

Understanding Childhood Friendships

A look into the nature of children's friendships



As the great poet, John Donne wrote in the 17th century, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main..."

No one can be alone in life. We need others to support us mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Relationships, and in particular friendships, can sustain us throughout our lives. Even when romantic relationships end, we get laid off, or become ill, true friendships endure. When times get tough, we know we always have someone to turn to who can help us in a practical way or a supportive way, as we cry on their shoulder and then move on to deal with the issue that has arisen.

But good friendships are not a matter of accident or chance. They come from skills cultivated when we are younger, which can help us form life-time friendships even in our earliest years.

Like every other aspect of growing up, children need to learn friendship skills. They learn them from parents and from their peers.

In this guide, we will be looking at the nature of children's friendships, how they form, and how we as parents can help ensure they are able to form lasting friendships and avoid negative relationships such as bullying.

So, let's get started with a look at the importance of friends.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDS

From the moment they are able to listen and understand, young children start to learn about interpersonal dynamics within the family, and with children their own age - their peers. It is an important aspect of growing up because it helps them understand interdependence and yet enables them to become independent.

If they have one or more siblings in the household, this can help teach them about relationships with people their own age as compared with adults. Children get a lot of educational benefit from their parents, but the interactivity with other children at home and in social settings such as play school, play days and more, helps them gain a range of skills that will put them in good stead in their adult life.

For example, children learn communication skills - being able to say what they want and how they feel. They ask questions, invite other people to play, and organize the activity into some sort of sequences of events.

In the process of dealing with other children, they learn about emotions - their own and those of others. They feel valued because they have friends, and learn how to try to preserve the friendship. They learn to control their temper tantrums and deal with frustrations in a positive way, so as not to argue with others or take their emotions out on them and drive them away.

Through this valuing of the friendship, they learn more complicated skills - such as avoiding aggressive behaviors like hitting or biting, and being able to compromise or come up with other ideas that might work.

They also learn how to co-operate with each other, and hopefully be honest. When game playing, for example, they learn how to take turns, play the game according to the rules, and not cheat. They also learn how not to be a sore loser.

Through friendships, they also learn that not everyone is the same and that people have different thoughts and feelings they need to be aware of and sensitive to. They gradually learn how to see things from others' points of view and adapt their communication and play style to different people.

They also learn new skills from their friends - things they might not have been able to do until they saw them and decided to imitate them. This can be a bad thing sometimes, of course, if kids "egg each other on" or teach each other inappropriate vocabulary; but again, this is where strong parental guidance can help.

Modeling in Your Own Household

Children take their cue from their parents, so if you don't treat others with respect, cheat at games and swear like a trooper, they are going to think this behavior is normal and acceptable and do the same. However, this can get them into considerable trouble at school and in social situations.

In some cases, they might even bring home a friend who acts like that. It is important not to overreact, but rather, to teach by example. Saying please, thank you, being kind, offering compliments and supportive praise all "grease the wheels" of human interaction. So too does learning when to speak up about an issue, and when to keep silent for the sake of harmony and the preservation of the relationship.

The Importance of Friendships Starts Early

How to make friends, and keep them, are two of the main developmental tasks children need to learn from their preschool years and upwards. Studies have shown that these skills help prevent children from having psychological and school problems later in life. Yet studies have also

shown that some children as young as three are already having serious problems negotiating relationships with other children.

About 5 to 10 percent of young children will go on to experience persistent problems, such as social exclusion and rejection, or physical or verbal harassment from their peers - either due to their own actions, or the bullying of others. Peer relationship difficulties in a child's early years are unfortunately a powerful predictor of future emotional and behavioral problems. These can include:

- Emotional problems such as loneliness, anxiety and depression
- Behavioral problems, such as physical or verbal aggression, hyperactivity or defiant behavior
- Physical issues, such as being bullied, or bullying others

Children with developmental difficulties are at particular risk because they develop more slowly than their peers and often are not allowed to or don't get as many chances to interact with children their own age. As children get older, they might also become more judgmental and start to make fun of the person they once enjoyed having as a friend.

Being made fun of or bullied can lead the child to become socially withdrawn. Adults can help with conflict resolution, positive reinforcement of good friendship skills, and discipline in relation to aggressive or bullying behavior.

Day care centers and schools might also use programs that try to improve the children's social behavior skills and their peer relationships. They will use varied activities and try to involve everyone in the efforts, staff and parents alike. If you are concerned your child is very shy and/or having difficulties with peer relationships, you might ask about training, or look up information online.

But what constitutes a problem? In order to know this, we have to have an idea of what is typical of friendships amongst children at different ages in order to determine if there are any issues that need to be addressed. Let's look at the typical friendship patterns at different ages in the next section.

THE TYPICAL FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS AT DIFFERENT AGES

In the same way that babies learn to roll, crawl, walk and run, so too do their friendship skills develop over time. As they get older, they start to view friendships differently and in a more emotionally mature and connected manner.

The Stages of Children's Friendships

Child psychologists tend to use the 5-level model developed by Robert Selman to determine what is typical for each age level and how your child's relationships should mature over time.

Level 0 Friendship — Momentary Playmates (Approximate Ages: 3-6 Years)

These relationships are all about fun and playing, with little thought for emotional connection and a lot of appreciation for the fact that they are nearby and they can do things together that they like. Conflict can arise if they don't get their own way, but they will gradually learn that cooperation leads to better results than storming off. They can usually only see their own perspective, so it can surprise and even anger them if one of their playmates expresses a different opinion.

They may show some preference for some friends over others, but in general, the friendships come and go as moods and activities change.

Level 1 Friendship — One-Way Assistance (Approximate Ages: 5-9 Years)

Children are still pretty selfish at this age, wanting their own way, but they start to understand that friendship means more than just playing together, and that it can be a two-way street. They want nice things from their friends and will be prepared to be nice in order to get them, but they don't really focus on their own role and responsibilities in the relationship.

They will sometimes tolerate others they don't really like if they are nice to them, and they will sometimes "bargain" with others by saying, "I'll be your friend if you do this!" or "I won't be your friend if you do that!"

This can lead to some drama and perhaps even bullying, so it is important to watch out for domineering behavior and foster cooperation.

Level 2 Friendship — Two-Way, Fair-Weather Cooperation (Approximate Ages: 7-12 Years)

At this point, children are much better able to grasp different points of view other than their own, but that does not always mean agreeing with them or putting the other person first. They will still try to get their own way if they can.

However, at this point they also start to take more of an interest in what is fair. They are also more willing to take turns, cooperate and do what another person wants if they get what they want.

At this point they also start to judge themselves and others, discriminating between "good" and "bad". They want to be liked but become nervous that they are "not good enough" or something is "wrong" with them if they have friendship issues.

They can also be jealous within friendships, especially if the friends they usually spend time with start to branch out and make other friends. This is where peer pressure can really start to kick in, with a child doing whatever they can to be the same as everyone else in order to be accepted and not stand out from the crowd.

In many cases, this desire to conform will lead the children to create secret clubs with rules, and above all, who is allowed in the club and who isn't. This can be fun for a time, but painful if they break the rules or someone says they don't want them to be part of the club any more.

Encouraging your child to think for themselves but without imposing their thoughts on others, and being more independent, can help them not get sucked into undesirable behaviors such as bullying, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or experimenting with sex, which can happen when they are in the upper age ranges of this level - depending on the age of their friends and the kind of mass media and parental habits (like smoking) that they are exposed to.

Level 3 Friendship — Intimate, Mutually Shared Relationships (Approximate Ages: 8-15 Years)

A child may have a large circle of friends they do various activities with, but they will eventually start to form closer relationships with one or two individuals who are more supportive and intimate. These are people they feel they can confide in and share more personal details with. They will try to compromise for the sake of the friendship and do things the other person likes, not put themselves first all the time.

They should respect a confidence, and have theirs respected in return. If this does not happen, it can be painful and even embarrassing, which will have an impact on that relationship and others as they learn who to trust or not to trust.

Girls will usually tend to become supposed best friends who do everything together. They might get jealous or angry if they don't spend all their time with them. Boys tend to be more flexible and hang out with anyone as long as they are doing mutually interesting things.

Girls tend to be more emotionally mature than boys at this age. If they bully, they will often do it verbally and often through social exclusion. If they are bullied, they can be made to feel worthless, or "less than" a certain standard, such as compared with models on the covers of magazines, or someone else in their group of friends who has more money, better clothes, and so on.

When boys bully, it usually tends to be physical. In most cases of bullying, however, the victim will usually be someone who is socially isolated. Some children might join in, but the more mature ones will make it clear that bullying is wrong and try to help the victim in some way.

Level 4 Friendship — Mature Friendship (Approximate Ages: 12 Years and Up)

In more mature friendships, there is a much greater emotional closeness and connection. Children choose friends who "get them", and in particular, ones who seem to understand when their own parents might not. This can however set a dangerous precedent of the child distancing themselves more and more from their family in a quest for independence, but getting involved with the wrong crowd as a result.

For example, they might think there is safety in numbers if they become part of a gang, but membership in that gang can cause them to become involved in illegal activities.

Healthy friendships are more relaxed and supportive. No one gets upset if they want to spend time with other people, though they can be challenged when romantic love interests start to appear on the horizon. A child with a good sense of self-esteem won't "lose themselves" in a relationship to the point where they dump all their friends. They will understand that true friends are loyal and reliable, and will be there for them no matter what. They will distinguish between close friends and casual ones.

The Importance of Understanding the Levels of Friendship

It is important to understand the typical characteristics of each level of friendship in order to be supportive and watch out for any troubling signs that your child might be struggling with their relationships, or are beginning to manifest difficult behaviors as a result.

Relationships are all about trial and error, and the peer who is a "bestie" one day can be an enemy, or someone they are indifferent to, the next. By teaching them it is okay to make mistakes as long as they learn from them, things will seem like less of a big deal for them; the end of a friendship won't seem like the end of the world, but just a natural part of growing up. It will help them learn to distinguish between true friends who want what's best for them, and false friends who have their own agenda.

Now that we've covered what is typical at each stage of development, you can watch out for any issues and try to support your child as they form better friendships.

But wait. Not so fast. There's one modern trend that can have a significant impact on friendships: social media. Let's examine this topic in more detail in the next section.

THE IMPACT SOCIAL MEDIA HAS ON FRIENDSHIPS

Social media was not around for most of us when we were growing up, so it can be difficult for parents to understand the impact of it on friendships between children.

Part of the problem is that parents often don't know what their children are up to on the internet until it is too late.

On the one hand, social media can be a great chance to connect with people from all over the world. In our day, we probably participated in an overseas pen pal program for the same reason.

On the other hand, are the people they are connecting with really who they say they are? And are the exchanges on the social networks positive and healthy ones? With the rise in cyber bullying and an increase in suicide rates that are linked to bullying in all its forms, it is important to be aware of the power of social media for good or ill. This will often depend on the maturity level of your child.

Social media can also lead to inappropriate sharing. With almost every child carrying a smartphone and every smartphone having a camera, locker room photos and shots of your child or others in the middle of inappropriate activities is possible, and can be devastating. Fabulously talented US Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps lost millions in sponsorship deals and nearly lost his career due to one photo posted online of him taking a puff of marijuana from a bong. Yet in countries like Holland, it is legal to do so.

"Naming and shaming", including "slut shaming" when someone does something wrong or when a couple breaks up can also be very painful and embarrassing. Even worse, spoken words will fade over time and only be heard by a few people, whereas social media posts can last forever and be read by dozens if not millions of people.

Teen Attitudes to Social Media

The Pew Research Center has released [a detailed study](#) that gives insights into the impact of social media on teen attitudes and relationships. It was conducted amongst 13 to 17 year olds in 2014 and 2015.

The study shows that 76% of all teens use social media, with Facebook being the dominant platform. Statistics show 71% of all teens use it, followed by Instagram at 52% and Snapchat at 41%. Around 33% use Twitter and 33% also use Google+.

Social media does not just connect them with existing friends, but new ones as well. About 64% have made new friends online and 62% says they have shared their online user name with people they have met in the real world in order to stay in touch.

About 94% say they spend time with friends on social media, with 30% reporting they interact every day, and 37% every few days. Social media is the top way communicating with friends for 66% of those taking the survey.

They value social media interactions because they feel better connected to their friends' feelings and what is going on in their friends' lives. Those with smartphones feel more connected than those without.

They appreciate being able to connect even when they are not together in person and they can connect with lots of other people at the same time. However, 90% do feel that people online tend to overshare. Rural teens tended to feel this more than urban and suburban teens. This might point to the fact that there are repercussions for postings in smaller, more close-knit communities.

On the plus side, 73% of girls and 63% of boys said they got support online when they were going through a hard time.

The Downside of Sharing

While it is true that social media can foster friendships, connections and support, it can also make some teens feel envious of others as they all share information about their lives. It can be upsetting for them to see post about events they are not invited to, and it can lead to feelings of inadequacy because they think their life doesn't measure up. Around 65% have seen events posted that they were not invited to, and about 21% feel their life is worse than that of others.

Teens are aware of the impression they make on social media and some carefully select or curate their content to present a certain image online. They are also aware of the potential of adults to see their account, including parents, teachers and even college admissions personnel.

Some teens report being able to present a different side of themselves as they talk about more serious things like politics. They are also aware that people might present a false front online. About 75% of teens think people are less authentic and real on social media than they are offline.

Around 40% of teens report feeling pressure to post positive and attractive content about themselves. Those from a more educated background feel more pressure to present a good face. They want to be liked and they want to post content so they are digitally "liked" or "hearted" as well. They want to be popular online too and get positive comments and be praised for "cool" content.

In terms of postings from others, 42% of teens have had someone post things about them that they cannot change or control. Older teens and white teens are especially likely to report this. Teens from more educated households are also more likely to experience this.

In terms of conflict online, around 68% of teen social media users (52% of all teens) have experienced drama among their friends on social media and 26% of all teens have had a conflict with a friend over something that happened online or over text messages. Girls are more likely to unfriend, unfollow and block former friends than boys, 58% versus 53%.

With all of this social media activity going on, it can be hard to discover exactly what is going on with your child's relationships, so look for signs of them being moody, withdrawn or upset, and try to encourage real world activities, not just virtual ones. If you suspect bullying, then you should also start to worry about your child's friendships.

Most parents always worry about how involved they should be in their children's friendships. Let's look at this topic in the next section.

HOW INVOLVED SHOULD YOU GET IN YOUR CHILD'S FRIENDSHIPS?

No one likes to feel like a "helicopter parent" hovering over their kids all the time, but sometimes it is important to step in - especially if you are worried about a child's particular friendships. The extent of the involvement will depend on the situation.

The first thing to remember is that children are not born with social skills. They are learned through social situations. In the same way that we make sure we socialize puppies when they are less than 6 months in order to make sure they can handle many of the most common situations adult dogs will face, when our child is younger, we can do a lot to their social development by exposing them to various groups of people and life experiences.

Being respectful of our friends and family shows the child the way they should treat theirs. They also learn trust, self-confidence and self-worth through their relationships with others.

Parents can also teach their child how to interact with other people. The child learns how to meet and greet people, talk to them, tell stories and jokes, and cooperate with others. We teach children how to play games, win and lose well, and not cheat. We also teach them how to apologize and accept apologies, pay compliments and receive them, say please and thank you. We help our children learn how to be patient, respectful and considerate of others.

Encouraging your child to bring friends home and having an open door policy where everyone is welcome helps your child learn to be tolerant and accepting of others. Organizing play dates and getting them involved in clubs and activities encourage them to mingle in a number of different settings.

Set rules for social media and spending time with their friends, and be vigilant about where they are going and what they are doing. If you are nervous about this, always invite their friends over, even if you don't approve of them. Your child won't need to feel they have to rebel, or resent you because you are trying to choose their friends for them. You might even find that children who are "rough around the edges" smooth out because they follow your example.

Set clear rules for appropriate behavior, with rewards and punishments that you follow through with. If you say they need to be in by 9 pm, they need to have a good excuse for not being home by then. Child learn a great number of social skills through family rules about how to treat others and what is expected of them, such as asking permission to borrow something, not just taking it, and how to be responsible by doing some of the family chores in a cooperative manner.

There are a lot of ways to show team work beyond sports teams, though they are a good start. Having your child view your family as a team will help them choose their friends wisely. They will be more inclined to stand up for themselves, and not give in to the selfish demands of peers trying to use them or pressure them in some way, if they have internalized your rules and understand correct and incorrect behavior.

If they do break a rule, be clear that the behavior is bad, not the child. Discuss things they observe at school or in your travels, and why the person might have behaved as they did. You don't have to label things right and wrong, but you can encourage your child to think about the other choices the person had, and which ones might have been better.

Talking and listening about what happened during the day, especially around the dinner table at least three nights per week, has been shown to keep families much closer and make children

much less inclined to behave inappropriately (such as smoking tobacco, trying illicit drugs, or engaging in underage sex).

Discussing worries, thoughts and fears maintains open communication with your child, so they should be less secretive about what they are doing, where they are going and who they are spending time with. Acknowledge feelings without judging them. Thank them for sharing.

Help your child learn to manage negative feelings and solve problems. Being able to manage negative feelings and work out problems are important skills in getting along with others. When your child talks about how s/he is feeling, show you understand through saying, "It sounds like you're upset because...." Then you can help them brainstorm solutions.

If you overhear your child and their friend having a conflict, let them work it out on their own. Only step in if it is really necessary - for example, if an argument is getting physical.

Understand that people have different social styles, so some can "work a room" while others have only a few select friends. You can't make friends for your child, and should not try to break up friendships, but you can foster relationships in which your child will develop the self-confidence and social skills s/he will need as an adult.

Childhood friendships can be tricky, but they are an important part of personal and educational development for children as they grow up and mature. Support them as they go out into the wider world, by setting a good example, and see how many enduring friendships they can foster.