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Bubba's budding bromance

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October 31, 2010

By **Howard Ludwig**

My 4-year-old son, Bubba, has lots of friends at preschool. But ask him who's his best friend and without hesitation, he'll say, "Ryan Hartz."

Their friendship is based on a mutual love of "Star Wars." Most days these two pals chase each other around while pushing air through gritted teeth. The pulsating noise is intended to sound like laser gun blasts. The imaginary battle for the galaxy can rage for hours.

Bubba's love affair with "Star Wars" is nothing new, but this 'best friend' label is a recent development. He's always had friends, but there was never a hierarchy or any categories attached.

Dr. Margret Nickels said designating a best friend is an important part of growing up. She's the director of the Erikson Institute's Center for Children and Families in Chicago. A clinical psychologist, Nickels has worked with area parents and children for more than two decades.

"This idea of friendships and the feeling of friendship is a developmental change," Nickels said last week.

Children begin developing friendships around age 3. At this time, a child will identify another child as a friend based largely on physical proximity. For example, a pair of 3-year-olds might consider themselves buddies if they manage to play in a sandbox together for an hour. If one of the children steals the other's shovel or throws sand, the friendship immediately fizzles, Nickels said.

By age 4, children tend to gravitate toward children with similar interests. In Bubba's case, it's "Star Wars." These types of friendships can teach kids about boundaries and conflict resolution, because sacrifices often need to be made to keep play going, Nickels said.

For example, a group of preschoolers might be playing Batman. Naturally, all the boys will want to play the role of the Dark Knight. But rather than jeopardize the friendship by fighting over who gets to wear the cape and cowl, one child might say, "OK, you can be Batman, but I get to drive the Batmobile."

By age 6 or 7, children begin to have an emotional attachment to their friends. There's concern for the other person's feelings as well as seeking approval. There are even subtle displays of affection among friends of this age, Nickel said.

Ten- and 11-year-olds start looking for similar personalities and common values when choosing friends. Loyalty and mutual support is suddenly more important. By the time the teen years arrive, most kids have developed the social skills needed to make friends. They know the types of people they like and whom to avoid, Nickels said.

As for Bubba's best friend, "Star Wars" isn't the only reason for the budding bromance. Preschoolers gravitate toward other children with common interests as well as common struggles, Nickels said.

I've watched Bubba and Ryan play. It looks pretty rough. If you didn't know they're pals, you might think they were fighting. Both of them know it's unacceptable to act violent and hitting is never allowed. Yet, the "Star Wars" movies are chock full of hand-to-hand combat and gunplay.

So how do you play "Star Wars" and not be violent? Both boys seem to struggle with this question. It appears they're trying to find the answer by playing as rough as possible without actually hurting each other.

You'd think this would result in plenty of bruises and Band-Aids, but it never gets to that point. Both boys seem to know exactly how far to push it without crossing the line. I think that's what makes them best friends.

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