

Protection Eight: Friendship Skills

Sometimes we make a wonderful friendship connection and the relationship is easy to maintain - essentially, we don't have to think very much about being that person's friend.

In life, though, situations arise where friendships can be more difficult. Children are thrown into situations where friendship skills are tremendously important. Particularly when they are experiencing bully actions against them, they may feel isolated and afraid. They may feel they have no outlet for their feelings, or that when they do try to express what is happening, they are ignored and further isolated. Children who are experiencing bully actions can alleviate some of their problems by learning strong friendship skills.

Often professionals talk about befriending the person using bully actions. That can be a solution, but it can also create a situation where a child has acquired a "friend" they are afraid to cross. It puts them at risk of becoming a user of bully actions. When it works in a balanced way, it can be a good thing. Otherwise, your child needs to know how to friend OTHER children. Ones that he may not know yet that might be a support, and he needs to know how to keep the friends he has, during the bullying episode.

Friendships include different components at different stages:

Early childhood: In early childhood, your child begins to understand the need for turn taking, but they tend to be egocentric, centered on themselves. Friendship is based on simple play, and friends are the ones who are in the same room with them.

Elementary age Children (Grades 1 to 4): In elementary school, children begin to experience friendships that include give and take. Children begin to associate with others who they see as similar to them in some way, most often in likes and dislikes.

Middle school age children (Grades 5 to 8): In middle school, children are very aware of their effect on their peers and what is said about them. They are also more aware of what they say about others, and the effects it all has. Importance is placed on loyalty, and certain expectations of trust are in place. Friendships are based in common interests and developed through experience sharing. Cliques may form, as children become choosy about their friends. A split between genders is likely to be seen.

High School (Grades 8 to 12): Peer group acceptance is of the ultimate importance. Family is often rejected in favor of peers. Loyalty and trust is expected in friendships. Friendships are formed with people who your child feels understand, recognize them

and support them. There is increased understanding that different types of friendships can be experienced.

Friendship skills include:

- being able to introduce oneself to a group.
- starting and maintaining conversations.
- being able ask questions to find out about others.
- awareness and control of tone of voice.
- listening and trying to understand.
- understanding and empathizing with mistakes.
- accepting people for who they are.
- giving and accepting compliments.
- giving and accepting criticism.
- giving and accepting help.
- being cooperative.
- being able to negotiate and problem solve.
- supporting a friend in difficult times.
- supporting a friend in positive growth.
- sharing your space, and your stuff.
- being a good winner and a good loser.
- knowing how to ignore annoyances.
- choosing friends.

When you see your child using these skills, give them positive feedback. Positive feedback breeds more positive behavior.

Activities:

Discuss with your child how they feel when they try to introduce themselves:

- In a group where no one knows each other
- In a group where people know each other, but do not know your child
- In a group where they know the people a little bit but are not good friends

Role play jumping into a conversation and/or introducing themselves with your child. Practice welcoming another child into a conversation by turning your body towards them and widening the talking space circle.

If your child is experiencing bully actions, talk about the friends they have. Are they good friends? Are there opportunities to make new, different friends, or to expand on friendships that are already slightly developed?

Brainstorm ways to meet/introduce yourselves to different people. Use the introduction situations above to develop role plays.

To enhance listening skills, make a habit of reading with your child. Every two or three pages, ask your child to summarize what happened. If a book is complicated, ask for a summarization more often, or if your child is advanced, ask for a summarization at the end, and ask other questions about what happened. This gives your child experience in listening and rephrasing. Empathizing can also be enhanced by discussing the feelings, or potential feelings of the characters, throughout reading.

Talk about compliments in this way with your child, and use the idea for yourself as well: A compliment is a gift. It's rude to refuse a gift. It is important to accept a compliment with a simple "Thank you." Rather than trying to deny it or immediately returning another compliment. Compliments are gifts that can be given for free.

Learning to accept people as they are can start by helping people. Seek out a soup kitchen or food bank that you can help at, as a family. Help your child see that we need to define people by their inner selves, not their outer trappings. Help them see that every person has an important place in the world.

Brainstorm some arguments that your child has had with friends, and define the two positions (ie: One person wants to go to the movie, one wants to go to the youth center) Work through the situation using a friendship problem solving process. Help your child ask the following questions about the disagreement:

1. Why was my position important to me?
2. Why was the other person's position important to them?
3. Is there an obvious compromise? (Can we do both things?)

4. Is there a possible trade off? (We do what you want tonight, and what I want next time.)

Talk openly about jealousy. Are there ever times when you or your child feel jealous of the other person in a friendship? Jealousy tends to be related to one's own self concept. Discussing jealousy can bring into focus the needs a child has in terms of self-concept development. If your daughter is jealous of a friend because the friend is thinner, it points out a body self-concept issue that needs focus. REMEMBER, changing self concept is not about finding and changing the perceived negatives. It is about finding and enhancing the real positives.

To practice ignoring annoyances, practice ignoring annoyances! When you, or your child is annoyed by someone's behavior, ask yourselves "How much will this matter in six months?" (or even tomorrow). For minor annoyances, the answer is not at all. This helps you and your child to think about it in a balanced way. When a behavior cannot be ignored, teach your child distraction. For example, when their sibling is tapping their pen against the table, a child can get up and go to a different room for a different activity without bothering to make a comment.

Have your child keep a friendship diary. They can keep track of whenever they use a friendship skill.

Brainstorm a list of important qualities they want their friends to have, and compare their good friends with the list. Do their good friends have those qualities? Brainstorm a list of qualities that would make them choose not to have someone for a friend.