

How to get your child to navigate a friendship group of three



In the counselling room, and in the classroom, we often hear the sadness in children suffering from the friendship group of three. It can be difficult to find that perfect balance where each child feels equally close in a triad. Inevitably, someone is going to feel a little, or a lot, left out. This is not to say that they can't work and are not to be encouraged, but don't be dismayed when the stability of the group falters.

Here are some ideas about how to help your child navigate tricky, but potentially wonderful friendship triangles:

Support healthy triads. If your child has found a happy friendship triad, support the unit by arranging opportunities for all three kids to get together. Find the opportunity to talk with your child about the challenge of trying to balance closeness with two friends. It may help to have your child imagine how someone might feel if two of the three friends become closer. Perhaps think ahead about ways to ensure that all three friends feel included.

Embrace the third wheel. Sometimes friendship triangles occur because one of two longtime friends starts hanging out with someone else as well. The original friend might begin to feel replaced; jealousy and resentment are likely to flare. One temptation might be for the original friend to sulk, try to demean the new friend or even demand the friend to prove loyalty by rejecting the new friend and going back to how things were. None of these tactics usually work. The friend in the middle is likely to choose the person who doesn't make difficult and selfish demands. Encouraging your child to get to know the new friend might be a good idea. Embracing the third wheel is not easy, but it's the only hope for the original friendship to survive.

Speak up or walk away from meanness. Not all friendships are worth preserving. Sometimes kids get caught up in what they want and don't realise that their actions are hurtful. If your child is feeling pushed aside in a friendship triad, it's important for your child to speak up. At St Mary's, we are strong advocates of the 'I message' - perhaps saying something like, 'I'm feeling left out, this isn't fun for me. Let's do something else,' will help to communicate feelings. If the friends aren't willing to consider the needs of the friend who has given the 'I message', he or she is best to move to another group, play with them and talk to an adult at school. The friends will either come around the next day or they won't, but your child will have made a clear choice not to tolerate ongoing meanness and lack of empathy.

Add a fourth to the group. The most effective way to handle the challenges of a friendship triad is often to add another friend to the group. Turning a triangles into a foursome increases the fun and decreases the likelihood of one child feeling left out.

Please find more of our articles on our school website in Your Mind Matters (below Sport/Activity) - Parent Matters - in both Parenting 4 - 12 and Parenting 12 - 18:

Friendship - A Souring Friendship - How to Help Your Child
Friendship - Conflict and Boundaries Within a Friendship Group
Friendship - Friendship Healthy or Toxic
Friendship - Teaching Your Child Friendship Skills
Friendship - Friendship and Peer Pressure

Please contact us with any wellbeing issues your son or daughter may be experiencing and we are open to suggestions for topics you would like to read more about.

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