

FRIENDSHIP IN THE TEENAGE YEARS

Friendship—that close connection with another person which allows us to feel valued and cared for—is vital at any stage of life. The need for love and belonging has long been established as one of our basic needs as human beings. And it has been well documented that having strong, healthy relationships improves our self-esteem and overall well-being.

As valuable as these connections are, however, they do not always come easily or naturally, particularly for adolescents.

As kids become teens, these friendships start to shift and evolve. As is true with so many things about middle school, teens become more independent and start making choices for themselves, so it makes sense they also become more independent in managing their friendships. Some kids handle this transition effortlessly, while others struggle mightily with making and keeping friends.

Helping Teens Make and Keep Great Friends

THE NEED TO BELONG AND FEEL VALUED

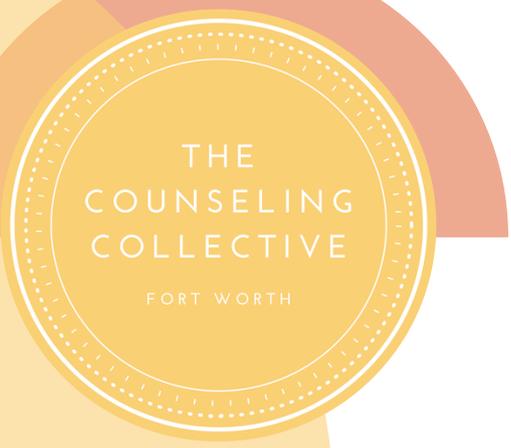
The good news is making friends boils down to a series of skills that can be learned. And as with any new skill, becoming proficient at friendship requires some self-awareness, some guidance, and practice. Here are some tips for helping your teen improve their friendship skills!

INVITE YOUR TEEN TO DO SOME REFLECTING.

Ask them, “What qualities do you have that would make people want to be your friend?” And more importantly, “How do people know that about you? How do you let people see what you value, what’s important to you, and who you really are?” Rather than just looking around for someone with common interests, helping teens become clear about who they are and what they value allows them to attract friends who will be a good fit for them.

REMIND YOUR TEEN THAT NOT EVERY ACQUAINTANCE WILL BECOME A BFF.

Teens who struggle with making friends tend to latch onto the first person who shows them meaningful attention. They may share too much personal information too soon, and they may become jealous and insecure when their new best friend has other friends. Help your teen work through the difference between a friend you sit next to in class and chit-chat with, and a friend who really understands and values you.



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And those friendship struggles can lead to a lack of confidence and feeling disconnected and vulnerable at a crucial time in their development.

Friendships during the teen years can be so important and fulfilling. Having someone to lean on, share secrets with, and let loose with makes life better at any age. If your teen is struggling with friendships, remember that it is not a lost cause. Make sure your connection with them is strong, and guide them toward the skills they need to make the kinds of friends that will serve them well.

TEACH YOUR TEEN HOW TO ENGAGE IN CONVERSATION.

Small talk is a learned skill. It doesn't come easily for everyone. It is particularly difficult for teens who are more introverted. Practice having light, casual conversations about easy topics such as music, activities outside of school, or homework. Help them learn how to keep it positive, and promote the value of listening more than they speak.

HELP YOUR TEEN UNDERSTAND THAT CONFLICT IS A NATURAL PART OF RELATIONSHIPS.

Even the best of friends are going to have fights, but not every argument means the end of a friendship. Help them work on fighting fair and knowing when to take a break from an argument to cool off. Particularly when it comes to social media, where misunderstandings are common and conflict can quickly get out of control, teach your teen the value of saying, "I think we're both really upset. Let's talk about this in person tomorrow."

BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN JUDGMENTS AND OPINIONS.

If you don't like your teen's new friend and you believe your reasons are valid, be thoughtful about how you bring it up. Opening a conversation with, "Tell me what you like about hanging out with her" may be much better received than the more obvious, "I don't like her! She's a brat!" And if you feel the need to criticize your teen's friend, be sure to be specific about the behaviors you don't like. For example, "I've noticed she cancels plans with you at the last minute a lot" opens up a much healthier conversation than, "I don't like her. She's so selfish and disrespectful!" Your teen values your opinion much more than they will ever let you know, so if you notice them being treated badly by a friend, by all means speak up. Just make sure you do it in a way that is likely to be heard.

HELP YOUR TEEN FOSTER OTHER RELATIONSHIPS.

The need for connection and belonging extends beyond friendships with peers. Make sure your teen feels connected to you and other adults in their life. When teens have solid, healthy relationships in their lives that they can count on unconditionally, it becomes much easier to endure the roller coaster of adolescent friendships.