmates. This category also encompassed responses indicating that one or both friends requested playdates or sleepovers with each other. This teacher's response described the friends' desire for proximity and was assigned the codes *proximity* and *play*:

They're inseparable. They'll always- whether one chooses a center first, the other one's always right there behind him making sure that they're playing in the same center. And if they're not, then they're playing in the center next to one another, so they can see and still talk to one another.

***Talking about each other.*** Over half of the teachers said that one or both children in specific friendship dyads talked about each other, including when they were not together. Teachers said these children asked where their target friend was if absent or late. Teachers also said the children would say the target friend was their friend, best friend, or buddy. In one case, a teacher said the SN child talked about conflicts or behavior issues involving his target friend.

***Commonalities.*** Most teachers indicated at some point during the interview that specific friendships were characterized by commonalities in terms of age, developmental age, temperament, interaction style, interests, or some combination of these characteristics. For example, the friends were both easygoing, were both loners, or both liked to lead. Teachers also said specific friends had common interests (e.g., both liked the same activities or toys).

***Compatibility.*** The majority of teacher participants articulated the belief that specific friends were compatible (for reasons other than commonalities). Such responses indicated

that the friends complemented each other or met each other's needs (e.g., the TD child liked to act silly and the SN child liked to laugh). Other responses indicated that the SN child depended on the TD child to help correct his speech, the TD child spoke for the SN child, or the TD child was a role model for the SN child. A few other teacher responses described the TD child taking a nurturing or mothering role in the relationship, or talked about opposites attracting when saying the friends had different temperaments.

***Affection.*** Approximately half of the teachers described specific friendships as characterized by children's expressions of affection, positive affect, liking, and enjoyment. As did parents, teachers said the friends hugged, held hands, told each other that they loved one another, smiled, laughed, and joked with each other. Friends also greeted each other and showed excitement at seeing each other. As responses were coded at the phrase level, some responses to interview questions received more than one code. This teacher's response gave details about the children's *play* as well as described signs of *affection*:

They like to get down and wrestle and do physical things together on the playground, like go down the slide a million times, and think it's just a hoot. There's a *Connect 4* game that we have... and they'll sit there and make patterns, and then they'll push the little lever at the bottom and watch it all fall on the table, and they'll just laugh and laugh, and they'll do it over and over and over. But they really love to read books together.

Responses coded in this category provided evidence for the harmonious nature of specific friendships as described by teachers. The following section presents somewhat contrasting – though rare – results.

### ***Teacher Beliefs Theme 2: A Few Friendships Were Inconsistent or Conflicted***

Some teachers suggested that specific friendships were inconsistent, conflicted, or inconsistent and conflicted. As described with parent results, at least one parent as well as the teacher for four SN-TD dyads gave information suggesting these friendships were

characterized by inconsistencies, conflicts, or both.

***Inconsistent.*** One teacher said the TD child in this friendship was not always willing to play with the SN child. However, the teacher said the same TD child sometimes did play with the SN child.

***Conflicted.*** A few teachers described the friends as having many conflicts, or described specific friendships as inconsistent and conflicted as in the following quote about the friends' interactions:

Initially, very good, but ... as it continues, Luke gets so intense in what's going on and really doesn't give much breathing space to the person that he's with that it starts to get too much and Andrew would hit him or shout at him or just get too frustrated by him.

On the other hand, one teacher said that whereas the friendship had been more inconsistent and conflicted at first; the children seemed to be playing well together recently.

### ***Teacher Beliefs Theme 3: Importance of Friendships***

Teacher beliefs about the importance of specific friendships were analyzed in the same manner as were parent beliefs except that teachers were asked about the importance of specific friendships separately for the SN and TD children in the dyad. All teachers in this study believed these friendships to be "important" (including responses such as, "I think it's good for Paul"), or "very important," for the SN children in these dyads. In contrast, some of the teachers said these friendships were not especially important for the TD children in these dyads. Some responses made direct comparisons of the importance of this friendship for the SN child and TD child (e.g., "Now, Chantay, on the other hand, I don't think it really matters with her. She could take Marquis, or leave Marquis. She could go on to a new friend").

Teacher beliefs about why specific friendships were important were coded under the same categories as parent beliefs. Similar to parents, teachers also noted that friendships in

general were important and that some children had limited access to peers outside of school.

***Emotional resource.*** Teachers believed this friendship to be important because it served as an emotional resource for SN and for TD children. This reason was reported by almost all teachers. Responses coded in this category indicated that children having someone – maybe with some commonalities – to play with and talk to was important for helping children feel comfortable at school and for helping children transition to a new school. Teachers also noted children’s fun and enjoyment as reasons why they thought specific friendships were important. Specific friendships were also believed to be important for a child’s self-esteem and confidence:

Whenever we had a circle time and we’d go around and talk about friends; the look on each other’s faces when they heard the other person say their name, then it was obviously a huge boost to their ego that somebody did like them better than anybody else.

Indeed, responses coded in this category included teachers saying the child considered the target friend to be his or her friend or best friend and the child thinking it was important to have a friend. As with parent data, also coded in this category were teacher responses indicating that the target friend understood a child’s speech while other peers did not, as well as responses indicating that children helped one another.

***Learning about relationships.*** The belief that specific friendships were important as a context for children to learn about relationships was reported by several teachers when asked about SN children and by only one teacher when asked about TD children. Teachers believed that children learned social skills, learned how to interact with children (including older or younger children and children other than the target friend), and learned how to develop relationships through specific friendships. Moreover, lack of exposure to same age peers outside of school was noted as a further reason why this friendship was important for a

child's learning about relationships.

***Cognitive resource.*** When asked about SN children, several teachers noted this friendship was important because it served as a cognitive resource for the children. Teachers said these friendships were important for the SN children to learn and make developmental advances. No teachers mentioned this reason in response to importance questions about TD children.

***Importance of friendships in general.*** Even though importance questions were asked about specific friendships in particular, a few teachers mentioned during the interviews that friendships in general were important. These teachers noted children's lack of exposure to same age peers outside of school as rationales for believing friendships in general to be important for the children.

### ***Summary***

In summary, most teachers described the nature of specific friendships as harmonious, though a few believed the friendships to be inconsistent or to have many conflicts. The majority of teachers believed that specific friendships were important for the emotional resource they provided both SN and TD children. A few teachers believed the friendships to be important as a context for learning about relationships and as a cognitive resource, particularly for the SN children in these dyads. Furthermore, children's limited access to peers at home was mentioned in combination with the cognitive resource code and as a reason why friendships in general were important for children.

### ***Comparison of Parent and Teacher Beliefs***

As is evident from the results described above, parents and teachers reported very similar beliefs about the nature and importance of specific SN-TD friendship dyads. The

majority of parent and teacher participants believed the friendships to be harmonious and important for children due to the emotional support they provided children. Analysis did not reveal any notable differences between parents and teachers regarding beliefs about the nature and importance of these friendships. The next section presents results describing parent and teacher strategies to support friendships.

### **Practices used to Support Preschool SN-TD Friendships**

The majority of interview questions (and the bulk of the data collected in this study) focused on research question 2: *What strategies do parents and teachers use to facilitate the SN-TD friendship, and what factors affect their use of these strategies?* As described in the method section, the thematic analysis focused on parent and teacher practices. However, reasons participants gave for using each practice were also noted in a separate listing in order to give some information about possible factors affecting use of practices. Results of the analysis for research question 2 are presented below, first for parents and then for teachers. Possible factors affecting use of practices are described following these results. Finally, comparisons of parent and teacher practices are made in order to address the practices component of research question 3: *What are the similarities and differences between parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the support of these SN-TD friendships?*

#### ***Parent Practices***

Two open-ended questions on the interview protocol asked parents whether there were things that they did to help the SN child and the TD child in this dyad become and stay friends, and if so, what kinds of things they did. Several questions followed these open-ended questions to ask for additional details about the practices parents mentioned and to probe for use of practices noted in previous research (i.e., arranging times for the dyad to play together,

giving the friends ideas about ways to talk or play with each other, helping the friends play together by participating in the play themselves, helping the friends play together by supervising the play, and helping the friends resolve conflicts). Parents reported using several practices to support specific friendships in response to the questions described above and in some cases in response to other interview protocol questions such as question 14: *What was most helpful for [SN child] and [TD child] to stay friends with each other?* Thematic analysis of interview transcripts resulted in three broad themes describing practices parents and teachers reported using in support of specific friendships. The first theme described social environment practices. The other themes were: providing opportunities for dyadic interactions and facilitating dyadic interactions or play. Although the major themes were the same for parents and teachers, results are presented separately for each group. Table 3.3 lists codes for parent practices and sample quotations under each theme. The themes are further described below.

Table 3.3

*Parent Practices*

Practice code	Sample response(s)
Theme 1: Social environment practices	
Supervising	I would just keep an eye on them. They would be playing in the backyard and I'd look out the window to make sure that they were behaving and playing together nicely.
Talking about friends and social skills in general	I just teach Saffie to be polite, and to be nice to all her friends.  I've taught Christopher to be nice to everybody he meets, and explained to him that everybody's different, and everybody has fears, but always try to be a help. That's just the way I've trained him. So, to be nice to people. So if he sees somebody's afraid, you know, you go and try to comfort them.

Talking about the target friend	I asked questions about Paul after [Graham] got back from school.  I just try to... talk to Luke when he comes home about Andrew; ask him, "Oh, what's Andrew doing these days and did you see him?"
Greeting friends	If I go into the class, I just try to walk over and say hello to Andrew.
Bringing children to school	I take her to school every day.
Letting children choose	I try to let him choose his friends.

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Theme 2: Providing opportunities for dyadic interactions

Arranging playdates	She came over to my house first, and then we went over to her house later that afternoon.  He's come over before. Sam asked to have two kids over, and Beren was one of the ones he picked. And he's come to Sam's birthday party.
Encouraging the friendship	I ask Graham that if he wants to invite Paul over to come play that he could do that.
Putting friends together	When I work at [name of child care program], if Beren's not doing much, I'll get him and Sam doing something together.

---

Theme 3: Facilitating dyadic interactions or play

Resolving conflicts	Beren was throwing puzzle pieces, and Sam was getting mad. So I suggested to Sam he tell Beren how he felt, and I asked Beren how he would feel if he was working on something and Sam was messing it up.  It was over a toy in the classroom and they were – actually I was in there at that time – and they were arguing and so both of them came up to me, so I tried to let one of them play with it first and then let the other one play with it.
Participating in friends' play	I've actually been in the classroom a couple times and I've played with Damon and Saffie before.

	It may have just been like if they were playing dress up or firefighters or something and I was the one that was needing to be rescued or saved. Or if I was the one that was injured. Or sometimes when they play sports or soccer or something, to be the referee.
Coaching friends' use of social skills	When I've been around them I've pushed them to share with each other, not get aggravated or anything like that, taking turns, and things like that.
Giving friends ideas about how or what to play	I would try to – in the 20 minutes or 25 minutes or something that I was there – would ... try to redirect them to being on the monkey bars.
Conversing with the dyad	If Luke had brought something to school with him and Luke was showing it to [his friend], we'd talk about whatever that object- the toy was, or the book was, or the story, or whatever.

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### ***Parent Practices Theme 1: Social Environment Practices***

A number of practices parents reported using to support specific friendships were general practices that gave information about parents' philosophies about their children's social environment. These strategies may be described as passive strategies and were almost always used by a parent with her own child only. Supervising and greeting friends were exceptions in that supervising involved both friends and greeting friends involved the target friend. Active strategies that focused on both friends in the dyad were coded under different themes. Practices that fell under the social environment theme included supervising, talking about friends and social skills in general, talking about the target friend, greeting friends, bringing children to school, and letting children choose. The next section provides descriptions for these practices. Results for SN parents and TD parents are presented together because parents in both groups provided responses that fell under these same three main themes.

***Supervising.*** In response to probing questions about practices used in support of

specific friendships, several SN and TD parents reported supervising the friends, although no parents reported this practice in response to the initial open-ended questions. This code was used for responses indicating that parents engaged in passive supervision: watching, listening, and observing. For example, one parent said she sat and watched the friends while they played on a computer.

***Talking about friends and social skills in general.*** Several parents reported talking to children about friends and about social behaviors and play skills. This practice was noted in response to the initial open-ended questions about practices used and during other points in the interview. This category included responses indicating that parents talked to children about use of prosocial behaviors in general (rather than with the dyad in particular). Parents reported telling their children to be kind, share, be polite, no fighting, be nice, be helpful, be honest, and treat others the way you want to be treated. Some parents asked their children who they played with today.

***Talking about the target friend.*** Several parents reported talking with their children specifically about the target friend in this dyad (e.g., asking their child what the friends did during the day): “When they were playing dress up for Noah’s Ark, I asked Graham, ‘What did Paul dress up as?’ If Graham will say that they had centers together, I’d ask what they did in the center.” This practice was reported by more SN parents than TD parents, both in response to the open-ended questions about practices and during the interview as a whole.

***Greeting friends.*** A few SN and TD parents reported greeting the target friend (and in one case, other friends) as a strategy to support specific friendships. One parent gave this description of how she acknowledged her child’s friends:

When I go to pick up James or drop James off, those that he talks about at home, I acknowledge them more maybe with a little pat on the head or I just touch them and

say, “Hey, it’s good to see ya.”...I do respond by calling their names, those that he talks about.

***Bringing children to school.*** A few SN and TD parents reported bringing their child to school as one strategy to support specific friendships. Although this and the next practice may not be considered to be friendship practices, they have been included in these results because parents mentioned them in response to questions about practices. Such responses give an idea of the general and passive nature of some parents’ involvement with these particular friendships.

***Letting children choose.*** Only a few SN parents reported allowing children choose their friends or choose with whom they wanted to play. In the following case, the parent did not believe she could choose friends for her child:

I try not to push too much on Heidi at this age. I try to let her kind of decide what she wants to do. ...as far as friendships and things like that, I feel like they kind of work out who’s going to be their friends and who will not. I can’t choose those for her.

No TD parents gave responses coded in this category.

Whereas the above practices describing the social environment could be described as passive strategies, parents also reported using more active strategies that were coded under the next two themes. These next themes describe practices reflecting more intentionality and involvement on the part of parents, as well as a focus on this dyad.

### ***Parent Practices Theme 2: Providing Opportunities for Dyadic Interactions***

Parents reported using several practices that provided opportunities for the friends in specific friendship dyads to interact with each other. These practices were always used with the two friends together, with the exception of responses coded as *encouraging the friendship* (e.g., a parent telling her child that he could invite his friend over to play). Following are descriptions of the codes for practices that fell under this theme.

***Arranging playdates.*** Parents reported arranging playdates for the friends in this study. According to both SN and TD parent participants, almost half of the SN-TD dyads had played together outside of the school setting. Of these, some dyads had regular playdates, while others had not played together very often. One dyad had played together away from school once and their parents frequently allowed them to play together just outside the childcare center after pick-up. Playdates that parents reported arranging included taking the friends to a movie, to a restaurant, and to each other's homes. Parents also reported inviting the target friend to attend their child's birthday party, though the friend was not always able to attend. Finally, one SN parent said she had initially tried to arrange playdates for the friends by inviting the target friend's family to community events, but that she was unsuccessful. She discontinued trying to arrange playdates when teachers advised her that the target friend might not be the best person to do this with (described with results for research question 4).

***Encouraging the friendship.*** While practices coded in other categories and under other themes could also be said to encourage specific friendships, some responses did not fit under other codes. This code was reserved for such responses relating to encouraging the friendship. Parents reported encouraging the friends to play with each other or encouraging the friendship in general (e.g., "We encourage his friendship with Graham"), including suggesting that the child invite his or her friend over to play. Only a few responses were coded in this category.

***Putting friends together.*** One friendship dyad attended a childcare center where parents were required to regularly volunteer for several hours, and the parent of the SN child in this dyad reported intentionally putting the friends together for activities. Other parent

practices that put friends together all focused on settings outside of school and were coded under *arranging playdates*.

The practices coded above under theme two provided opportunities for the friends to engage in dyadic interactions. Responses coded under the following and final practices theme indicated practices that may have facilitated dyadic interactions.

### ***Parent Practices Theme 3: Facilitating Dyadic Interactions or Play***

A number of parent responses indicated their use of practices that seemed more focused on facilitating the friends' dyadic interactions or play. These practices are described in the next section.

***Resolving conflicts.*** Many SN and TD parents reported helping the friends to resolve conflicts, although most responses coded in this category were responses to probing questions as only a few parents spontaneously noted this practice in response to the initial open-ended questions. Resolving conflicts included responses about helping friends talk through or work out conflicts, encouraging children to use words to resolve conflicts, and giving a child scripts to use to resolve conflicts. In about half the cases, parents described talking with the dyad to help resolve conflicts between the friends, and in about half the cases parents described talking with only the target friend or their child to help resolve conflicts between them, as in the following example:

He might say, "Well, Frank did such-and-such today." I always encourage him, "Well, did you tell him? Did you use your words and tell him that you didn't like it and how it makes you feel?" And he'll say, "Yes." I'll say, "Well always use your words. And let him know how it feels if you don't like it."

Although, the parent used this strategy with her child rather than the dyad, the strategy was about the interactions of the two friends.

***Participating in friends' play.*** Several SN and TD parents reported participating in

friends' play. Similar to resolving conflicts, most responses coded in this category were responses to probing questions, rather than to the initial open-ended questions. Examples of parent participation in play included taking a role in pretend play, playing a game, and reading the friends a book.

***Coaching friends' use of social skills.*** Parent responses indicating the coaching of children's social and play skills were coded in this category, unless the practice was part of resolving a conflict, in which case the response was coded as *resolving conflicts*. Parents reported coaching the friends' use of social and play skills with each other. In some cases, parents coached their own child about social skills, but the focus of the coaching was the interactions of the dyad (e.g., telling their child to greet the target friend). Parents reported coaching children to play nicely, share, take turns, talk to each other, be kind, greet your friend in the morning and say "good-bye" in the afternoon. This category included parent responses about telling friends how to share items they both wanted. Although only a few parents noted coaching the friends' use of social skills in response to the initial open-ended questions, use of this practice was reported at some point during the interview by several parents in each group (SN and TD).

***Giving friends ideas about how or what to play.*** Responses describing parents giving friends ideas about how or what to play with each other were coded in this category. Such responses included suggesting specific activities, suggesting activities for children who were not engaged, and redirecting children from inappropriate activities to more appropriate activities. However, if a parent described giving the friends ideas as part of resolving a conflict, it was coded as *resolving conflicts* instead. Activities that parents suggested to children included doing puzzles, playing favorite pretend games, and playing sports games.

No parents noted giving the friends ideas for playing together in response to the initial open-ended questions, but use of this practice was reported during the rest of the interview by a few SN parents. Likewise, the next strategy was only mentioned in response to probing questions rather than spontaneously in response to open-ended questions.

***Conversing with the dyad.*** Only a few SN parents said they engaged the friends in conversation or joined the friends' conversation by asking them about or commenting on their activities and interests inside and outside of the classroom. No responses falling under this code were provided by TD parents.

### ***Teacher-Reported Parent Practices***

In order to access information about practices that parents used, but neglected to mention, I asked teachers whether parents did things to help these children become or stay friends. Most teachers did note specific strategies parents used in support of these friendships. All of the practices teachers reported parents as using were coded under codes already reported by parents (i.e., no new themes or practices emerged).

### ***Factors Affecting Parent use of Practices***

For each practice that parents reported using, there were two questions on the interview protocol relating to factors affecting their use of practices. These questions were: (a) *How and why did you decide to do this?* and (b) *How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?* The first question was asked of all parents and the second of all SN parents. However, early in the interview, parents were asked if their child's target friend had a disability. Of the 12 TD parents, 6 were not aware of the target friend's disability and I was careful not to reveal the SN child's ability status. Therefore, I did not ask the second question when interviewing those TD parents.

A list of rationales parents gave for using each practice was made and examined for information about possible factors affecting parent use of practices. Rationales were not coded because of the idiosyncratic nature of parent responses and because of the decision to focus on friendship practices, but examples of parent responses are provided here. Some parents said their reason for using practices with this dyad – such as giving friends ideas about how or what to play – was that friends and friendships are an important emotional resource for their children: for a sense of social confidence, for being accepted, and for enjoyment. Similarly, some parents said they used these strategies because the target friend was important to their child. Indeed, child request was a rationale given for both arranging playdates and participating in friends' play. Other parent responses suggested that they used various practices to support these friendships in order to help the children's interactions go smoothly: to make sure children were getting along well, to avoid escalation of conflicts, and to avoid or redirect inappropriate behavior (e.g., self-stimulation or aggression). Less common responses included a TD parent arranging for friends to play together because she got along well with the target friend's parent, and an SN parent trying to facilitate dyadic interactions between specific friends because she did not believe her child's teachers were doing enough to help him interact with peers.

When asked how the SN child's disability affected decisions to use particular practices, parents gave several responses indicating that the child's disability did not affect their decision to employ particular strategies. However, this question was asked for each practice that parents reported using and several parents (SN and TD) at least once noted the SN child's disability as affecting their decision to employ a particular practice. For example, the SN child's disability affected this TD parent's decision to supervise the friends' play:

“Beren has difficulty with play skills; so that it wouldn’t be destructive or that he would be engaged at all, I needed to be supervising it.” In a second example, this SN parent said her child’s disability was the major influence in her decision to converse with the dyad because her child had difficulty making connections with peers:

I mean part of it – I’d say 20% of it – was normal mom wanting child to have a nice friend, and 80% of it was: this is a big area for Luke that he needs a lot of help with.

The TD parents who listed the SN child’s disability as affecting their decision to employ a particular practice had children whose target friend had a moderate or severe disability.

Overall, SN parents seemed to be more involved than TD parents in terms of use of practices. For example, more SN parents than TD parents reported the use of most practices, and more SN parents than TD parents used practices coded under multiple themes. The SN child’s disability may have affected SN parents’ use of a variety of practices.

I also listed rationales parents gave for not using practices to support specific friendships when such responses were given. Rationales parents gave for not arranging playdates included: scheduling issues, the children played together at school, and playdates were difficult because other children didn’t understand the social issues of the SN child. One parent described a struggle to make sure her child was diagnosed and receiving services and said friendship had not been a priority compared to settling those issues. Some parents said they did not use practices to facilitate friends’ interactions because they weren’t around the friends, and in some cases, because the friends did not have conflicts.

Many parents reported practices that their children’s teachers used to support specific friendship dyads or said they didn’t know for sure or they didn’t know specifics, but they thought or guessed that teachers used strategies in support of these friendships (e.g., “Probably she did a lot of the same things of supervising and helping their interactions stay

friendly”). I mention this here because it may be the case that if parents believe that teachers use various practices to support friendships, then parents themselves may not feel the need to employ these strategies. In other words, the belief that specific friendships are supported at school may be one factor affecting parent use of friendship practices. Indeed, in response to questions about what was most helpful for the children becoming and staying friends and about what influenced the children becoming and staying friends, every parent mentioned teachers or school. Moreover, all parents mentioned school as the place where these friends met and where they usually played together. (Responses to these latter questions were noted, but were not thematically analyzed as they were not directly relevant to the research questions of this study.)

### ***Summary***

To summarize this section, parents of both the SN and TD children reported use of a number of practices to support specific friendship dyads, from general, passive, social environment level practices to more active, intentional strategies focused on dyadic interactions. The following section describes results of the analysis of teacher practices.

### ***Teacher Practices***

As with parent interviews, two open-ended questions on the interview protocol asked teachers whether there were things that they did to help the SN child and TD child in this dyad become and stay friends, and if so, what kinds of things they did. Several questions followed these open-ended questions to ask for additional details about the practices teachers mentioned and to probe for use of practices noted in previous research (i.e., arranging times for the dyad to play together, giving friends ideas, participating in the play, supervising the play, and resolving conflicts). Teachers reported using several practices to support specific

friendships in response to these and other questions on the protocol. As with parents, thematic analysis of interview transcripts resulted in three themes describing practices teachers reported using in support of specific friendships. The first theme described social environment practices. The other themes were: providing opportunities for dyadic interactions and facilitating dyadic interactions or play. Table 3.4 lists codes for teacher practices and sample quotations under each theme. These themes are described further below.

Table 3.4

*Teacher Practices*

Practice code	Sample response(s)
Theme 1: Social environment practices	
Supervising	I've watched them. I sat back and watched them color together just to see how they talk to each other.
Talking about friends and social skills in general	I always work with all my children in the room. I just teach them to respect each other, set down classroom rules of treat each other like you want to be treated. Don't make fun of the other people.  We talk about friendships.
Letting children choose	We let the children choose who they want to play with.  But when they go on the playground, it's free reign and they will always play together on the playground.
Separating friends	We separate them in order for them to concentrate on what they're actually doing as opposed to just playing with friends.
Talking about all classmates being friends	We encourage all of the kids to get along with each other. We talk about everybody being friends.  By the end of the year we have made 12 new friends.
Requiring children to play with all classmates	I make everybody play with everybody.... As they change centers they have to change to a different center with a different child.

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Theme 2: Providing opportunities for dyadic interactions

Putting friends together	If he's here for breakfast, I'll make sure that they sit at the same table and then for group time, I mean, for center time.  I do put them in the same centers a lot of times.
Encouraging the friendship	[We]...encourage him to continue playing with Luke.
Planning favorite activities	I would do different activities that I knew they both liked such as art, painting, drawing.

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Theme 3: Facilitating dyadic interactions or play

Participating in friends' play	I've played a lot of ball games with them, and I've played puzzles with them as well.  I sit down with them a lot; try to help them.
Resolving conflicts	When they have a disagreement we have them talk through things, and tell each other what they didn't like, and how could they help each other make each other feel better.  Sometimes if they do argue over something, we suggest certain ways to handle it.
Giving friends ideas about how or what to play	I'll say, "Hey, you guys want to go read a book?" or "Do you want to do a floor puzzle together today?"  Sometimes Christopher can go a little overboard with the rapping, and we'll suggest a different type of song to sing.
Coaching friends' use of social skills	I would just say, "You know, that is not how we play with our friends. We need to play nicely. We need to share."
Conversing with the dyad	When they're talking or they want to tell me a story and it's something to do with them, I'll always say, "Oh that's great! And what did you all do after this?" I try to get them to tell me more...
Interpreting for the SN child	I had to help him do a little bit of talking at first; explain to Chantay what he was trying to say to her...because some of his words wouldn't come out.

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### ***Teacher Practices Theme 1: Social Environment Practices***

A number of practices teachers reported using to support specific friendships were practices that described the classroom social environment and gave information about teachers' philosophies about the social environment in their classrooms. These were classroom level practices and teachers often referred to the whole class when describing practices coded under this theme, though sometimes teachers did mention using these practices with the dyad. Descriptions of the codes for practices that fell under this theme are presented next.

***Supervising.*** In response to probing questions about practices used in support of specific friendships, almost all teachers reported supervising the friends, although no teachers reported this practice in response to the initial open-ended questions. This code was used for responses indicating that teachers engaged in passive supervision: watching, listening, and observing.

***Talking about friends and social skills in general.*** Many teachers reported talking to children about friends and about social behaviors and social skills. Only a few teachers noted this practice in response to the initial open-ended questions about practices used, but a majority of the teachers mentioned this practice at some point in the interview. This category encompassed responses indicating that teachers talked to children about use of prosocial behaviors and play skills in general (rather than with the dyad in particular). Similar to parents, teachers reported telling children to be kind, cooperate, share, help, be nice, and use your words to explain how you feel. Teachers also reported telling children ways to get involved with friends, and to avoid name-calling. One teacher said she guided children to generate a classroom rule about treating each other with respect, while another said she

talked to children about friends during circle time. Indeed, most responses coded in this category described practices used with the whole class. Only one teacher mentioned social goals on a child's IEP, though a couple of other teachers did report working on social skills with the SN child or the TD child (but not focused on this friendship).

***Letting children choose.*** Teachers reported letting children choose their friends or choose with whom they wanted to play (e.g., in centers, during group time, on the playground, and during special activities or events). This category also encompassed responses indicating that teachers provided free play time, allowed the friends to play together or not play together, and allowed the friends to have a quiet space to play with each other. Several teachers noted this practice at some point in the interview.

***Separating friends.*** A few teachers reported separating friends when they weren't getting along, when they were disruptive (e.g., talking too much), or in order to get them used to playing with other children.

***Talking about all classmates being friends.*** Teachers reported talking with children about everybody in the class being friends with each other. This kind of dialog reflected an understanding of friendship as children in the same class getting along, rather than as a dyadic relationship. Use of this practice was rarely mentioned in response to the initial open-ended questions about practices used, but was mentioned by several teachers in response to probing and other questions on the protocol.

***Requiring children to play with all classmates.*** Although this was not a common response, teachers did report encouraging or requiring everybody in the class to play with everybody else. For example, one teacher said she required the children in her class to rotate through centers with different peers in each rotation in order to get to know everyone.

Another teacher reported encouraging the SN child to play with other children, not just the target friend.

***Other social environment practices.*** Only a few teachers noted practices that did not fall under the above codes and were coded under this social environment theme. These practices included: (a) encouraging children to play with a new classmate; (b) providing a child-centered classroom (i.e., a stimulating, interesting environment in which children were allowed to make choices); (c) teaching children about diversity; (d) modeling social skills or friendship (e.g., “We just model being good friends in our class, my co-teacher and I”), and (e) having friends make cards or pictures for each other (e.g., if the friends had to be apart while one went to therapy).

As described with parent results, some of the above practices may not be considered to be practices facilitative of friendships. However, they have been included in these results because teachers mentioned them in response to questions about friendship practices and because these responses give an idea of the general and passive nature of some teachers’ strategies in support of specific friendships. Similar to parents, teachers also used active strategies that were coded under the next two themes. These next themes describe practices reflecting more intentionality and involvement on the part of teachers as well as a focus on the dyad rather than the class as a whole.

### ***Teacher Practices Theme 2: Providing Opportunities for Dyadic Interactions***

Teachers reported using several practices that provided opportunities for the friends in specific friendship dyads to interact with each other. These practices were almost always used with the two friends together. Descriptions of the codes for practices that fell under this theme are presented next.

***Putting friends together.*** This category was used for responses indicating that teachers intentionally put the children in specific friendship dyads together for activities such as stories, group time, or centers. In response to the initial open-ended questions about practices used in support of these friendships and to other questions during the interview, about half of the teachers mentioned putting the friends together. Putting friends together included assigning friends to be buddies, assigning friends to play areas where there were less likely to be conflicts over things like materials, assigning friends to play areas where only two children were allowed or to particular centers where certain types of play were likely to benefit children, and asking friends which center they wanted to go to one after the other so they could end up in the same center before it filled up. In one case, teachers used one friend to help or to involve the other friend. One child wouldn't go to the sand table, but when the teacher had his friend work with him there: "they played with each other for a good 15 minutes in the sand table, putting flowers together in buckets."

***Encouraging the friendship.*** Whereas the practices coded in other categories and under other themes could also be said to encourage these friendships, some responses did not fit in other categories. This code was reserved for such responses relating to encouraging the friendship. A few teachers reported practices coded here (e.g., encouraging the friends to play with each other, encouraging the friendship in general, or encouraging the friendship by sharing information with parents). In response to the open-ended questions about practices used, only one teacher reported communicating with parents about the friendship and sharing information specifically so that parents could arrange for the friends to play together outside of school. However, in response to direct questions about parent-teacher communication later in the interview protocol, other teachers did note communicating with parents about specific

friendships. The content of this communication is addressed with results for research question 4.

***Planning favorite activities.*** Teachers also reported planning activities that both friends enjoyed (such as painting and dancing), or getting toys out that both friends liked to play with. Responses coded in this category were rare.

***Other practice providing opportunities for dyadic interactions.*** One teacher reported using a particular practice with the SN child in the dyad. This teacher had a folder containing pictures of the children in the class doing activities they enjoyed. She used this to help the SN child choose someone to play with and something to ask that child to do with him. Although all class members were included in the folder, this teacher said the SN child always chose the target friend.

The practices coded above under theme two provided opportunities for the friends to engage in dyadic interactions. Responses coded under the following and final practices theme indicated practices focused on facilitating the friends' dyadic interactions.

### ***Teacher Practices Theme 3: Facilitating Dyadic Interactions or Play***

A number of teachers described active strategies that were focused on the dyad but seemed to go beyond merely getting the friends together in the same place. These practices seemed to be aimed at helping the children interact with each other or facilitating smooth interactions between specific friends.

***Participating in friends' play.*** All teachers reported helping the friends play together by participating in the play themselves. For example, teachers said they played games with the friends or built with the friends in the block center. This teacher participated in pretend play: "Yes, I have been part of their housekeeping area. I have gotten married once in

housekeeping, and Neal was the husband and Kelly was the priest.” Interestingly, although all teachers responded to probing questions to indicate they used this practice, no teachers spontaneously noted participating in the play themselves in response to the initial open-ended questions about practices used.

***Resolving conflicts.*** Most teachers reported helping the friends to resolve conflicts, and about half of the teachers spontaneously noted this practice in response to the initial open-ended questions. Responses coded in this category included helping friends talk through or work out conflicts, encouraging children to use words to resolve conflicts, and talking to children about how it would make them feel if they were treated in a particular manner. This category encompassed responses indicating that teachers talk to the friends together or individually about conflicts to help resolve them so that the friends could go back to playing together. An example of a strategy used with one of the friends individually was a teacher telling the TD child words to use to try to get the SN child to stop doing something that was bothering him.

***Giving friends ideas about how or what to play.*** Teachers reported giving specific friends ideas about how or what to play with each other. This included responses such as suggesting specific activities, redirecting children from inappropriate activities to more appropriate activities, and suggesting activities for children who were not engaged. For example, this teacher gave the friends an idea about how to play with materials:

We’d have little dolls and they can do the hair or put clothes on them. And they’d have the clothes on the table and just do their hair and I’d go over and say, “I think those dolls are cold; they need some clothes on.”

Although not commonly reported in response to the initial open-ended questions, giving the friends ideas for playing together was reported at some point during the interview by a

majority of the teachers.

***Coaching friends' use of social skills.*** As did parents, teachers reported coaching the friends' use of social and play skills with each other. Teachers reported coaching children to play nicely, share, take turns, talk to each other, talk about feelings, and treat each other with respect. Some teachers said they gave specific words to use to one or both friends (e.g., "Go ask Saffie this..."), or told friends how to share items they both wanted (e.g., "One will play with it for a couple of minutes then let the other one have a turn and switch back and forth"). One teacher played the role of someone whose feelings were hurt and asked the friends what they would say to make her feel better, whereas another used a game about feelings to help children talk about their own feelings. This practice was not commonly reported in response to the initial open-ended questions, but coaching the friends' use of social skills was reported at some point during the interview by a majority of the teachers.

***Conversing with the dyad.*** Some teachers reported engaging the friends in conversation or joining the friends' conversation by asking them about or commenting on their activities and interests inside and outside of the classroom and what they liked about each other. One teacher said she praised children for playing well together. Also coded in this category were responses indicating that teachers talked with the dyad about friendship, that friends are important, and that they would still be friends despite disagreements.

***Interpreting for the SN child.*** Teachers mentioned interpreting the SN child's words or behaviors for the TD friend, particularly if a speech disability resulted in the SN child's words being hard to understand or a developmental disability affected the SN child's social interactions, as in the following example:

At first she wasn't sure why he would come up to her and hug her. He was always so friendly with her. So we would just talk to her about that he needed help talking to

other friends and he might need a little extra help socializing with kids.

Interpreting for the SN child was not a commonly reported practice.

### ***Parent-Reported Teacher Practices***

In order to access information about practices that teachers used, but neglected to mention, I asked parents whether teachers did things to help specific children become or stay friends. Parents reported teachers as using practices under all three themes. All practices were coded under codes already reported by teachers (i.e., no new themes emerged). The following section provides information about possible factors affecting teachers' friendship practices.

### ***Factors Affecting Teacher use of Practices***

Two questions on the interview protocol relating to factors affecting teacher use of practices were asked for each practice that teachers reported using. These questions were: (a) *How and why did you decide to do this?* and (b) *How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?* Because of the idiosyncratic nature of teachers' responses and the decision to focus analysis on practices, rationales for using practices were not coded. However, a list of rationales teachers mentioned for using each practice was made and examined for information about possible factors affecting teacher use of practices. Some teachers noted the importance of friendships as a reason for using a practice with this dyad. Several teachers said particular strategies were part of their job or how they teach (e.g., "It's just the way I teach" [re *planning favorite activities*]). Many responses suggested that teachers used various practices to support these friendships in order to help the classroom run smoothly: to help children get along and play well, to prevent conflicts, to avoid escalation of conflicts, and to help the children make good choices. The latter rationales were given for

teacher use of a variety of practices under each of the three themes, not just for using practices coded as resolving conflicts.

When asked how the SN child's disability affected their decision to use particular practices, teachers – like parents – gave several responses indicating the child's disability did not affect their decision to employ particular strategies. However, this question was asked for each practice that teachers reported using and every teacher at least once noted the SN child's disability as affecting their decision to employ a particular practice. For example, one teacher participated in the friends' play because teacher involvement helped the SN child to stay engaged longer. In another example, the SN child's disability affected a teacher's decision to put friends together for activities in that the TD child understood the SN child's speech: "because Kelly understands him." The following response suggested that the nature of the SN child's disability – in particular its effect on his socialization – affected this teacher's decision to coach the friends' use of social skills (in this case, initiating interactions with peers):

Just working on his socialization to get him to- I forget what they exactly say with the Asperger's, but he won't- he's very factual. He won't come to you and just start talking about things that aren't right in front of him. So that's why we're trying to get him and Saffie to talk.

I also listed rationales teachers gave for not using practices to support specific friendships when such responses were given. Rationales for not using friendship practices included: the children were already friends when they came to this classroom, or the children figured out how to be and stay friends on their own. One teacher said she did not have to help children resolve conflicts because these friends did not have conflicts, while another said she did not arrange times for these friends to play together because their parents did this.

Results of the thematic analysis suggest that teachers did use a variety of active

strategies to help the children in these friendship dyads become and stay friends, and a review of the reasons given for using practices suggests that teachers were attuned to the unique socialization needs of some SN children. Nonetheless, comments made throughout the interviews indicated varying degrees of intentionality in teachers' use of practices for the purpose of facilitating specific friendships. This teacher's response suggested that she was very intentional in choosing to put the friends together:

Well, I did choose someone who is very relaxed because I didn't want to scare [SN child]. I wanted him to try to reach out for someone and I figured James was so calm that that would be a positive person for him to reach for.

On the other hand, a different teacher described engaging the friends in conversation and then stated, "It wasn't anything I did consciously. I just- because that's what I do with my children, I start asking them questions about their day." Indeed, the majority of teachers made statements – about one or more of the practices they reported using – indicating that (a) this practice was used with children in general rather than intended to be focused on the dyad (e.g., "I mean, we play with all of the kids" [*re participating in friends' play*]), (b) she would do this for or with any children (e.g., "But I do it for others too, so it's not just the two of them" [*re giving friends ideas about how or what to play*]), or (c) this practice was just part of the daily classroom routine (e.g., "I do that with all the kids on a daily basis" [*re giving ideas*]). These responses suggest that even though teachers said they used a number of practices that were coded as potentially facilitating children's dyadic interactions with friends, teachers may not have had specific friendships in mind when they used these strategies.

Most teachers did report practices that parents used to support these friendship dyads or said they didn't know for sure or they didn't know specifics, but they thought or guessed

that parents used strategies in support of these friendships. This suggests that teachers believed parents employed strategies to support these friendships. As with parents, the belief that these friendships are supported in another setting (i.e., at home), may be one factor affecting teacher use of friendship practices. However, all teachers mentioned school as the place where these friends met and where they usually played together.

### ***Summary***

To summarize this section, teachers – like parents – reported use of a variety of practices to support specific friendship dyads, from general, passive, classroom level practices to more active strategies focused on dyadic interactions. The following section provides further comparison of parent and teacher practices.

### ***Comparison of Parent and Teacher Practices***

According to results of the thematic analysis, parents and teachers used similar practices in support of preschool SN-TD friendship dyads. Of all the practices resulting from the coding process, the following practices were only reported to be used by parents: talking with their child about the target friend, greeting the target friend in the classroom, bringing their child to school, and arranging playdates. It makes sense that teachers did not use the latter practices because these practices are geared toward parent activities. The practices unique to teachers were the following more classroom oriented practices: separating friends, talking to children about all classmates being friends, requiring children to play with all classmates, planning favorite activities, and interpreting for the SN child. The following practices were reported to be used by SN parents, but not by TD parents: letting children choose their friends or who they want to play with, putting friends together for activities, giving friends ideas about how or what to play, and conversing with the dyad. Parents as well

as teachers reported use of the following: supervising friends, talking about friends and social skills in general, letting children choose their friends or who they want to play with, encouraging the friendship, putting friends together, resolving conflicts, participating in friends' play, coaching friends' use of social skills, giving friends ideas about how or what to play, and conversing with the dyad.

### ***Questionnaire Results***

Results from questionnaires are reported in Table 3.5. These results were consistent with results from the thematic analysis in terms of the types of strategies that parents and teachers reported using to support specific SN-TD friendship dyads. Three of the strategies listed on the questionnaire had not come up during interviews. These were: (a) helping to arrange for the friends to be in formal activities together outside of school, (b) reading stories on the topic of friendship to these friends, and (c) arranging for the friends to be in the same class at school. Although a few participants reported occasionally or frequently using the latter three strategies, most reported never or rarely using them. One parent noted trying to talk with teachers about how to foster the friendship as a strategy under “Other strategies I use.” Other responses to this open-ended question had already come up in interviews. In general, teachers reported using strategies more frequently than did parents. Although all participants completed the questionnaire, some chose not to respond to specific items or their responses to specific items were unclear.

Table 3.5

*Mean Response to Questionnaire Items on a Four Point Scale (Never, Rarely, Occasionally, or Frequently)*

Questionnaire Item	SN parents	TD parents	Teachers
	<i>(n = 12 in each group)</i>		

	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
I provide time for these friends to play together.	0.7 (1.1) <sup>a</sup>	1.0 (1.2) <sup>a</sup>	2.8 (0.6)
I arrange play dates so these friends can play together.	0.7 (1.1) <sup>a</sup>	0.9 (1.2)	0.3 (0.9) <sup>a</sup>
I share information with parents/teachers so that they can arrange for these friends to play together.	0.7 (0.9) <sup>a</sup>	1.0 (1.0)	2.0 (1.0)
I help make arrangements for these friends to be in formal activities together outside of school like tumbling or music.	0.1 (0.3) <sup>a</sup>	0.4 (0.8)	0.3 (0.8)
I provide suggestions to solve problems or resolve conflict between these two friends.	1.1 (1.0)	1.5 (1.0) <sup>a</sup>	2.4 (0.9) <sup>a</sup>
I allow these two friends to “exclude” other children when they want to be alone together.	0.2 (0.6) <sup>a</sup>	0.0 (0.0)	1.4 (1.0)
I encourage play between these two friends by commenting on their activities in an encouraging way.	1.8 (0.9)	1.8 (1.0)	2.7 (0.6)
I invite these two friends to play together.	1.2 (1.1) <sup>a</sup>	0.9 (1.2)	2.2 (0.8)
I make special materials or activities available that encourage these friends to play together.	0.4 (0.6) <sup>a</sup>	0.8 (0.9)	1.9 (0.9)
I teach these children skills for how to be good friends to each other, like sharing, manners, and communicating.	1.6 (1.0)	1.8 (0.9) <sup>b</sup>	2.7 (0.5)
I speak for a child or interpret a child’s behavior so the friend can understand.	1.1 (1.0)	0.7 (0.7)	2.2 (0.7)
I help these friends take turns when they play.	1.2 (0.8) <sup>a</sup>	1.3 (1.1)	2.3 (0.7)
I help these friends talk to each other while they are playing.	1.3 (0.7)	1.3 (1.2)	2.3 (0.7)
I show these friends how to play together by participating in their play.	1.1 (1.0)	0.9 (0.9)	2.3 (0.5)
I read stories on the topic of friendship to these friends.	0.3 (0.6) <sup>a</sup>	0.1 (0.3) <sup>a</sup>	2.4 (0.8)

I have arranged for these friends to be in the same class at school. 0.3 (0.6)<sup>a</sup> 0.3 (0.9)<sup>c</sup> 0.8 (1.3)

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<sup>a</sup>*n* = 11. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 9. <sup>c</sup>*n* = 10.

The fact that most of the strategies reported to be used by parents and teachers on the questionnaires had already come up in interviews serves as a measure of triangulation for thematic analysis findings. Items described above that had not come up in interviews probably did not come up because most parents never or rarely used those strategies. In the next section, results for the final research question of this study are presented.

### **Parent-Teacher Communication about Preschool SN-TD Friendships**

The final research question in this dissertation study focused on home-school communication about specific friendships: *What types of communication – if any – occur between parents and teachers about these friendships?* Thematic analysis focused on the components of interview protocol question 22. However, participant responses giving details about communication relating to specific friendships in other sections of the interview were also coded and included in the results for this question. Results of the analysis for research question 4 are presented below, first for parents and then for teachers.

#### ***Parent-Reported Communication***

Parents were first asked: *Do you communicate with [child]'s teacher about [child]'s friendship with [target friend]?* If the response was positive, parents were then asked what types of things they communicated about relating to this friendship. Thematic analysis for research question 4 focused on the content of parent-teacher communication as reported by participants. If the response was negative, parents were asked if they would like to communicate with their child's teacher about this friendship. Responses to follow-up

questions about frequency, method, preferred method, and satisfaction regarding communication were not thematically analyzed, but were entered into the coding table and analyzed as is. Analysis of interview transcripts resulted in three themes that emerged from parent and teacher data: (a) teachers gave parents information relating to specific friendships, (b) parents asked for or gave teachers information relating to specific friendships, and (c) barriers to communication and reasons for lack of communication. Although the major themes were the same for parents and teachers, results are presented separately for each group. Table 3.6 lists communication codes and sample quotations from parents under each theme. The themes and codes are further described below.

Table 3.6

*Parent-Reported Communication*

Communication code	Sample response(s)
Theme 1: Teachers gave parents information relating to specific friendships	
Details about this friendship	If Monique and David are playing together during the day, [the teacher] always tells me something they did during the day, if it was exciting or whatever. She will always let me know.  At least a couple of times a week, she'd say, "Well we were doing this and Neal and Kelly were just side-by-side the whole time."
These children are friends	[The teacher] you might as well say is the one that brought it to my attention that they're friends, because she did.
Daily activities	More often than not, it's about how his day was.
Theme 2: Parents asked for or gave teachers information relating to specific friendships	
How their child got along with others	I have asked her, "How does Saffie get along with other children?" and, "Does she play well?"  I communicate with his teacher generally speaking about all

	the kids at the school as far as how he's getting along.
About the target friend	When I first started I wanted to know who Hannah was, because it was a name brought up all the time; wanted to get a face with the name.
Conflicts	How often do they get in arguments with each other?
Playdates	Maybe the simple fact that I'm picking up Graham today, or sending a note that Paul is going home with Graham; he'll be riding with him today.

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Theme 3: Barriers to communication and reasons for lack of communication

Do not ask because no problems	I don't really stop and ask her how the friendship is because I felt like more than likely if something was wrong with their friendship or if they couldn't get along, [the teacher] would tell me.
Privacy policy	There's a bunch of kids at the school, but the problem is that they don't give names out. Like a parent has to request- like if- let's say there's a little girl Jacklyn and her mother was looking for playmates for her daughter and asked the teacher if there was anybody that Jacklyn played with in particular. And so she said, "Well, yeah there is; I'll talk to the parents of those children and see if they would be willing to let you contact them." So unless you enquire, you don't really know.

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***Parent Communication Theme 1: Teachers gave Parents Information Relating to Specific Friendships***

When asked about communication with their child's teacher, almost all SN parents and about half of the TD parents reported that teachers gave them information regarding these SN-TD preschool friendships. Below are descriptions of the communication codes that fell under this theme.

***Details about this friendship.*** Parents said that teachers told them positive details about their child's activities with the target friend during the day. Parents also said that teachers told them general characteristics of this friendship. About half of the parents (both

SN and TD) gave responses that were coded in this category. The types of things that parents reported teachers telling them about these friendships included: how, how often, what, and where the friends liked to play or did play during the day. One parent said the teacher told her what she was planning to encourage the friends to play with during the day. This code also encompassed responses indicating that teachers told parents how close this friendship was, and details about the friends helping each other (e.g., the TD child helped the SN child with his speech). One parent said the teacher told her that her child was welcoming of the target friend when he was new to the class. In several cases, teachers shared positive details about the target friend in response to parents' questions about the target friend. (The parent questions received a separate code described under a subsequent theme.)

***These children are friends.*** Several parents noted that the teacher had let them know these children were friends. This comment was more common from SN than from TD parents. In most cases, parent responses indicated that the teacher initiated this conversation, but in one case, the parent said she asked who her child played with and then the teacher told her about this friendship.

***Daily activities.*** Even though the interview questions asked about communication between parents and teachers on the topic of specific friendships, a few SN and TD parent responses indicated that teachers gave them information about their child's daily activities in general, rather than focused on this dyad. Parents said teachers told them who their child played with or who their child's buddy was, and what their child did during the day. This parent did mention the target friend in her description of what teachers told her about her child's general daily activities: "They will tell me who James played with that day or that sort of thing.... They'll say, 'James' buddy today was Daniel'." Parents also said teachers told

them whether their child had any conflicts, behavior issues, or time outs during the day. However, communication about conflicts between the two friends was coded in a different category described below.

***Other information one parent said teachers provided.*** One parent said teachers told her the target friend might not be the best choice for her to arrange playdates with for her child, for reasons unclear to this parent, but relating to the target friend. One detail to note here is that several parent responses to questions about communication referred to their child's *teachers* rather than just the one teacher interviewed for this study. Because the parent in the example below did not name the teacher, it is not clear whether the participating teacher or one of the teacher assistants in this child's class provided the parent with this information:

I went and talked to one of the teachers and I asked about it, and they said, "Well, he's probably someone that" – because I was trying to set up some playdates and foster the friendship – and they were saying, "Well, Andrew's probably not the best person to do that with right now."

This parent said teachers did make a suggestion of another child to foster a friendship with.

The responses given codes described above indicated that many parents received information from teachers on several friendship-focused topics and about children's activities in general. Responses coded under the next communication theme indicated that some parents initiated requests for information from teachers and shared information with teachers about specific friendships.

***Parent Communication Theme 2: Parents asked for or gave Teachers Information Relating to Specific Friendships***

The second theme that emerged from the data about communication with their child's teacher was that parents asked for or provided teachers information. Most SN parents

reported that they asked for or gave teachers information regarding specific SN-TD preschool friendships, whereas only a few TD parents reported doing so. Below are descriptions of the communication codes that fell under this theme.

***How their child got along with others.*** The most common topic of communication under this theme was parents asking teachers how their child gets along with other children. This included parents asking about friendships, who their child liked to play with, who their child had problems or conflicts with, and about the appropriateness of their child's interactions. This code included parents discussing how their child got along with the target friend and others as in this example:

Not that that always comes up, but you know in a more general sense, just talking about how Beren's doing and how he's doing with other kids. So sometimes Sam will come up specifically, and sometimes it's more just a general how-he's-doing kind of conversation.

However, if the parent only asked the teacher how the child got along with the target friend, then it was coded under *about the target friend* described below. More SN parents than TD parents reported asking teachers about this.

***About the target friend.*** Several SN parents reported asking their child's teacher about the target friend. Parents said they asked teachers who the target friend was, how the target friend was doing, where the target friend was if absent, about things the target friend said or did, about their child's daily activities with the target friend, and how their child got along with the target friend. No TD parents reported asking specifically about their child's target friend.

***Conflicts.*** A few SN and TD parents reported communicating with teachers about conflicts or behavior issues involving the two friends. One parent's response was unclear in terms of whether the parent or teacher initiated the conversation, but other parents clearly

indicated asking teachers about conflicts. Therefore, communication about conflicts was coded under theme two.

***Playdates.*** Only a few SN parents mentioned playdates between these two friends in conversation with teachers or in notes to teachers about friends riding home with each other. One parent asked for teacher advice on whether she should arrange playdates with the target friend. No TD parents mentioned communicating with teachers about playdates.

The responses given codes described above indicated that several parents asked for or provided teachers with information relating to the friends and how their child got along with peers in general. Responses coded under the final communication theme indicated that some parents chose not to or had difficulty communicating with teachers about specific friendships.

### ***Parent Communication Theme 3: Barriers to Communication and Reasons for Lack of Communication***

A few parents noted barriers to communication or reasons for lack of communication about specific friendships during the interview. Following are descriptions of the communication codes that were included this theme.

***Do not ask because no problems.*** A few parents reported that they did not ask teachers about this friendship because there weren't any problems between the friends. These parents believed that if problems arose, teachers would let them know.

***Privacy policy.*** Although this was an infrequent response, one specific barrier to communication that was noted was a school's privacy policy. This SN parent described the privacy policy of the childcare as a barrier to communication about her child's friends:

They're very private about the kids. They don't talk much about- like for example his speech therapist when she talks about when they do group sessions, she'll just use the first initial, "Thomas is developing a friendship with S, a boy." I don't know who S is

and I don't know how to find out who S is...

***Other barriers or reasons for lack of communication.*** A few additional SN parents provided other responses coded under this theme. For example, one parent said that prior to this study she did not know that her child had a special friend (described above in recruitment). Another reported a problematic home-school relationship in that she felt there was little connection with parents at the center her child attended and her efforts to push for the best for her child resulted in alienating the teachers. She said she stopped communicating as much with them and thus thought she might be “out of the loop” in terms of knowing all that was going on with the friendship, though she was very curious:

So the partnership between home and school ended up being a big problem; ended up being to Luke's disadvantage because of his disability. I think instead of banding together and really working harder because of that, I think I ended up alienating them because of my complaints, or criticisms, or over-involvement or whatever... it pushed the teachers away.

Results of the thematic analysis of parent interviews indicated that parents reported communicating with teachers on a variety of topics relating to specific friendships.

According to parents, teachers generally provided information on some topics whereas parents generally provided information or asked about other topics. A few parents reported reasons for lack of communication about these friendships or felt that communication was hampered by specific barriers.

### ***Comparison of SN and TD Parents' Communication***

***Content and frequency of communication with teachers.*** Analyses of the data in this study indicate that SN parents seemed to be more involved than TD parents in parent-teacher communication about specific friendships. One indicator of this increased involvement is that all SN parents gave interview responses coded under one or more of the above themes, while

some TD parents gave no responses coded under any of the above themes (i.e., said they did not communicate with teachers about specific friendships). Another indicator of this increased involvement of SN parents was the frequency of communication as reported by parents. Parents were asked: *How often do you communicate about this friendship?* About half of the SN parents indicated communicating at least once a week (some said daily), whereas communicating at least once a week was a rare response from TD parents. Finally, more SN parents than TD parents provided responses coded under theme two in particular, suggesting that SN parents as a group were more involved than TD parents as a group in requesting and providing information to teachers regarding these friendships.

***Methods of communication with teachers.*** Parents were asked: *How do you communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?* Most SN parents reported that they communicated about specific friendships through informal conversations with teachers. Several mentioned additional methods of communication with teachers such as notes, conferences, anecdotal evidence, team meetings, or written goals. All TD parents who were asked this question reported that they communicated about these friendships through informal conversations. (Some TD parents had said they did not communicate with teachers and were not asked this question.) Overall, SN and TD parents were similar in that informal conversation was their predominant method of communicating with teachers.

***Preferred methods of communication with teachers.*** Most parents were also asked: *What are the ways you prefer to communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?* SN and TD parents were similar in their preferred methods of communication. The majority of SN and TD

parents reported informal conversation as the method they preferred, while a few parents said they preferred conferences, had no preference, preferred a team approach involving regular informal and scheduled meetings, preferred notes, or preferred a combination of the previous methods. Only a few parents (and only parents in the TD group) said they were not especially interested in communicating with teachers about specific friendships and were not asked this question.

***Satisfaction level.*** Parents who initially said they did communicate with teachers regarding specific friendships were asked how satisfied they were with the communication. The majority of SN and TD parents who initially said they did communicate with teachers regarding friendships said they were satisfied or very satisfied. A few parents (only in the SN group) gave a mixed response. For example, one parent said she appreciated teacher advice about not pursuing playdates with the target friend if he was not going to be beneficial for her child, but said she would have liked additional teacher help in making a connection with a different child's family. Thus, SN and TD parents were similar in that most were quite satisfied with the parent-teacher communication around these friendships.

### ***Summary***

Parents of the SN and TD children in these friendship dyads reported various types of communication with teachers on the topic of these friendships. According to parent report, SN parents seemed to be more involved in home-school communication than TD parents in terms of frequency of communication and in terms of reporting at least some communication, especially regarding asking for or requesting information from teachers. Most SN and TD parents said they usually communicated informally with teachers, and most preferred informal communication above other methods.

### *Teacher-Reported Communication*

Teachers were first asked: *Do you communicate with [SN child]'s parents about [SN child]'s friendship with [TD child]?* If the response was positive, teachers were then asked what types of things they communicated about relating to this friendship. If the response was negative, teachers were asked if they would like to communicate with the child's parents about this friendship. The same questions were then asked about communication with the TD child's parents. As with parent data, thematic analysis of teacher data for research question 4 focused on the content of parent-teacher communication as reported by participants, and responses to follow-up questions about frequency, method, preferred method, and satisfaction regarding communication were entered into the coding table and analyzed as is. Thematic analysis of teacher transcripts resulted in the same three themes that emerged from parent data: (a) teachers gave parents information relating to specific friendships, (b) parents asked for or gave teachers information relating to specific friendships, and (c) barriers to communication and reasons for lack of communication. Table 3.7 lists communication codes and sample quotations from teachers under each theme. The themes and codes are further described below.

Table 3.7

#### *Teacher-Reported Communication*

Communication code	Sample response(s)
Theme 1: Teachers gave parents information relating to specific friendships	
Details about this friendship	If they've done something during the day that we thought would make her mom laugh or whatever, we'll just let her know.  I used to tell them just how well they played together, and that they're just good friends to have, because both of them are just

	good kids, and they enjoy being around one another.
Conflicts	I also notify the parent if there is a conflict between them.
These children are friends	I let the parents know that they were friends.  I told David's mom; I said, "These two are buddies because every time one of you comes pick up the other, the other wants to go with the other."
Daily activities	I tell her who she likes to play with.... Who she's played with.... what she was doing; what's she had to eat.

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Theme 2: Parents asked for or gave teachers information relating to specific friendships

Child talked about the target friend	Their mothers always say, "You know, Jakim always talks about Dennis."  I would have thought that Andrew would have talked about his friendship at home. Luke I know does because [Luke's mom] tells us.
How their child got along with others	[The parents] may say, "How is he getting along with the kids in the class?"  If Sally is being bossy or if she's just trying to be a leader; her mom will ask me that.
About the target friend	His mom comes in and she wants to know how they're doing: "How's David and Monique doing today?"
Playdates	The mom said she was going to try to have them do playdates.

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Theme 3: Barriers to communication and reasons for lack of communication

Privacy policy	You can't use the other child's name to the parent, so that holds us up on a lot right there. You can say, "Chantay hit another child today," but you can't actually say who that child was. So that kind of holds us up. We really can't talk about both children together.
Friendship never came up	Andrew's parents never really asked us any questions about Andrew's friendships.

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***Teacher Communication Theme 1: Teachers gave Parents Information Relating to***

### ***Specific Friendships***

When asked about communication with parents, all teachers reported giving SN parents and most teachers reported giving TD parents information regarding specific SN-TD preschool friendships. Descriptions of the communication codes that fell under this theme are presented below.

***Details about this friendship.*** Most teachers reported giving parents positive details about their child's activities with the target friend during the day or general characteristics of this friendship. Teachers said they communicated such details with a majority of parents (both SN and TD). The types of details that teachers reported telling parents about these friendships included: how, what, and where the friends liked to play or did play during the day. This code also encompassed responses indicating that teachers told parents how close this friendship was, that the children got along well, and that one child seemed relaxed with the other. Teachers also shared details about the friends helping or supporting each other (e.g., "I tell David's mother that Monique helps with David's speech a lot, and she was very pleased to know that"). Other responses focused on sharing details about social interactions between the friends and cute or nice things the friends did or said to each other. Some teacher responses indicated that they gave parents positive details about the target friend (e.g., he's a "good kid" in response to a parent question) or about the friends' similarities (e.g., they were similar in age and skills and could relate to each other well). One teacher emphasized to a parent that this friendship was a good choice for her child in the hopes that the parent would talk about the friendship at home.

When asked about communicating with each child's parents, most teachers said they did communicate with parents, and some teachers indicated that it was important to share a

number of details about specific friendships as in the following example:

I make sure that they know that they played together today, this is what went on, the way that they take up for each other. I keep the parents notified about what's going on with both of them. Because they've done something really cute every day, so every day I have something to tell them.

A contrasting, but rare response was that teachers did not communicate with parents or did not think there was much to communicate about: "Unless they ask, there's really nothing to tell."

**Conflicts.** Some teachers reported communicating with SN and TD parents about conflicts or behavior issues relating to the friends. Responses coded in this category also included telling parents how conflicts were resolved and what parents might do to help their child resolve such conflicts in the future. One teacher's response was unclear in terms of whether the teacher or parent initiated the conversation: "Her momma does know ... that they've had some outs and ins, and we've talked about their friendship and sometimes when they've had the problems." However, other teachers' responses indicated bringing information about conflicts to parents' attention. Therefore, unlike with parent responses, teacher-reported communication about conflicts was coded under theme one instead of theme two.

**These children are friends.** Some teachers said they let SN and TD parents know that these children were friends. One teacher confirmed with parents that these children were friends in response to parents saying their children were always talking about each other, whereas other teachers initiated this conversation. For example, one teacher expressed wanting a child to have a friendship and wanting parents to arrange for the friends to play together and let the parent know that the children were friends: "Mentioning it to the mother, I wanted her to pursue it. If she wants him to be friends with James, I would like for her to

make the contact with [his] mother.”

***Daily activities.*** Even though the interview questions asked about communication between parents and teachers on the topic of specific friendships, a few teachers gave responses indicating that they shared information about children’s daily activities in general, rather than focused on this dyad. Teachers said they told parents who their child played with, what their child did, or whether their child had any conflicts, behavior issues, or time outs during the day. One teacher communicated about the latter topics by means of a daily behavior report sent home with all children in her class.

***Other information one teacher said she provided.*** One teacher reported sharing information with the SN and TD parents of the children in the friendship dyad about gatherings such as birthday parties and reported sharing phone numbers so parents could contact each other.

Teacher responses given codes described above indicated that many teachers provided information to parents on friendship-focused topics and a few teachers shared information about children’s activities in general. Teacher responses coded under the next communication theme indicated that some parents initiated requests for information from teachers and shared information with teachers about specific friendships.

***Teacher Communication Theme 2: Parents asked for or gave Teachers Information Relating to Specific Friendships***

As with parent data, the second theme that emerged from teacher data about communication with parents was that parents asked for or provided teachers information. A majority of teachers gave responses coded in this category (regarding communication with SN or TD parents, or with both). Below are descriptions of the communication codes that fell under this theme.

***Child talked about the target friend.*** Several teachers said that SN and TD parents mentioned their child talking about his or her target friend at home. For example, this teacher said one parent shared her child's reaction to a picture of his friend at home: "His mom tells me that he'll go up and talk about her."

***How their child got along with others.*** As did parent data, teacher data also indicated that parents asked some teachers how their child gets along with other children. Such responses included parents asking who their child liked to play with and about the appropriateness of their child's interactions with peers. Also included in this code were teacher responses saying parents asked how their child got along with the target friend and others (e.g., one parent asked if her child plays with anyone besides the target friend). However, if a parent only asked the teacher how the child got along with the target friend, then it was coded under *about the target friend* described above. Unlike with parent data, teacher data did not suggest that more SN parents than TD parents were concerned about how their children got along with peers.

***About the target friend.*** Teacher responses agreed with parent data indicating that some parents asked about their child's target friend. A few teachers reported that parents (SN and TD) asked them about the target friend, such as about things the target friend said or did, or about how their child got along with the target friend.

***Playdates.*** Teachers also said SN and TD parents mentioned playdates between these two friends in conversation with them or in notes about friends riding home with each other. However, this was not a common topic of communication.

The responses given codes described above indicated that several parents asked for or provided teachers with information relating to specific friends and relating to how their child

got along with peers in general. Responses coded under the final communication theme indicated that some teachers chose not to or had difficulty communicating with parents about specific friendships.

***Teacher Communication Theme 3: Barriers to Communication and Reasons for Lack of Communication***

Approximately half of the teachers noted barriers to communication or reasons for lack of communication with parents about these friendships. Descriptions of the communication codes that were included this theme are presented next.

***Privacy policy.*** A few teachers gave responses indicating that their communication with parents was limited by their school's privacy policy. For example, one teacher mentioned the privacy policy of the childcare as a barrier to communication with parents about the two friends (see quote in Table 3.7). Another teacher said that in notes to parents about this friendship she would not name the target friend: "But in the notes I would leave out either or child's name and the parent usually knows because they can ask the child."

***Friendship never came up.*** A few teachers reported that the topic of friendship never came up in communication with SN or TD parents. One such teacher said she would be willing to communicate with parents about the specific friendship, but would not want to talk about it in the classroom in front of other children because she wouldn't want other children to then expect her to talk about their friendships with their parents.

***Other barriers or reasons for lack of communication.*** Examples of other teacher responses coded under this theme included: (a) this was a classroom friendship (e.g., "It's a classroom thing. I don't know whether it's continued out of there or not. I don't feel that it's that important"), and (b) it was hard to communicate with a parent about this friendship because it wasn't always the parent who picked up the child due to the parent's work

schedule.

Results of the thematic analysis of teacher interviews indicated that teachers reported communicating with parents on a variety of topics relating to these friendships, in some cases providing information themselves and in other cases receiving information or requests for information from parents. A few teachers reported reasons for lack of communication about these friendships or felt that communication was hampered by specific barriers.

### ***Comparison of Teacher Communication with SN and TD Parents***

***Content and frequency of communication with parents.*** Teachers engaged similarly in communication with SN parents and TD parents about specific friendships. Most teachers provided responses coded under one or more of the above communication themes with SN parents and with TD parents. Teachers were asked: *How often do you communicate about this friendship?* Several teachers indicated communicating at least once a week with SN parents and with TD parents. Other teachers said they communicated less frequently (e.g., “as needed,” or “rarely”), if at all.

Overall results indicated that teachers as a group communicated about specific friendships similarly with SN and TD parents. Indeed, some teachers made specific comments about the fact that they communicated about the same kinds of things with both SN and TD parents (e.g., “I communicate with them the same way I do Jake’s. Everything is fair treatment”). However, other teachers said they communicated more with the parent of the SN child because of the child’s disability. Note the contrast between the previous quote about “fair treatment” and the following quotes concerning communication with SN parents: (a) “Daniel’s mom is very concerned about him being normal, and I mentioned it to her more often than I did James’ mom because she needed some reassuring herself that he was fitting

in,” and (b)

It’s a lot less with Kelly’s parents, just for the fact that Kelly doesn’t have a disability and every cute thing she says and every new sound she makes is not as important as Neal’s. Not that Neal is any more important than Kelly, but the fact that he might have said something that was a whole lot clearer today than it was yesterday. It’s just as important, but I don’t tell Kelly’s parents everything Kelly said kind of thing.

Thus, although overall results indicated similar patterns of communication between teachers and both SN and TD parents, some teacher responses showed that they were particularly attuned to the communication needs of some SN parents.

***Methods of communication with parents.*** Teachers who indicated that they did communicate with parents about specific friendships were asked how they did so. The majority of teachers reported communicating with SN and TD parents about specific friendships through informal conversations, and several teachers mentioned additional methods of communication with parents such as notes, conferences, phone calls, home visits, observation notes, progress notes, and portfolios.

***Preferred methods of communication with parents.*** Most teachers reported informal conversation as the method they preferred for communicating with SN and TD parents. This teacher provided a rationale for preferring informal conversation with the SN parent:

I prefer the informal. I think she’s had to deal with so much stuff because of his delays, that I just like to be just kind of, “Hi, how are you doing?” and “Daniel is doing this...” Not to make it so scary for her.

Conferences were also noted as a preferred method of communication by a few teachers.

***Satisfaction level.*** All of the teachers who initially said they did communicate with SN parents regarding specific friendships said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the communication, and almost all of the teachers who initially said they did communicate with TD parents regarding specific friendships said they were satisfied or very satisfied. Thus,

overall, teachers were quite satisfied with the communication with SN and TD parents about these friendships.

### ***Summary***

Teachers of preschool children in specific friendship dyads reported various types of communication with parents on the topic of these friendships and reported being satisfied with this communication. According to the data, teachers communicated about similar topics, in similar ways, and with similar frequency with both SN and TD parents. Informal conversation and conferences were the most commonly used and preferred methods of communicating with parents.

### **Member Checks**

Seven participants responded to the mailed summary of results. Their comments indicated that these findings generally reflected their beliefs regarding specific preschool friendships. A few respondents said they were surprised that some children did not have problems, or that some parents did not consider these friendships to be especially important. Sadness was expressed by one participant that some preschools' privacy policies "would prevent parents from being informed about positive relationships." One participant pointed out that friendships change from day to day at this age. No practices or topics of communication beyond those already described in the previous results sections were mentioned in response to member checks.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore beliefs and practices of parents and teachers in support of preschool friendships between children with and without disabilities. A further purpose of this study was to document parent-teacher communication related to these friendships. This study makes a contribution to the literature in that the focus is on friendships, whereas much of the research literature focuses on social skills or on the broader construct of social competence. In addition, this study is focused on preschoolers, whereas much of the existing research on children's relationships has been conducted with school age children. Finally, the unique design of this study allowed for examination of beliefs and practices of the parents and teachers of preschool children in specific SN-TD friendship dyads in order to better understand what might be going on at home and at school to help these children become and stay friends. No other study has been designed in this manner for the purpose of addressing this topic.

This study is timely given changes in the field of early childhood education during the past few years. Specifically, early childhood education has become more focused on academic issues, in conjunction with increased emphases on school readiness and accountability. As a result, there has been a concern among some early childhood education professionals that this emphasis will result in a lack of attention to other key domains of development, including social development (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004), even though

research attests to the importance of early social-emotional development for school success (Kauffman Early Education Exchange, 2002). In the following sections, linkages between results of this study and the literature are discussed along with implications for practice. Finally, limitations of the study and future research directions are discussed.

### **Linking Results with the Literature**

In this section, links between current findings and the literature are discussed in the order of the research questions of this study. Anticipated, unexpected, and new findings are discussed in the context of existing literature.

#### ***Parent and Teacher Beliefs about the Nature and Importance of Friendships***

Parents and teachers reported similar beliefs about the nature and importance of these friendships and their reported beliefs are aligned with existing research. Friendship has been defined as a reciprocated dyadic relationship that is voluntary and based on affection (Asher et al., 1996; Parker et al., 1995; Rubin et al., 1998). Participants' descriptions of these friendships as characterized by expressions of affection and positive affect are consistent with the idea of reciprocal affection as a defining characteristic of friendship, and with findings from previous research (e.g., Dietrich, 2005). Furthermore, participants' descriptions of friends frequently choosing to play with and be near each other are consistent with the idea of friendship as a dyadic, voluntary construct. The fact that defining characteristics of friendship – according to the literature – were borne out by participant responses provides support for the choice of teacher report and parent confirmation as the method of identifying friendship dyads used in this study.

Inconsistent with the largely harmonious nature of most friendships in this study were the few friendships reported to be less harmonious. This was somewhat unexpected, though

discussion of conflict does exist in the literature on preschoolers' friendships. Some of this literature documents increased incidence of conflict among friends. For example, Vespo and Caplan (1993) studied conflict in a preschool setting, noting that more conflicts were observed for friends than for acquaintances because of the increased time friends spent together. Increased time together may have contributed to the conflicted nature of a couple of the friendships in this dissertation study, though this was not examined per se. Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, and Lapp (2002) found that early friendships served a protective function for children who were considered at-risk, even when those friendships were conflicted in terms of aggression. One teacher's report that friends who had exhibited much conflict early in the school year later played well together is consistent with Gottman's (1983) finding that children improve in conflict resolution skills as they get older and as their relationship progresses. Indeed, much of the literature relating to conflict among friends focuses on friends' ability to resolve conflicts (e.g., Hartup et al., 1988; Vespo & Caplan). The findings of this study are in agreement with this literature in that (a) most of these friendships – even the ones described as predominantly harmonious – were not completely without conflict, and (b) participants said a number of these friends were able to resolve conflicts when they arose. In summary, although a few friendships in this dissertation study were described as inconsistent or conflicted, the overall results portray these preschoolers' friendships as characterized by mutual positive affect and enjoyment as described by Buysse et al. (in press), and by Dietrich (2005).

The findings of this study are consistent with Rhodes' (2002) finding that most parents place a high value on friendships for their preschool children, particularly for the emotional benefits of these friendships, but also as a context for development of social skills.

Findings of this study are also consistent with research suggesting that teachers believe friendships are important for their preschool students (Kemple, et al., 1996; Kowalski, et al., 2001). Teachers' belief that these friendships were particularly important for the SN children in this study was indicated through responses to separate questions about importance for SN and TD children and by teacher's direct comparisons of importance (e.g., "I don't think it's [as] important to Monique as it is [to] David because Monique has other friends that she can turn to"). Findings did indicate some parents and teachers believed that friends helped children transition to their current preschool, but no participants talked about the possibility of this friendship helping their children transition to a new school in the future (some noted these friends would not be moving to the same school).

Friendship as a context for development of cognitive skills did not emerge as a common belief of parents or teachers in this study, and friendships as a context for learning specific pre-academic or academic skills was not mentioned by any of the participants. This may have been due to the fact that these children were in preschool. However, several of the children were getting ready to go to kindergarten in the months following data collection. There is research to suggest that friendship can be a context for learning skills such as literacy skills in kindergarten (Pellegrini et al., 1998). However, there is also evidence that children in friend pairings do not necessarily always perform better on cognitive tasks than children in acquaintance pairings (Kutnick & Kington, 2005). The latter research was conducted with children age 5 and older. Other research with school age children and adolescents suggests that peer relationships – including friendships – provide an essential context for development (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Bagwell, 1999). Additional research is needed in order to understand friendship as a context for development in cognitive and other

domains for preschool age and younger children. The following sections describe parent practices and communication as well as teacher practices and communication regarding specific friendships.

### ***Parent and Teacher Practices to Support Friendships***

#### ***Parent Practices***

Based upon the literature review and conceptual models for this study, I expected that parents would report using a variety of strategies to support these friendships, such as arranging for children to play together and supervising their play (Ladd & Golter, 1988; Ladd & Profilet, 2002; Ladd et al., 1992; Parke et al., 2002), including helping children to play together (Bhavnagri & Park, 1991). Indeed, these strategies were mentioned by participants in this study. Other strategies that I anticipated parents would report included setting the stage for friendships (e.g., through choice of a preschool; Rubin & Sloman, 1984), coaching children about friendships, and reading books on the topic of friendship (Rhodes, 2002). One parent talked about having selected the inclusive preschool her child attended because of the therapy provided there for children with disabilities, but did not say she chose the preschool specifically for friendship-related benefits. Parents reported use of social coaching practices such as helping friends to share and take turns. No parents reported reading books on the topic of friendships during the interviews and the average of parent responses to this item on the questionnaire was in the “never” to “rarely” range.

Parents reported using a number of strategies that seemed general, passive, and not necessarily focused on the target friendship. These were grouped in the category of the first theme – social environment practices – and included bringing children to school, letting children choose their friends and playmates, and talking about friends and social skills in

general. The idea of letting children choose their friends is in concert with the voluntary component of the definition of friendship described above (Asher et al., 1996). Other general parent strategies related to the two friends such as supervising friends, talking about the target friend, and greeting the target friend. These practices also seemed more passive – generally, just talk – than other practices discussed next.

Some parent practices seemed to be more active, reflecting more intentionality in terms of supporting these dyads in particular as opposed to peer relationships and friendships in general. Parent practices that provided opportunities for dyadic interactions included arranging playdates for the friends, encouraging the friendship in ways other than those coded in different categories, and putting friends together for activities in the school setting.

A final group of strategies seemed to be active, reflecting intentionality in terms of supporting these dyads of focus, but seemed to go beyond provision of opportunities for friends to interact to actually helping the friends interact. Strategies grouped under the third theme – facilitating dyadic interactions or play – included resolving conflicts, participating in friends’ play, coaching friends’ use of social skills, giving friends ideas about how or what to play, and conversing with the dyad.

Overall, the variety of friendship practices parents reported using was an encouraging finding. About half of these dyads, identified as friends by teachers, had spent time playing together outside of the school setting. This parent articulated her belief that playdates were effective for helping the friendship: “It gives a special level of experience with each other that they don’t have with most of the kids at [preschool].” Several SN parents seemed to be tuned in to their children’s unique socialization needs. Within the active and facilitative theme, two of the strategies – giving friends ideas about how or what to play and conversing

with the dyad – were mentioned by SN parents, but not TD parents. Rhodes’ (2002) research found that some SN parents felt they had to use strategies in order for the child to make friends. Although factors affecting use of practices were not thematically analyzed in this study, reasons parents gave for using these practices included: (a) friendships were important, (b) children needed help with social connections and friendship skills, (c) strategies helped to focus attention and avoid disruptive behavior, and (d) teachers did not provide sufficient support for the friendship (a rare response).

Not all parents were actively involved in supporting these friendships, however. Looking at results across research questions, it is interesting to note that there were some SN and TD parents who felt these friendships were important or very important for their children, who acknowledged that their children had limited access to same age peers outside of the school setting, and who still did not report using many – if any – of these friendship practices. Indeed, busy schedules and consideration of this friendship as a school friendship were noted as reasons for lack of practices.

Similar to Rhodes’ findings, this study found that parents believed that shared histories in preschool settings were helpful for friendship formation. However, while Rhodes’ research did not provide evidence that most parents believed teachers played an important role in facilitating friendship formation, a majority of parents in this study did report the belief that teachers used practices to facilitate these friendships. Some parents named practices they said teachers used or guessed teachers used, while other parents said or guessed that teachers used practices, but didn’t know what those practices were. The following section discusses results for teacher practices.

### ***Teacher Practices***

According to my review of the research, I expected that preschool teachers would report using several strategies in support of these friendships such as: (a) placing a maximum on the number of children allowed to play in certain areas; (b) reading friendship stories; (c) demonstrating social skills; and (d) assigning children specific play partners (Sparkman, 2003). Although teachers in this study did not report placing a maximum on the number of children allowed to play in certain areas as a friendship practice, one teacher did report assigning these friends to centers where only two children were allowed, and several teachers reported assigning friends together as play partners. Teachers did talk about, encourage, and model social skills for the friends and for their classes as a whole. Although no teachers mentioned reading friendship stories during the interview, about half of the teachers indicated on the questionnaire that they did this frequently. Perhaps teachers did not consider this to be a strategy targeting specific friendships or simply did not remember to mention this strategy during interviews. Other strategies that I anticipated teachers using included provision of time for free play and encouraging friendships through positive comments about children's play (Buysse et al., 2003). Both of these strategies were mentioned by teachers in this study.

Like parents, teachers reported using strategies that seemed to fall along a continuum from general, passive strategies to more active strategies focused on the target dyad. At one end of this continuum, teachers reported a number of strategies that seemed general, passive, and not always focused on the target friendship. These were grouped in the category of the first theme: social environment practices. For teachers, these strategies included letting children choose their friends and playmates, talking about friends and social skills in general, modeling friendship and social skills, and supervising children. Teachers seemed to agree

with the idea of friendship being defined as voluntary (Asher et al., 1996) in their endorsement of letting children choose their friends. Other teacher strategies coded under this first theme included strategies less aligned with the notion of friendship as a special dyadic relationship and more aligned with an understanding of friendship as all children within a class getting along, as found in Sparkman's (2003) study. Examples included talking about all children in the class being friends, requiring children to play with everybody in the class, and separating friends when they were disruptive or so that they could get used to playing with others.

Some teacher practices seemed to be more active, reflecting more intentionality in terms of supporting these dyads in particular as opposed to getting along in general. Teacher practices within this theme included putting friends together for activities, encouraging the friendship in ways other than those in different categories, and planning favorite activities. It was reassuring to find that teachers were willing to support these friendships in terms of ensuring opportunities for them to interact. However, only a few of the teachers reported planning friends' favorite activities. This has implications for practice in that teachers might be encouraged to more frequently and intentionally draw friends together by providing activities that will capture their attention and provide a common context for interactions. Buysse and colleagues (in press) suggested, for example, that planning an activity of high interest could encourage a friend to join in the play of a child exhibiting mobility difficulties. Most teachers confined their use of practices under this theme to the school setting. Consistent with existing research (e.g., Buysse et al., 2003), teachers reported never or rarely helping parents arrange playdates for the friends outside of the early education setting. Only one teacher said in the interview that she shared contact information with parents so that they

could arrange playdates, and the results of the questionnaire revealed that most teachers only occasionally shared information with parents so they could arrange for specific friends to play together. Further discussion of home-school communication around these friendships is provided in the relevant section below. One final note about this theme of providing opportunities for dyadic interactions is that only one teacher noted that she actively encouraged the friendship and put these children together in the first place, and even she seemed a little unsure about her response: “I think I might have started it and asked, and maybe suggested it, and luckily they kept with it.” Although friendships are by definition chosen by the friends themselves, and not by others, it is nonetheless appropriate for teachers to pay close attention to children’s interests and “nudge” two children with similar interests to play together, thereby encouraging a potential friendship to emerge (Buysse et al., in press).

A final group of teacher’s friendship practices seemed to be active and reflected intentionality in terms of supporting specific friendship dyads, but seemed to go beyond providing opportunities for friends to interact to actually helping the friends interact. Teacher strategies matched parent strategies grouped under the third theme – facilitating dyadic interactions and play – and included resolving conflicts, participating in friends’ play, coaching friends’ use of social skills, giving friends ideas about how or what to play, and conversing with the dyad. Interpreting for the SN child was an additional strategy reported by teachers, but not by parents. Hestenes & Carroll (2000) found that preschool children with and without disabilities spent less of their time interacting with each other than expected, given the proportion of each group per classroom. However, teacher presence significantly predicted inclusive play, when it occurred. The researchers emphasized teacher role in

facilitating play interactions between children with and without disabilities, suggesting that teacher presence and support were important for increasing inclusive interactions, and that teachers should pay close attention to their own behaviors that increase interactions and play levels between children with and without disabilities (Hestenes & Carroll). The research of Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog (1997) suggested that teacher presence alone was negatively related to preschoolers' social competence, but responsive teacher involvement and peer presence were both positively related to social competence. Though the latter study was not focused on social interactions between children with and without disabilities, teachers can nonetheless come away with the message that responsive involvement is important, but stepping back and allowing the children to interact is also important at some point. Increased teacher involvement may be necessary for children with disabilities, but teachers should also be cognizant of which classroom activities will facilitate peer-peer interactions: "Teachers need to be attentive to the types of activities they select for free play and to the potential of those activities for contact with peers as opposed to adults" (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, p. 260).

As with parents, the variety of different friendship practices reported by teachers was encouraging. In particular, many teachers reported using facilitative practices. Also encouraging were the teacher rationales for using facilitative practices that indicated their awareness of the socialization needs of some SN children. It was anticipated that a child's *disability* may be one factor affecting teacher use of strategies to support friendships as found by Buysse et al. (2003). This hypothesis was borne out by the data in that all teachers responded that the SN child's disability affected their decision to employ at least one of the practices they used. However, in some cases teachers didn't seem clear about whether or not

the SN child's disability affected their use of a particular practice. This teacher was asked *How did David's disability affect the decision to help them play together by participating in the play yourself, if at all?* and responded: "I don't think so. I don't think it affected it at all. Because now I think the more that we get involved with David ... and Monique, his speech gets better." Her response indicated that she believed that participating in the play between these two friends was important for helping David's speech improve, though she also said at first that his disability did not affect her decision. Perhaps she believed that it was not socially acceptable to say that his disability affected her decision, or perhaps she was not clear herself about her rationale for participating. The implication for practice is that teacher training should help increase teacher awareness about including social goals on children's IEPs and teacher awareness of strategies for working toward those goals.

Although the variety of practices teachers reported using was encouraging, most of the teachers made comments that hinted at a lack of forethought or intentionality with regard to use of one or more practices to support friendship formation (e.g., "It wasn't anything I did consciously"). Personnel preparation programs can alert teachers to potential friendship strategies such as the ones suggested in this study and help to make teachers more aware of the ways in which they may facilitate dyadic interactions and relationships so that friendship support becomes a conscious goal for teachers who work in inclusive programs.

The teacher practice themes – which fell along a continuum from general, passive strategies to more active strategies focused on the target dyad – are reminiscent of the intervention hierarchy recommended by Brown, Odom, and Conroy (2001) for guiding teacher decision-making about interventions aimed at facilitating peer interactions for young children. However, while the practices reported in this study generally fit such a hierarchical

model, they did not reflect all of the specific practices recommended by Brown et al. At the base of the hierarchy, Brown et al. placed classroom-wide interventions such as developmentally appropriate practices, inclusion of children with disabilities with peers who are socially responsive, and affective interventions. In the center of the hierarchy, Brown and colleagues placed naturalistic interventions including incidental teaching and friendship activities. Finally, at the top of the hierarchy, the latter researchers placed social integration activities and social skills training interventions. A similar pyramid model was discussed by Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain (2003) for teachers supporting young children's social competence and prevention of problematic behavior. The teachers in this study appeared to utilize many appropriate practices at the level of the base of the hierarchy or the pyramid, such as supervising friends, modeling social skills, and allowing children choices. The practices in theme two – providing opportunities for dyadic interactions – would fall near the base of the hierarchy. Teachers also reported providing interventions that I would consider to fall at the center of the hierarchy (e.g., incidental teaching of appropriate social behaviors in response to situations that occurred in the classroom). However, teachers did not report the use of planned and structured friendship activities, social integration activities, or social skills training activities similar to those described by Brown et al. at the higher levels of the hierarchy. In order to be included in this study, the children in these dyads had to be considered by teachers to be friends, so perhaps these children were not in need of any interventions – let alone structured interventions – targeted at promoting this friendship. In other words, perhaps putting the friends together for activities and facilitating their interactions by doing things like helping them resolve conflicts and giving them ideas about what to play were sufficient for promoting friendships among these children. However, it

would seem important to increase teacher awareness of this hierarchy and of the use of increasingly intense interventions in response to individual needs for additional support. At least one parent in this study expressed a desire for more intensive interventions for her child to support the development and maintenance of a particular friendship with another child.

### ***Parent-Teacher Communication about Friendships***

This study makes an important contribution to the existing literature in documenting parent-teacher communication on the topic of preschool friendships. No previous studies were found focused on home-school continuity regarding this topic in particular. Most parents and teachers reported communicating with each other about these friendships and most reported being satisfied or very satisfied with home-school communication on this topic. Alternative viewpoints are discussed below. The majority of parents and teachers said they communicated primarily through informal means and indeed preferred informal conversation or conferences for communication on this topic.

The major communication themes were the same for parent data and teacher data. Both groups reported that teachers provided parents with information regarding these friendships. Such information included letting parents know the children were friends in the first place and details about the friendship (e.g., how close the friends were or what the friends played during the day). A few responses indicated that teachers provided information about children's daily activities in general, sometimes mentioning the target friend. It was encouraging to find that some teachers made a point of letting parents know the children were friends and gave parents details about the friendship. Buysse and colleagues (2003) suggested that sharing such information regarding friendships formed in the preschool setting may be especially important when children with disabilities are involved, particularly for

children who may have difficulty communicating this information to their parents. Without this kind of home-school communication, parents may not be alerted to their children's friendships and may not be aware of the opportunity to support emerging friendships.

Another main communication theme was that parents provided teachers with information or asked teachers for information regarding these friendships. Such information included (a) parents telling teachers that their children talked about target friends at home, (b) parents asking how their children got along with others, (c) parents asking about target friends, and, only rarely, (d) parents providing information about friends' playdates. Some parents also reported asking about friends' conflicts.

Parent interviews indicated that SN parents were more involved with parent-teacher communication in terms of asking for and providing teachers information. Overall, teacher interviews indicated that teachers communicated similarly with SN and TD parents in terms of providing information and receiving requests for information about these friendships. However, a few teachers made a point of saying that they communicated more with SN parents because of the SN child's disability. Thus, it appears that disability status may have been a factor in prompting some SN parents and teachers to engage in increased home-school communication about these friendships.

Noteworthy is the absence of responses indicating that teachers viewed parents as valuable sources of information about these friendships or important contributors to these friendships. Teachers reported giving information and being asked about or provided with information, but did not report asking parents for information relating to these friendships. Likewise, parents did not report seeing themselves as a valuable source of information about these friendships with the one exception of this parent who reported a problematic home-

school relationship, but would have appreciated additional friendship-focused communication with teachers:

I would really like to be considered more of a valuable resource and active member of Luke's team. And in theory, they work with families. In actuality, I see them alienating families, and seeing active families with ideas about things as more work.

In general, documentation of communication between parents and teachers about these friendships is encouraging, given the importance of friendships asserted in the introduction and literature review for this study and the importance of these particular friendships reported by participants. However, the absence of responses noting parents as a key source of information is a concern. Developmentally appropriate practice guidelines for early childhood education emphasize teachers and families working in collaborative, reciprocal relationships to share information and decision-making regarding shared goals for children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Similarly, recommended practices for early intervention and early childhood special education emphasize family-centered practices, such as working together to develop outcomes important to the family (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). The implication from both sets of practice guidelines is that teachers should strive to build partnerships with families and that personnel preparation programs should provide training and strategies to teachers for implementing such family-centered practices.

The final finding concerning home-school communication about specific friendships was that a few parents and teachers experienced barriers to communication and a few participants noted reasons for lack of communication. Some parents did not feel communication about a specific friendship was necessary unless problems arose and some teachers said issues concerning friendship did not come up in communication. Teachers should find ways to communicate about friendship on a regular basis and help parents

understand the importance of friendships. Finally, the privacy policies of a few preschools appeared to hinder communication about these friendships. While it is important to protect information about children's disability status and information on Individualized Education Plans, teachers and parents can find ways to communicate about young children's friendships without compromising confidential information. Many teachers in this study said they did so through informal conversations with parents (e.g., at drop off and pick up times). At the beginning of the school year, teachers could also request parents' written permission to share the names of children's friends in communication.

### **Implications for Practice**

The implications for practice suggested by results of this study include increase parent and teacher awareness of friendship as a potential developmental context, heighten teacher awareness of increasingly individualized interventions that may support young children's friendships, and encourage family-centered practices as recommended by professional standards. Most parents and teachers in this study believed that specific friendships were important for children's development and well-being. Personnel preparation programs should highlight friendships as important for children's social-emotional development and well-being and for their benefits for promoting development in other domains such as communication, socialization, and cognition.

Personnel preparation programs should also prepare early childhood teachers to support friendship formation and maintenance as recommended by professional standards focused on social and emotional development of young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Sandall and colleagues (2000) recommend that early childhood environments be structured to support children's play and interactions, and to foster positive relationships with

peers. In addition, the latter authors recommend using a variety of procedures – including prompting and prompt fading, naturalistic teaching, and peer-mediated strategies – to support the social development of children with disabilities. The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families/Head Start Bureau, 2003) includes social and emotional development as one of its eight domains. An example of an indicator within this domain is: “shows progress in developing friendships with peers” (p. 8). Given the lack of friendship practices that have been empirically researched (Buisse et al., in press), an evidence-based practice approach would recommend that other sources of evidence be considered, including knowledge about strategies for supporting social competence based on current research, and the collective wisdom and values of the field (Buisse & Wesley, 2006). Personnel preparation programs aimed at preparing teachers to facilitate children’s social development should make teachers aware of existing interventions such as those noted in the hierarchy described by Brown et al. (2001). Buisse and colleagues recommend a number of promising practices for supporting friendships, from classroom-wide practices for setting up an environment conducive to friendship development, to individualized interventions for select children (e.g., interpreting or speaking for children with communication disabilities). This study adds to the current research by describing parents’ and teachers’ reported use of strategies.

Finally, preparation programs should increase awareness of family-centered practice and provide personnel with experiences and tools for facilitating home-school communication about young children’s friendships, particularly with families of children with communication delays. Professional standards for early childhood special education personnel preparation highlight family involvement and emphasize that families should be

involved in all components of personnel preparation, including field experiences (Stayton, Miller, & Dinnebeil, 2003). Future teachers could be alerted to issues that are important to families of young children with disabilities regarding their children's friendships through field experiences such as the family mentorship project described by Dinnebeil, Benner, Boone, and Sparkman (2003).

### **Study Limitations**

Although findings of this study extend existing research, some limitations should be noted. This study explored what was going on at home and at school in support of established friendship dyads. The participating parents and teachers were limited to a particular geographic region (i.e., central North Carolina) and findings may not generalize to other parents and teachers. The majority of participants were Caucasian and almost all were either Caucasian or African American, and findings may not generalize to parents and teachers representing other ethnicities. The overwhelming majority of SN children in these friendship dyads were male. Thus, a gender balance was not achieved in the sample of children and parents and teachers may have reported different beliefs and practices for friendships involving more females. Given the design of the study, all participants had enrolled their children in inclusive preschool programs or were employed in inclusive preschool programs. I did not explore the beliefs and practices of parents whose children were enrolled in different types of childcare programs or whose children did not attend preschool. The fact that parents had enrolled their children in inclusive preschools may be an indicator of their increased awareness of the possibilities for social interactions between children with and without disabilities and such awareness may mean that their beliefs and practices are not typical of other parent responses. This was not investigated, but is a possibility. A final

limitation is that this study relied on parent and teacher report, and participants may have provided responses they felt were socially acceptable. However, the fact that the practices parents said teachers used were practices that teachers themselves reported using and vice versa provides some measure of triangulation of these findings. Future studies might consider classroom observations, for example, in order to further document practices teachers use in support of preschool friendships between children with and without disabilities. Additional recommendations for future research are presented next.

### **Future Research Directions**

Overall, the participants in this study believed these friendships were important for their children. Additional research is needed to better understand the benefits of friendships for young children. For example, research is needed on the protective effects of friendship for young children, as less is known currently about this than about the detrimental effects of peer rejection on children's development (Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). In order to better understand the development of friendships and their influence later in life, it is crucial to research very early friendships (Berndt, 2004). Future studies could focus attention on the histories of established friendships in order to learn about the earliest stages of friendship development between two children.

For most of the children in this study – who had to have at least one reciprocal friend according to teacher report in order to be included in the study – parents and teachers used a variety of practices to support their friendships. These practices are consistent with and extend current knowledge, but additional intervention research is needed to investigate the effects of such practices on young children's friendships. For example, particular friendship strategies may be especially beneficial for young children with disabilities who have not yet

established reciprocal friendships. Other strategies may be especially beneficial for helping children maintain already established friendships. Yet other strategies may be particularly effective for young children with communication delays, physical disabilities, or cognitive delays. Furthermore, additional research is needed to investigate how the nature and severity of disability affect parent and teacher beliefs and practices in support of young children's friendships. For example, future research could investigate parent and teacher beliefs and practices to promote friendships of children with Autism in particular. Finally, additional research is needed on how best to provide training for teachers regarding ways in which friendships may be promoted and ways in which family-centered practices may be improved with regard to communication about children's friendships.

This study utilized qualitative methodology to investigate the practices and beliefs of parents and teachers with regard to the support of specific preschool friendship dyads between children with and without disabilities. The study addressed the following research questions through interviews completed by parents and teachers: (a) How do parents and teachers describe the nature and importance of the friendship between the SN child and the TD child? (b) What strategies do parents and teachers use to facilitate the SN-TD friendship, and what factors affect their use of these strategies? (c) What are the similarities and differences between parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the support of SN-TD friendships? and (d) What types of communication – if any – occur between parents and teachers about these friendships? Parents and teachers reported holding similar beliefs about the nature and importance of friendships, describing most of these preschool friendships as harmonious: characterized by children showing affection, playing well together, wanting to be together, talking about each other, having commonalities (e.g., similar interests), and

being compatible (e.g., met each others' needs). The majority of parents and teachers believed specific friendships between two children were important because of the emotional benefits they provided children. Parents and teachers reported using a variety of strategies to help these preschool children become and stay friends, including general strategies that set up the social environment, strategies that provided opportunities for the two friends to play together, and strategies that helped the friends interact and play with each other. Most parents and teachers communicated with each other through informal conversation (and preferred to communicate informally) on a variety of topics relating to specific friendships and most reported being satisfied with this parent-teacher communication. These findings add to the knowledge base by describing parent and teacher beliefs, practices, and communication related to specific preschool friendships. However, additional research should be conducted to better understand beliefs, practices, and communication and the effects they have on the friendships of young children with and without disabilities.

## **Appendix A:**

### **Friendship Form**

Sections of the following Friendship Form were adapted with the permission of Dr. Virginia Buysse from the Playmates and Friends Questionnaire for Teachers, Revised (Goldman & Buysse, 2002; personal communication, October 30, 2003).

### Friendship Form

To be completed by the teacher.

In the first column, please list the first names only of the children with IEPs enrolled in your classroom. Then provide information about each child's special friends in the other columns.

Children with Disabilities	Special Friends (first names only)	Friend's Age	Does this child have a disability?(circle one)
First name _____  Age ____			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
First name _____  Age ____			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
First name _____  Age ____			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
First name _____  Age ____			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know
			yes no don't know

## **Appendix B:**

### **Interview Protocols**

The following protocols for interviews with parents and teachers were adapted with permission from H. G. Rhodes (2002; personal communication, September 2, 2003)

### **Protocol for Interview with Parents**

1. Tell me a little bit about [child's name]. What is he/she like? How is he/she around other children?
2. What are some hopes and dreams that you have for [child]? These can be any kind of goals that you have.
3. Let's talk about [child]'s friends. How many friends altogether would you say [child] has? What are their first names? (If more than three, which of these are [child]'s best friends?)
4. Let's talk about [name of target friend].
  - a. How old is [target friend]?
  - b. Is [target friend] a boy or a girl?
  - c. Does [target friend] have a disability that you know of?
  - d. How did [child] meet [target friend]?
  - e. What are their interactions like?
  - f. Where do they usually play together?
  - g. What kinds of things do you see or hear that lets you know they are friends?
  - h. How long have they been friends?
  - i. How do you think this friendship happened?
  - j. Why do you think these children became friends?
  - k. What do you think keeps this friendship going over time?
  - l. How important do you think this friendship is for [child]?
  - m. (If important) Why do you think this friendship is important for [child]?
5. Are there things that you did to help [child] and [target friend] become friends? What

- kinds of things did you do?
6. Are there things that you do to help [child] and [target friend] stay friends? What kinds of things do you do?
  7. Tell me more about [strategy named].
    - a. How often do you do this?
    - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
    - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
    - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
    - e. (If SN) How did [child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
    - f. (If TD) How did [target friend]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
  8. Do you ever arrange times for [child] and [target friend] to play together? If so,
    - a. How often do you do this?
    - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
    - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
    - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
    - e. (If SN) How did [child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
    - f. (If TD) How did [target friend]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
  9. Do you ever give [child] and [target friend] ideas about ways to talk or play with each other? If so,
    - a. How often do you do this?
    - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?

- c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
- d. How and why did you decide to do this?
- e. (If SN) How did [child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
- f. (If TD) How did [target friend]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?

10. Do you ever help [child] and [target friend] play together by participating in the play yourself? If so,

- a. How often do you do this?
- b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
- c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
- d. How and why did you decide to do this?
- e. (If SN) How did [child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
- f. (If TD) How did [target friend]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?

11. Do you ever help [child] and [target friend] play together by supervising their play? If so,

- a. How often do you do this?
- b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
- c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
- d. How and why did you decide to do this?
- e. (If SN) How did [child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
- f. (If TD) How did [target friend]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?

12. Do you ever help [child] and [target friend] resolve conflicts while they play? If so,
  - a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
  - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. (If SN) How did [child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
  - f. (If TD) How did [target friend]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
13. What was most helpful for [child] and [target friend] becoming friends?
14. What has been most helpful for [child] and [target friend] staying friends?
15. (If SN) How do you think [child]'s disability affects your child's friendship with [target friend]?
- 15a. (If TD) How do you think [target friend]'s disability affects your child's friendship with [target friend]?
16. How much influence do you think you had on [child] and [target friend] becoming friends?
17. How much influence do you think you have on [child] and [target friend] staying friends?
18. Who or what else affected [child] and [target friend] becoming friends?
19. Who or what else affects [child] and [target friend] staying friends?
20. Are there things that [child]'s teacher did to help [child] and [target friend] become friends? What kinds of things did she do?

21. Are there things that [child]'s teacher does to help [child] and [target friend] stay friends? What kinds of things does she do?
22. Do you communicate with [child]'s teacher about [child]'s friendship with [target friend]? If so,
- a. What types of things do you communicate about relating to this friendship?
  - b. How often do you communicate about this friendship?
  - c. How do you communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
  - d. What are the ways you prefer to communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
  - e. How satisfied are you with the communication with [child]'s teacher about this friendship?
- If no communication,
- f. Would you like to communicate with [child]'s teacher about [child]'s friendship with [target friend]?
  - g. (If yes) How would you prefer to communicate about this (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
23. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about [child]'s friendship with [target friend]?

### **Protocol for Interview with Teachers**

1. Tell me a little bit about [SN child's name]. What is he/she like? How is he/she around other children?
2. What are some hopes and dreams that you have for [SN child]? These can be any kind of goals that you have.
3. Let's talk about [SN child]'s friends. How many friends altogether would you say [SN child] has? What are their first names? (If more than three, which of these are [SN child]'s best friends?)
  - 1a. Tell me a little bit about [TD child's name]. What is he/she like? How is he/she around other children?
  - 2a. What are some hopes and dreams that you have for [TD child]? These can be any kind of goals that you have.
  - 3a. Let's talk about [TD child]'s friends. How many friends altogether would you say [TD child] has? What are their first names? (If more than three, which of these are [TD child]'s best friends?)
4. Let's talk about [SN child] and [TD child].
  - a. How old is [SN child]? How old is [TD child]?
  - b. Is [SN child] a boy or a girl? Is [TD child] a boy or a girl?
  - c. Does [SN child] have a disability that you know of? Does [TD child] have a disability that you know of?

- d. How did [SN child] meet [TD child]?
  - e. What are their interactions like?
  - f. Where do they usually play together?
  - g. What kinds of things do you see or hear that lets you know they are friends?
  - h. How long have they been friends?
  - i. How do you think this friendship happened?
  - j. Why do you think these children became friends?
  - k. What do you think keeps this friendship going over time?
  - l. How important do you think this friendship is for [SN child]? How important do you think this friendship is for [TD child]?
  - m. (If important) Why do you think this friendship is important for [SN child]?  
Why do you think this friendship is important for [TD child]?
5. Are there things that you did to help [SN child] and [TD child] become friends? What kinds of things did you do?
6. Are there things that you do to help [SN child] and [TD child] stay friends? What kinds of things do you do?
7. Tell me more about [strategy named].
- a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
  - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
8. Do you ever arrange times for [SN child] and [TD child] to play together? If so,

- a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
  - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
9. Do you ever give [SN child] and [TD child] ideas about ways to talk or play with each other? If so,
- a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
  - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
10. Do you ever help [SN child] and [TD child] play together by participating in the play yourself? If so,
- a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
  - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
11. Do you ever help [SN child] and [TD child] play together by supervising their play?
- If so,
- a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?

- c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
12. Do you ever help [SN child] and [TD child] resolve conflicts while they play? If so,
- a. How often do you do this?
  - b. Can you tell me about a time when you did this?
  - c. Do you think [strategy] worked?
  - d. How and why did you decide to do this?
  - e. How did [SN child]'s disability affect the decision to [strategy], if at all?
13. What was most helpful for [SN child] and [TD child] becoming friends with each other?
14. What has been most helpful for [SN child] and [TD child] to stay friends with each other?
15. How do you think [SN child]'s disability affects the friendship between [SN child] and [TD child]?
16. How much influence do you think you had on [SN child] and [TD child] becoming friends?
17. How much influence do you think you have on [SN child] and [TD child] staying friends?
18. Who or what else affected [SN child] and [TD child] becoming friends?
19. Who or what else affects [SN child] and [TD child] staying friends?
20. Are there things that [SN child]'s parents did to help [SN child] and [TD child] become friends? What kinds of things did they do?

20a. Are there things that [TD child]'s parents did to help [TD child] and [SN child] become

friends? What kinds of things did they do?

21. Are there things that [SN child]'s parents do to help [SN child] and [TD child] stay friends? What kinds of things do they do?

21a. Are there things that [TD child]'s parents do to help [TD child] and [SN child] stay friends? What kinds of things do they do?

22. Do you communicate with [SN child]'s parents about [SN child]'s friendship with [TD child]? If so,

- a. What types of things do you communicate about relating to this friendship?
- b. How often do you communicate about this friendship?
- c. How do you communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
- d. What are the ways you prefer to communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
- e. How satisfied are you with the communication with [SN child]'s parents about this friendship?

If no communication,

- f. Would you like to communicate with [SN child]'s parents about [SN child]'s friendship with [TD child]?
- g. (If yes) How would you prefer to communicate about this (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?

22a. Do you communicate with [TD child]'s parents about [TD child]'s friendship with [SN

child]? If so,

- a. What types of things do you communicate about relating to this friendship?
- b. How often do you communicate about this friendship?
- c. How do you communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
- d. What are the ways you prefer to communicate about this friendship (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?
- e. How satisfied are you with the communication with [SN child]'s parents about this friendship?

If no communication,

- f. Would you like to communicate with [TD child]'s parents about [TD child]'s friendship with [SN child]?
- g. (If yes) How would you prefer to communicate about this (e.g., informal conversations at school, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences)?

23. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about [SN child]'s and [TD child]'s friendship?

**Appendix C:**  
**Questionnaires**

Sections of the following Questionnaires were adapted with the permission of Dr. Virginia Buysse from the Playmates and Friends Questionnaire for Teachers, Revised (Goldman & Buysse, 2002; personal communication, October 30, 2003).

## Questionnaire for Parents

First names of the children in this friendship dyad \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

### A. Friendship Strategies

Please check the strategies below that you have used with this friendship.  
(Check all that you have used.)

Strategy	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
I provide time for these friends to play together.				
I arrange play dates so these friends can play together.				
I share information with parents/teachers so that they can arrange for these friends to play together.				
I help make arrangements for these friends to be in formal activities together outside of school like tumbling or music.				
I provide suggestions to solve problems or resolve conflict between these two friends.				
I allow these two friends to "exclude" other children when they want to be alone together.				
I encourage play between these two friends by commenting on their activities in an encouraging way.				
I invite these two friends to play together.				
I make special materials or activities available that encourage these friends to play together.				
I teach these children skills for how to be good friends to each other, like sharing, manners, and communicating.				
I speak for a child or interpret a child's behavior so the friend can understand.				
I help these friends take turns when they play.				
I help these friends talk to each other while they are playing.				
I show these friends how to play together by participating in their play.				
I read stories on the topic of friendship to these friends.				
I have arranged for these friends to be in the same class at school.				
Other strategies I use:				

**B. Special Friends**

Please list the first names of your child's special friends.

Child's first name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Does your child have a disability? \_\_\_\_\_

Friend's First Name	Friend's Age	Male/Female (circle one)	Is this friend a classmate? (circle one)	How long have these two been friends?	Does this child have a disability? (circle one)
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know

**C. Demographic Information**

Your relationship to the child

Mother  Father

Child's first name

Child's age

Your age

Child's ethnicity/race (Please check all that apply)

Your ethnicity/race (Please check all that apply)

- Black/African American
- Caucasian/non-Hispanic white
- Latino/Hispanic
- Asian/Asian-American
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

- Black/African American
- Caucasian/non-Hispanic white
- Latino/Hispanic
- Asian/Asian-American
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education you have completed (Please check one)

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less
- High School graduate
- Some college/vocational school
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Your family household income for the last year (Please check one)

- \$20,000 or less
- \$20,000 to \$40,000
- \$40,000 to \$60,000
- over \$60,000

Your occupation

Number of children in your family

## Questionnaire for Teachers

First names of the children in this friendship dyad \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

### A. Friendship Strategies

Please check the strategies below that you have used with this friendship.  
(Check all that you have used.)

Strategy	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
I provide time for these friends to play together.				
I arrange play dates so these friends can play together.				
I share information with parents/teachers so that they can arrange for these friends to play together.				
I help make arrangements for these friends to be in formal activities together outside of school like tumbling or music.				
I provide suggestions to solve problems or resolve conflict between these two friends.				
I allow these two friends to "exclude" other children when they want to be alone together.				
I encourage play between these two friends by commenting on their activities in an encouraging way.				
I invite these two friends to play together.				
I make special materials or activities available that encourage these friends to play together.				
I teach these children skills for how to be good friends to each other, like sharing, manners, and communicating.				
I speak for a child or interpret a child's behavior so the friend can understand.				
I help these friends take turns when they play.				
I help these friends talk to each other while they are playing.				
I show these friends how to play together by participating in their play.				
I read stories on the topic of friendship to these friends.				
I have arranged for these friends to be in the same class at school.				
Other strategies I use:				

**B. Special Friends**

Please list the first names of each child's special friends.

Child's first name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Does this child have a disability? \_\_\_\_\_

Friend's First Name	Friend's Age	Male/Female (circle one)	Is this friend a classmate? (circle one)	How long have these two been friends?	Does this child have a disability? (circle one)
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know

Child's first name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Does this child have a disability? \_\_\_\_\_

Friend's First Name	Friend's Age	Male/Female (circle one)	Is this friend a classmate? (circle one)	How long have these two been friends?	Does this child have a disability? (circle one)
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know
		male female	yes no		yes no don't know

**C. Demographic Information**

Child's name

Your relationship to the child

Teacher

Your age

Your ethnicity/race (Please check all that apply)

- Black/African American
- Caucasian/non-Hispanic white
- Latino/Hispanic
- Asian/Asian-American
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education you have completed (Please check one)

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less
- High School graduate
- Some college/vocational school
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Your degree

Your family household income for the last year (Please check one)

- \$20,000 or less
- \$20,000 to \$40,000
- \$40,000 to \$60,000
- over \$60,000

**Appendix D:**  
**Member Check**

Dear Parents and Teachers:

Thank you, for your participation in this study about preschool children's friendships. I have enclosed a 1-page summary of the information provided by parents and teachers in interviews. I would like your feedback to make sure these results are reflective of your responses. Please look over the enclosed summary and consider the questions below. If you wish to provide feedback, please use this form and the enclosed envelope (you do NOT need to identify yourself), or you may contact me at the email address or phone number below by October 16. I am very grateful for the time and information you shared with me.

Sincerely,

Heidi Hollingsworth  
Doctoral Student, School of Education, UNC-CH  
(336) 229-5387  
[hholling@email.unc.edu](mailto:hholling@email.unc.edu)

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**Please answer the following questions regarding the summary of results:**

1. Do these findings generally reflect your beliefs and practices regarding this preschool friendship?
2. Were any of these results surprising to you? If yes, which ones?
3. Are any important beliefs and strategies regarding this friendship missing from these results?

## **Summary of Interview Results: Beliefs and Practices of Parents and Teachers in Support of Friendships between Preschool Children with and without Disabilities**

Parents and teachers described most of these preschool friendships as harmonious and believed these friendships were important for the children:

- Most parents and teachers said these friendships were characterized by children showing affection, playing well together, wanting to be together, talking about each other, having commonalities (e.g., similar interests), and being compatible (e.g., met each others' needs). A few friendships were described as being inconsistent or conflicted.
- Most parents and teachers believed that these friendships were important for children because they were an emotional resource, helped children learn and develop, and/or helped children learn about relationships. A few parents and teachers felt these friendships were not especially important.

Parents and teachers used a variety of strategies to help these preschool children become and stay friends:

- Several strategies were general and set up the social environment. Some parents and/or teachers supervised children, taught children social skills (like sharing and being polite), talked with children about friendships, and let children choose their friends. Some parents also greeted their child's friend and brought their child to school regularly. Some teachers modeled friendship, encouraged all children to get along and play with each other, and separated friends at times.
- Other strategies provided opportunities for the two friends to play together. Some parents and/or teachers intentionally put friends together for activities (like centers), encouraged these friendships by telling children they could invite their friend over, and arranged playdates for the friends outside of the school. Some teachers planned friends' favorite activities.
- A final group of strategies helped the children to interact and play with each other. Some parents and teachers participated in the play themselves, helped the friends resolve conflicts, gave friends ideas about how or what to play, coached the friends' use of social skills with each other, and engaged the friends in conversation. Some teachers helped children understand the words or behaviors of friends with disabilities.

Most parents and teachers communicated with each other through informal conversation (and preferred to communicate informally) on a variety of topics relating to these friendships:

- Some teachers told parents these children were friends, gave parents details about the friendship (e.g., how well the friends play), and told parents about children's activities.
- Some parents asked for/gave teachers information about their child's friend, about conflicts, about playdates, and about how their child got along with other children.
- The privacy policies of a couple childcare programs made it hard for parents and teachers to communicate about specific friends by name, and some parents and/or teachers said they did not communicate with teachers about these friendships because there were no problems between the friends or because the topic of friendships never came up.
- Most parents and teachers expressed satisfaction with their communication about these friendships, though a few parents and teachers said they would like to share and/or receive additional information about these friends.

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