

Friendship - Healthy or Toxic?

Having good friends helps children to be independent beyond the family and prepares them for the mutual, trusting relationships we hope they will establish as adults. It will not be surprising to know that the better quality relationships your child has, the more likely they are to be happy. Helping your child to navigate the ups and downs of friendships can be very challenging. Children need to know what makes a good friend, how to be a good friend, what to look for and how to identify a friendship which is not positive too. Learning to be a good friend and how to sustain a friendship will inevitably involve some level of disappointment and at times distress when let down by a friend.

Does your child ever feel disappointed with a friend's attitude or behaviour? Are there times when you wonder in what way you can support your child and their friend to achieve a good outcome? Below are some ideas to kickstart conversations with your child about their friendships. Common signs of a good friend include:

- someone who is kind, loyal and shows respect no matter what
- someone you enjoy being with
- someone who will listen
- someone who won't put you down or deliberately hurt your feelings
- someone who is honest and trustworthy
- someone who makes you smile
- someone who gives
- someone who brings out the best in you
- someone who is willing to stick around even when things get tough.

It can be very worrying and frustrating if your child is suffering because a friend he/she trusted, has let them down. A friendship can become toxic and is often characterised by subtle (or not so subtle) put downs, manipulation, exclusion and other hurtful behaviour. A toxic relationship can lead to your child having a high proportion of negative feelings about themselves.

You can help your child avoid toxic friendships by:

- talking with your child about what good friends are like (see above)
- making the most of opportunities to help your child socialise with others who have similar interests and who are respectful and caring
- encouraging your child to have a wide range of friends from a variety of places (such as school, sporting or social clubs, family friends, neighbours) as this will provide security when a particular friendship sours.
- encouraging friends to visit
- listening carefully when your child talks about friends and ask open ended questions which facilitate more talking (e.g. Tell me more about...., What did you think when...?)
- share your own friendship history as this can help him/her to see other options and feel understood
- be a good role model where your child can observe your relationships which show respect, empathy and positive ways of solving conflict
- use praise and other techniques to develop confidence in your child so he/she is feels valued

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