

Conflict and Boundaries Within Friendships

The friendships that are so easily formed between young children quickly become complicated as early as the Primary School years. Parents play a key role in teaching kids about healthy friendships and supporting them through the inevitable pains of toxic ones. Almost inevitably, children and teens experience friendship conflict. It is sometimes difficult to know when to intervene, how to intervene and how best to support your child. From our experience and reading, here are some ideas.

Teach Him/Her to Know it When He/She Experiences It

One of the things that makes conflict within a friendship seem to have an under-the-radar nature are the things left unsaid and invitations not given. It is unexplained cut-offs in friendship. It is silence. This type of treatment is marked by omission which makes it very hard for children to put their finger on what they are experiencing in their friendships — yet the pain, humiliation, and isolation are unmistakable.

Parents and other significant adults play a critical role in keeping an open communication with young people and making them aware of the typical behaviours that mark this form of social aggression. Knowledge is power; when children know what the boundaries of a good friendship are and when a relationship is being tested, they are better able to make a conscious choice to move closer or away from friends who use these behaviours.

Around the dinner table, after school, in the car, or anytime the mood is right, strike up a conversation (or, better yet, a dozen ongoing dialogues) about the values kids should look for in a real friendship. Make it into a finish-the-sentence game with a starter like, A Real Friend is Someone Who... Hopefully, the end of your child's sentence will sound something like:

- uses kind words
- takes turns and cooperates
- shares
- uses words to tell me how she/he feels
- helps me when I need it
- compliments me
- includes me
- is always there for me
- understands how I feel
- cares about my opinions and feelings
- stands up for me
- is fun to be with
- has a lot in common with me

When kids understand how a healthy friendship should look and feel, they are best equipped to set their boundaries and extricate themselves from friendships that are toxic and damaging.

Some of the most common negative behaviours that adults can help children to be aware of in relation to their peers include:

1. Mocking, teasing, and calling others names.
2. Talking about parties and play dates in front of others who are not invited.
3. Giving others the "silent treatment."

4. Threatening to take away friendship (“I won’t be your friend anymore if…”).
6. Spreading rumours and starting gossip about another.
7. “Forgetting” to save a seat for a friend or leaving someone out by “saving a seat” for someone else.
8. Saying something mean and then following it with “just joking” to try to avoid blame.
9. Using mobiles and/or social media to gossip, start rumours, say mean things, or forward embarrassing posts and photos.

If your child is asking for help with a friend who has overstepped respectful boundaries, help him/her with some “I statement” responses such as, “I don’t like the way you are treating me right now. I’m feeling angry about what you just said/did/pretended not to do and I’m not going to let you treat me that way anymore.” Adults who teach their children how to respond effectively — by role modeling assertive communication skills help their children to develop the confidence to walk away from toxic friendships. If your child would like to renegotiate the relationship and improve the friendship, they need to have an honest conversation to reveal how they feel. This respectful honesty is an opportunity to set the boundaries, provide the friend with some insight and improve the quality of the friendship.

Encourage Him/Her to Show Strength

As school counsellors, we teach our young clients that it is okay to feel sad, or hurt, or angry, and that it is a good thing to talk about their emotions with others. Yet, when it comes responding to someone who has let them down, here is an opportunity for parents to teach their children how to show strength. Strength should not come in the form of physically or verbally aggressive responses that up the ante and escalate hostilities of course, but rather, young people show strength when they use humour to deflect a situation and where they stand up for themselves whenever their feelings are disrespected. As for the “talking about their emotions” part, adults should make themselves available as a sounding board for kids whenever possible. Kids need to have a safe place to be vulnerable—to vent, to talk about their friendship frustrations, and even to cry and the most overwhelming feeling is likely to be one of grief. Parents are usually the best people to provide this safe place.

Other helpful articles on this topic can be found at:

<http://au.reachout.com/what-is-a-bad-friendship>

<http://www.kidspot.com.au/health/ask-the-expert/ask-dr-justin/helping-a-child-with-toxic-friendship-problems>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/because-im-the-mom/201306/10-signs-child-is-in-toxic-friendship-how-you-can-help>

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