

The Ups and Downs of Friendship

The familiar cliché, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” can accurately describe most friendships of children. Working with young people on a daily basis causes me to reflect on my own childhood. One minute Jenny was my best friend, and the next minute I was sobbing to my mother because Jenny was the meanest person I had ever met. Peer relationships, the good and the bad, are an important part of growing up.

Friendships do more than provide your child with someone to hang-out with, or a place to have a sleep-over on a Saturday night – friendships are key building blocks for development and adjustment into the “adult” world. Friendships help children learn social skills, problem-solving skills and increase self-confidence. On the other hand friendships cause conflict, decrease self-esteem and offer a variety of headaches to parents.

Helping your child succeed in the “friendship world” is easier said than done. The best place to start is at home. Loving and nurturing family relationships give a child a good foundation for moving out into the social world. Young people tend to use the behaviors they learn in their home to interact with those outside their home. Good family relationships are only the start of creating positive peer relationships. Here are a few suggestions for parents to help in navigating peer relationships of their children:

Provide opportunities for socialization. Invite a friend or two to spend the night at your house. Participate in organized activities with other young people, especially those outside school, groups that introduce them to an entirely new group of peers (4-H, dance class, special interest groups, etc.). Some children find it easier to socialize in groups rather than one-on-one situations. Find a happy medium that allows your child a comfortable place to socialize.

Respect your child’s individuality. One child may have a “best friend” while others are happier having a variety of friends. The key is that your child’s social style may be different than yours. Understand that both situations mentioned are acceptable and do not force your ideals about friendship on your children. While a variety of friendship patterns work for children, concern should be raised for the child that seems to have no friends.

Let your children and their friends solve conflicts themselves. For some odd reason children tend to have more conflicts with their friends than with other children. As parents our first reaction, when conflict arises, is to play the role of “knight in shining armor” and come to the rescue of our children. Solving your children’s problems with their friends is very seldom the solution. Children get themselves into disagreements, and in time they will work out their disagreements with their friends.

Talk with your child about their friendship experiences. Although it is important to let your child solve their own conflicts, it is also important to show interest in what is going on in your child’s life. Problem solving with your child gives them a variety of solutions; in the end they decide how best to handle the situation. Help your child learn empathy by talking about what emotions their friends are going through during the same situation. Most importantly model a balanced approach to friendship – sympathize without making the situation more than it really is. Children will exaggerate without the help of their parents.

Seek outside help if you are concerned about your child’s peer relationships. Children who are rejected or ignored by their peers may benefit from the support of others. Friendship has a lot of different meanings and a variety of emotions associated with it, especially when you are growing up. As parents we need to be supportive and show we care. If you have additional questions about this subject or other youth related issues please contact the University of Missouri Extension Center in Henry County at 660-885-5556.

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