



CHOOSING FRIENDS - Help for parents

A number of factors can come into play as your youngster selects his friends. A healthy friendship is one in which both children are on an equal footing. Neither child should dominate the other or make all the decisions on what activities to pursue. They should share and make an effort to please each other. They should also be capable of problem-solving on their own: If one boy wants to play with a particular toy that belongs to his buddy, they will probably work out a time schedule so that each can have a turn. Or they might devise alternative activities that they can do together.

Differences in Boys' and Girls' Friendships

There are both similarities and differences in the way boys and girls form and nurture their friendships. In the middle years, same-sex playmates are more the rule than the exception for boys as well as girls (just as it was during the preschool years). Even in school settings where children have a wide choice of friends, they are about 10 times as likely to play with youngsters of the same sex. On the playground, boys and girls tend to play apart. In school cafeterias, there appear to be unofficial "boys' tables" and "girls' tables. "

Boys need a peer group in which they can be part of a group, where they can relax and yet feel powerful. They tend to choose friends who have interests similar to their own, perhaps a shared love of soccer or collecting baseball cards, while girls may look for friends with compatible personalities. Boys are likely to play outdoors with friends, and they tend to "run in a pack" of boys.

Compared with boys, girls are far more likely to have their personal identities tied to their friendships. Their sense of self is organized around being able to make and maintain these relationships. Because of this tendency, girls generally judge themselves as successful when they are caring and responsible. When girls have conflicts, they often avoid direct confrontation, and rather retaliate by attempting to damage the other girl's friendships or social status.

In our culture, girls are raised to relate in so-called face-to-face intimacy, and thus are inclined to have conversationally based interactions with their girlfriends. These conversations are intended to create and maintain relationships. Yes, boys talk to one another, but their interactions tend to be "side-by-side intimacy," organized around an activity (playing with a tractor or a video game) or similar interest.

More than boys, girls are likely to have a "best friend" or two, although those special friends may change frequently. They will share their secrets with and write confidential notes to their best friend. Girls often hold hands, give hugs to each other, and arrange social occasions just to be together, not because a particular activity is planned.

Your 11- or 12-year-old daughter may discuss her relationships at the dinner table, while boys are less likely to talk in this way. Girls are also more inclined to become emotionally distressed when a friendship breaks up or when they move away from their best friend.

A "Best" Friend

In middle childhood some youngsters concentrate their social activity on a single best friend. In these relationships children usually match themselves with someone with whom they feel completely compatible, someone who is capable of meeting their needs for companionship, approval and security.

These can be wonderful friendships, the kind that seem as though they will last a lifetime - sometimes they actually do. Even though parents often worry that exclusive friendships can be confining and stifling, and that their child has too much invested in this single relationship, most experts disagree. Sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings with one special pal can often be more satisfying than spending time with a large group, as long as these two friends are having a positive influence on each other and are not excluding themselves from a broad range of experiences.

Dealing with Negative Peer Influence

What should you do if your child wants to play with the neighborhood troublemaker? What if he starts hanging out with a youngster who lies, destroys property or bullies other children? What if he begins expressing values or attitudes you do not like? What if he adopts behaviors that are worrisome?

Dealing with negative peer influence is a challenge, but there are solutions. Some parents may demand that their own youngster stop spending time with this "bad influence," but this may not be the best strategy. Typically, children adamantly defend such a friend, and they may trivialize or rationalize his faults or shortcomings. They may ignore their parents, finding a way of seeing this playmate anyway. And if they do abide by their parents' wishes, other problems may ensue, since the children's own judgment and ability to make wise decisions independently are affected.

In most cases a better strategy is to reinforce positive friendships with other children whose behavior and values meet with your approval. Encourage your youngster to invite these children over to your house to play. Arrange activities that are somewhat structured, mutually enjoyable and time-limited, such as bowling, bicycling or watching a sporting event. Also, arrange summer events (camp, special weekend trips) that bring the children together.

At the same time, do not hesitate to express your displeasure over the less desirable playmates. Speak calmly and rationally when you explain why you would prefer that your child not spend time with them, focusing on specific behavior rather than generalizing or criticizing their character. Let him know the consequences if he ends up adopting the unacceptable behavior that you have seen in these other children, while still not absolutely forbidding him to play with them. This approach will teach your youngster to think more logically and assume responsibility for his actions, and show that you trust his growing capacity to make the right decisions.

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