



Parenting for Prevention: Healthy Relationships In Elementary & Middle School

Parents can be the strongest models for their children's friendships. They are many opportunities for you to demonstrate how you care for your friends, feel safe around your friends, enjoy spending time with your friends, and support your friends when they need it.



Parent Tips for Building Relationship Skills in Children

When a child enters school, their world and their opportunity to develop new friendships expand. Along the way, parents can help lay the foundation for building healthy relationships and can provide support during the normal ups and downs in friendships.

Kindergarten – 2nd Grade

Take the time to talk with your child about their day

Children build their communication and language skills by sharing details of their day with you and then take these lessons with them as they develop relationships at school and the neighborhood

Find solutions

When your child is struggling with a social situation, work together on a solution

Talk about friendships

Check in with your child about their friends, the qualities they like in them, and how are they being a good friend to others.

3rd - 5th Grade

Sandwich Technique

Starting and ending with a positive comment is a helpful strategy for children to talk with their friends about a conflict. "I like that we are friends. The other day I was sad when you didn't sit with me at lunch. If there is something wrong, let's talk about it."

Proactive Listening

Model for your child what active listening looks like. Have them tell you something while you look them in the eyes, repeat back what they say, and give positive reinforcement. Then switch roles so they can practice.

"Put Ups"

The opposite of a Put Down, have your child come up with positive things they can tell a friend when they need encouragement or support

6th – 8th Grade

Teach your child about first impressions

Show them how to make eye contact, speak clearly, introduce themselves, and smile or convey warmth when first meeting someone. Role play to practice.

Talk about responsible on-line behavior

Take an opportunity to discuss the value that technology has had on our lives, but also the importance of being kind on-line to others, cyberbullying, and the permanence of what we put on-line.

Discuss peer pressure

Talk openly about peer pressure, the kind of scenarios they may encounter, and how to respond to specific situations, such as being asked to drink or skipping curfew.

Importance of Peer Relationships

Friendships serve an important role in our lives. At a young age, children learn about cooperative play, how to express oneself, how to take turns, how to apply empathy, and how to form connections with others who share similar interests and values.

Signs of a Healthy Relationship

Respect: Learning and understanding the other person's values and what is important to them

Trust: Knowing that you can count on each other and be there for one another

Honesty: About your thoughts and feelings

Communication: How you show your respect, trust, and honesty with another person

Recognizing Bullying

Bullying is not teasing. It can have wide-ranging consequences for the person being bullied, the person who bullies, students who witness bullying, and the overall climate of the school or community.

Bullying can take many forms

- Verbal (name calling, derogatory comments)
- Physical (hitting, shoving, spitting)
- Social exclusion or isolation
- Spreading of false rumors or lies
- Having things taken or damaged by someone who bullies
- Being threatened or forced to do something by someone who bullies
- Racial bullying
- Sexual bullying
- Cyberbullying

Bullying is ...

~ An aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions

~ A pattern of behavior repeated over time

~ The presence of an imbalance of power or strength

GIRLS

- **Help your daughter learn to communicate her feelings.** Working with her to develop communication skills to express her emotions, such as “It hurts my feelings when you ignore me at lunch”, or “I’m sorry that I did not invite you to the movie”, can help your daughter address friendship issues in a positive way.
- **Talk about friendships openly.** Take advantage of opportunities to talk with your daughter about something positive you witnessed in her group of friends, such as, “It was really nice the way you and Katie welcomed the new girl onto your soccer team”. Similarly, if you noticed an interaction, such as teasing, you might ask your daughter to share her thoughts about it.
- **Help her solve problems independently.** Children learn by practicing and doing. If your daughter has a conflict with a playdate, encourage her to come up with solutions by asking questions about how she might be able to solve the problem.

NAVIGATING MIDDLE SCHOOL

The middle school years can be both exciting and confusing. Here are some characteristics about middle school friendships for girls:

- Adolescent girls are developing their own interests and beginning to form perceptions about the world around them
- Friendships are primarily centered on talking – in person, on the phone, through social media
- The need to belong intensifies. In middle school, cliques develop, social groups may change, and girls may take on different “roles” as leaders or followers.
- Validate her feelings if she comes to you with a social issue. Listen to what she says & give her the space to express herself.
- Help her find friends outside of school. Getting involved with sports or hobbies widens her circle and expands her world.
- Help her to say “No”. Practice refusal skills to increase her confidence in standing up to friends about doing something she is not comfortable with or against your family’s rules.
- Talk with your daughter about the negative impact gossip or cyberbullying can have. It’s lose-lose situation to be the one initiating or being the target of gossip or cyberbullying.

BOYS

Friendships among boys are vitally important – they provide a sense of connection and belonging. Contrary to what our culture often depicts, boys need friends. They suffer when they feel they don’t have friends, and experience the normal ups and downs friendships.

FRIENDSHIPS IN SCHOOL AGED BOYS

- Friendships are built around active play with rules and competition – playing sports, acting out movie scenes, making up their own games. Boys like doing things together. Teasing is not uncommon.
- Boys often have a close friend who they confide in and have important conversations.

Making and sustaining friendships is a primary activity among schoolage boys. Unlike girls, whose friendships can be fluid, boys’ friendships tend to endure. As your son heads off to school, you can encourage him to make safe, strong relationships that will help him grow and mature.

- **Help him define “friend”.** Ask him what characteristics he likes in a friend and what it means to BE a good friend to others
- **Remember that quality is better than quantity.** Whether your son has 1 or 2 best buddies or considers his entire basketball team his friends, the important thing is that his group makes him feel happy, supported, and safe.
- **Step in when you need to.** If you feel that a friend is negatively influencing him, talk with your son about why you disapprove of his friend’s behavior.

Department of Health & Human Services: Healthy Friendships in Adolescence

<https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/healthy-relationships/healthy-friendships/index.html>

Parent Toolkit

<https://www.parenttoolkit.com>

PBS.org

<http://nunu.pbs.org/parents/raisinggirls/friends/>

Family Education

<https://www.familyeducation.com/life/friendships/boys-their-friends>

Portions of this tip sheet were adapted from the listed resources