

## What Makes a Friend? Part I—Help Your Child Choose Friends Wisely

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How can you help your child steer clear of destructive friendships and avoid the dreaded “frenemy”? The ability to choose quality friends is a vitally important skill in its own right. Moreover, avoiding destructive peer relationships can be a key strategy for your child to avoid serious abuse by adults, as well. As parents, we often taut the value of good friends, but how often do we dig a bit deeper to examine the foundations of our own and our children’s relationships? Perhaps more importantly, can we avoid applying adult standards for friendship as we help our children with their own?

This three-part series does just that. In this first installment, read on to consider the essential traits of good friendship among school-age children.

**Opposites do *not* attract.** Think about what childhood friends do together. Until the teen years, children’s friendships are based on shared activity, such as playing games together, rather than hours of conversation. As a result, the most important ingredient for childhood friendship is that the kids enjoy some of the same things. Does your child read some of the same books as his buddies? Does she enjoy playing with some of the same toys? Without this plainest sort of common ground, friendship is tough.

At our house, I tend to be the one that messes this up for my children. I

confess a too-often scenario: I get to know a great woman with kids about the ages of my boys. The kids are friendly and well behaved, so I arrange a play-date only to find all of the kids involved swinging between squabbling and bored-stiff. “But they’re nice kids,” I say to my own boys, “Why can’t you get along?” Because nice isn’t enough; friendship—especially for kids—requires interests that overlap.

It is great when kids learn new activities from one another. Without some existing common interest, however, they are far less likely to get to that point. As parents and caregivers, we must respect that children have a more limited ability to connect on an intellectual or emotional level with a shared practical activity.

**Seek mutual respect and affection.** Both of my own children have struggled with this one. In the past, one of my sons has too often dreamed of friendships with the kids he thought were cool. In many cases, my son didn’t know the child well at all, nor did they share any common interests. As a result—and at the risk of a bad pun—when they got together, the “cool kid” was lukewarm on my son. In many cases, the other child was simply dismissive.

My other son has an almost opposite hang-up. His desire to be respected—to be cool—means that he occasionally chooses friends just because they look up to him. As a result, he has ended-up with more than one friendship where the other child was more interested in him than he was in them. Rather than choosing a friend on the merits, my son simply liked being liked.

Good friendships are based on generally mutual levels of affection and respect. If your child isn’t receiving these from a friend, he or she is learning to accept less than is deserved. If your child isn’t providing affection, he or she is learning to exert the wrong sort of emotional power.

**A good friend is emotionally independent (most of the time).** Often, adults tend to report that being a good friend means helping another weather emotional turbulence. It is true, of course, that friends should “be there” for one another.

Too often, however, we overestimate children’s ability to support others, especially over a period of time. I think of the things I have said over the years to my boys, “Be patient with Elsa. She doesn’t mean to hurt your feelings; she is really mad at her parents,” or “Jack’s behavior is not what it should be, and he doesn’t treat you the right way, but he just can’t help it.” Too often, I have put my children in the position of counselor or therapist, even when they weren’t up to it.

Maintaining a friendship with a struggling child who is going through tough family circumstances, clinical emotional differences, etc., creates a lot of stress for school-age children. They have less ability to separate understandably poor conduct (his parents announced their divorce last night) from unacceptable bad behavior (he was just being mean). The inability to fix a problem for a friend can be frustrating, and simply witnessing a friend’s conflict and hostility, for whatever reason, is hard.

Of course, kids should learn compassion and empathy; there are lessons to learn from the struggles of others. As parents and caregivers, however, we must be careful not to use adult standards for friendship in this arena. We must help our kids appreciate the difference between the mutual dependence of functional friendships from the damaging kind of one-sided relationships.

Help your kids find good friends: those with common interests, with mutual affection and with emotional stability. Not only will this serve them in the obvious, immediate ways, but it will also set the stage for healthy relationships going forward.

