

Appendix C4

FRIENDSHIP NEWSLETTER

Some Thoughts on Friendship

Frequently parents seek out information on the “challenge” of their children’s developing friendships in middle school and wonder if their children might be in the minority if they are having problems in this area. I remind parents that friendships don’t just happen after one abstract discussion with our children on the topic. The famous psychologist Jean Piaget believed that a young child’s conceptions of friendship came more from experience and practice than from abstract thought. Thought lags behind action in the elementary and most middle school years. Children need to learn what it feels like and looks like to *be* a friend. The attributes of care and cooperation and kindness we as parents hope to see in our children as they relate to other children and form friendships have to be practiced for a very long time before they can be mastered. It may help our children to understand that we and they have to work at being a friend: to plan, to do, and to reflect in a recursive fashion. It is a process of trial and error. What are some of the actions children and others associate with friendship? Or we might ask, “What does a true friend *do*?” A friend, according to the research of Drs. Zick Rubin, John Gottman, and others:

- Cares about you even when you make mistakes
- Tells you when you are making a mistake
- Holds you accountable for living up to your values
- Apologizes when she or he has made a mistake
- Is accepting and respectful
- Is loyal
- Is honest
- Helps you make good decisions

2 DEVELOPING CARING RELATIONSHIPS

- Is friendly
- Doesn't always wait for others to greet him or her
- Is sensitive and notices how others feel
- Is participative
- Enjoys himself or herself and others
- Is positive
- Is willing to give and take
- Is not narrow-minded or rigid

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES TO NOTE

When can children do all of this? With children 6–8 years old, we are talking more about encounters than about true friendship. By ages 9–12, there is more of a relationship—a two-way street and an effort at *adaptation to another person's needs* that are essential to true friendship. Students are learning that friends have some needs that are similar to their own and others that are very different. Researchers say the ages 9–11 or 12 are the best time to develop peer relations and skills necessary for effective adult friendships and adult social competence. By age 9, a student thinks a friend should be willing to risk his or her own safety to help a friend. After Grade 4, there is thus more of an expectation of loyalty, acceptance, sharing, and tolerance of conflict among friends. By age 10, same-sex chums share secrets and altruistic concerns. They are sensitive to what matters for the other person. By age 12, some students actually feel friends' wishes should often come before their own.

By Grade 6, then, a student goes from “what can I do to get what I want?” to “what should I do to contribute to the happiness of my chums?” They may at times still be hostile and selfish to some acquaintances, but friends become islands of security in a rapidly changing social scene. Often students evolve tight-knit groups of three or four in which individualism is discouraged. Collectivism, or the common goals of the group, is more important. The small group becomes the path to social acceptance. A single chum is sufficient in males, and multiple chums become the norm in females. Research has found that preadolescents with chums are better able to identify the emotions of people of all ages than are preadolescents without chums.

THE MEANING OF FRIENDSHIP

What does friendship do for a child? It gives *validation*: “I am accepted, my feelings and ideas are accepted.” It has been noted that for *girls*, validation often comes from *disclosure of thoughts*, and for *boys*, more often it comes from *actions*

and deeds. For the other party, it is an opportunity to understand someone else's desires, needs, and values. Researchers have found that boys said they wanted a friend who made few demands for closeness; had some special traits, such as athletic ability or good looks; and didn't look for too much empathy or too much loyalty. Boys were not very threatened if someone didn't want to be their friend; they wanted someone to do things with or for solidarity. Many, on the other hand, feel these findings may represent boys saying what they think boys should say. Girls are said to be looking for a network of intimate friends to confide in and for emotional support, loyalty, and trust. Most people would concur that both boys and girls want or need emotional support.

Friendships and groups of friends, sometimes referred to as *cliques*, can help children learn to balance personal autonomy with the demands of social life. Cliques can actually help make students safe, yet it is sometimes tough within the clique to go against unwritten rules. What a group can provide that friendship cannot is collective participation, experience with organizational roles, and group support. Problems arise because of potential inclusions and exclusions and pressure for conformity and dependence. A member's goal in a group, as in a friendship, is not to be rejected, to find a common ground. Some *conformity* in this regard is OK, but it can cut children off from others outside the group and can lead to stereotyping. Some *gossip*, it has also been found, is OK if it does not hurt and destroy someone or become a barrier to new friendships. Strangely enough, gossip among friends at this age can in fact be a precursor to self-disclosure in adult life. It may serve to reaffirm evolving behavioral norms. It may be done to build solidarity or norms of acceptable behavior. It may be a way to formulate or communicate one's core beliefs and attitudes: "Did you hear _____ did _____? What do you think? What would you do in that situation?" Once children internalize the rules of social interaction, they have less need to observe others for information on how to behave.

Some *peer pressure* is OK, especially for good behavior, but a true friend will not push someone to do something she or he doesn't want to do. Some peer groups encourage egocentrism, aggression, and antisocial behavior. Sixth graders are the more peer oriented and do more lying to grown-ups and more smoking and swearing than other middle school students do. By eighth grade, this behavior may diminish somewhat.

DOES THE PARENT HAVE A ROLE?

Yes. Even though the recent controversial book by Judith Harris declares a parent's influence is almost nonexistent as compared to the influence of peers, I and many other psychologists feel parents do have a very important role to play.

We can't always protect our children from hurt, but we can help them decide which relationships are beneficial and which are destructive. An effective deterrent to antisocial behavior is authoritative parenting—that is, acceptance of the child but structure and clear expectations in terms of behavior. We also need to spend quality time with our children. Peer-oriented children may be more a product of parental disregard than the attractiveness of a group. Peers have their most negative influence when parents do not participate actively in a child's life. Many neglected children in the same group is not a good portent. We can also work to do the following:

- Pair an older, aggressive child with a younger child in, for example, a mentoring or tutoring situation.
- Make an “out group” an “in group.” Help children discover what they might have in common with other children.
- Help the child see that ostracism from a destructive group is better than surrender to its values.
- We can do what teachers do in many countries, such as Russia and Israel: Expect children to work always to socialize each other into meeting high standards of respectful behavior.

SOME SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

Carol Gilligan's book *Meeting at the Crossroads*, exploring friendships for young girls, is very informative. A book, *Cliques*, by C. Giannetti and M. Sagarese (2001) is very helpful. Go online to read articles by Dr. William Hartup and other pieces on friendship. See Hartup's and others' writing on friendship at <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eeearchive/digests/1992/hartup92.html>. Finally, many new books on boys' development are starting to look at peer relationships. *Real Boys*, by Dr. William Pollack, and *The Men They Will Become*, by Eli Newberger, are excellent. For additional resources, contact me at dmcderm2@depaul.edu.

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