

Summary: Seeking & Maintaining Healthy Friendships

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A friend is one that knows you as you are, understands where you have been, accepts what you have become, and still, gently allows you to grow."

—William Shakespeare

There are many facets to children's friendships. Laurie Denn and Jean Breitenbucher, educators from the Edina Family Center, offered "Cliff Notes" from a variety of their classes in an information-rich presentation lasting two hours.

All skills are developmental, and social aspects of friendship are something we all work on throughout our lives. Think of it as an evolving process for kids. Quality, not quantity, is what's important. Parents should be mindful of "ghosts in the nursery," seeing ourselves in our kids and re-living our own experiences. Kids, and siblings within families, may have vastly different personalities and needs. Sometimes sibling relationships may actually replace the outside need for friends; that's OK.

Continue to be available as your child grows. Remember: "Quality time is quantity." Know your child's friends and their parents. (In middle school, ask your child's homeroom teacher who their friends are, if you don't know). Make home a welcoming place for friends. Learn parental techniques, for example, for successful party-hosting: get busy with laundry in a nearby room, or serve salty snacks and water in small drink cups that need refilling so you have a reason to be present in the kid-filled room.

Communication with your child, of course, is critical. Maintaining a warm, affectionate relationship will ultimately help children resist peer pressures. Ask your child what they like about their friends. Adolescents are still likely to accept parents' values on the "big issues." But they may tend to follow peers on social style. Parents need to share their values regarding sex, drugs and peer pressure. (Be aware, adults are susceptible to pressure too!). Restrict situations which are unsupervised and/or inappropriate for the age level. Set limits consistently: Issues of safety and morality are always non-negotiable. Specify which family times and rituals take precedence over peers and activities.

Susceptibility to peer pressure peaks in 8th to 9th grade. Parents can help by teaching techniques such as saying "no" to situations. Negotiate, when possible. Develop a "code word" to use when your child wants to leave uncomfortable situation. For example, tell your child to call you and say "I'm not feeling good. Come and get me." It's not a lie to say that because the child actually is uncomfortable.

A word about the Internet: It can be a source for indirect bullying, as kids share gossip and lies. "Relational aggression" is also on the rise, as friendship cliques target individuals for attack. It is important to help Internet-savvy kids realize the difference between "virtual" friendships versus "true" friendships. The virtual kind allows us to maintain a superficial connection to a wide circle of acquaintances and friends. Remember: "You are not your 'Facebook' or 'My Space' page."

Consult the Edina Family Center for handouts containing summary information, and a variety of classes on friendship-related topics.