

Friends Age 11 Summary

Why Friends?

Helping your child/teen grow healthy friendships is essential. Through relationships, your child/teen develops a sense of belonging. They come to better understand themselves through interactions with you, their teachers, and their peers. Friends contribute to their sense of well-being.

Tip These steps are best done when you and your child/teen are not tired or in a rush.

Tip Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

STEP 1  **GET INPUT**

Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Engage your child/teen in a conversation about friendship. You could ask:
 - “Who do you count as friends? Why?”*
 - “What’s important about having friends?”*
 - “How can you start new friendships?”*
- Practice actively listening to your child’s/teen’s thoughts, feelings, and worries about friendships.
- Learn about the meaning of friendship. In calmer moments with your child/teen, ask:
 - “What are some qualities you look for in a friend?”*
 - “What qualities do you have that make you a good friend?”*
- Make this a regular conversation in your household, particularly when your child/teen finds it challenging.
- Use the books your child/teen reads or the shows and videos they watch to spur conversations about friendship. When reading or watching a show together, ask about the characters’ choices and how they might support or hurt a friendship. Ask open-ended questions (with no right or wrong answers) so your child/teen can consider what it means to be a good friend.
- Discuss the meaning of friendship as a family at dinner.

Tip Sometimes, feeling the need for friends, especially when you don't have many, can make a child/teen feel alone, vulnerable, and different. Reassure your child/teen that it's typical for every person to want to grow friendships. Everyone goes through challenging times trying to find new friends.

Trap Your worries are not always your child's/teen's worries. Listen closely to what concerns your child/teen most without assuming your child/teen shares your thoughts, concerns, and feelings. For example, you may be worried that your child/teen only has one friend instead of a large group of friends as you did as a kid. Realize that your child/teen may only need one good friend to be happy and understood.



Teach New Skills

- Model introductions for your child/teen. Find chances during regular weekly activities in which your child/teen accompanies you to model introductions to people.
- There's always a first day at a new activity, a new grade in school, or a new camp where parents or those in a parenting role stand around saying goodbye to their children/teens. Introduce yourself and your child/teen to other parents or those in a parenting role and other kids. It can be as simple as shaking a hand and exchanging names.
- Discuss your friendship challenges. When you experience friendship challenges, talk them through with your child/teen. *"June didn't invite me to her party. Now, I feel awkward when I talk to her. I'm wondering whether or not I should bring it up."*
- Learn strategies together. Brainstorming ideas together to start a connection can add to their comfort level and boost their motivation to take that healthy risk.
- Learn listening strategies together. Try active listening, paraphrasing, seeking clarification, and questioning and commenting with empathy.
- Consider what you typically talk about. If it's the logistics of life, you might want to add some additional topics to teach essential conversation tools.
- Keep your questions or comments brief and engaging.
- When you or your child/teen are uncomfortable disagreeing or arguing with another, it can be challenging to know how to respond in ways that won't harm yourself or others. Use "I-messages" following this guide: *"I feel _____ (insert feeling word) when you _____ (name the words or actions that upset you) because _____."*
- Repair harm. A critical step in teaching your children/teens about friendship is learning how to repair harm they've caused (physical or emotional). Resist forcing your child/teen to apologize. Forcing a child/teen to apologize teaches your child/teen a memorized response. An apology may make you feel better, but it does not teach your child/teen to accept responsibility for their actions or to begin to understand another's feelings.

**STEP
3****PRACTICE**

Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Use “I’d love to see...” statements. *“I’d love to see the types of questions you use to gather five different pieces of information about how your sister’s day went.”*
- Recognize effort by saying “I notice...” statements like, *“I noticed how you used an I-message with your sister when you got frustrated - that’s excellent!”*
- Schedule friend dates or social outings.
- Learn about where your child/teen likes to see friends. Offer opportunities for healthy hangouts by offering your home and being around to provide snacks, games, and supervision, or suggest safe public hangouts like the ice cream shop, the bowling alley, or the roller rink.
- When figuring out who to invite and when, follow your child’s/teen’s lead.
- Discuss a few simple rules with your child/teen in advance. *“Each family has different rules. Let’s figure out a few for our house that makes the most sense. How about - play appropriate and safe games?”*

Tip Children/teens have plenty of time and space for screens. Social gatherings should not be one of them if you want to maximize your child’s/teen’s social learning. Adopt the motto: “Friends before screens.” Perhaps get out some board games that haven’t been opened yet, put away the screens, and allow them time to work out what they’ll do. If you want to offer screen time during a hangout, save it for later so they can interact first.

**STEP
4****SUPPORT**

Support Your Child’s/Teen’s Development and Success

- Ask key questions to learn about your child’s/teen’s free time at school and whether they interact with others: *“Who did you sit with at lunch today? What did you play in gym class?”*
- Reflect feelings when your child/teen comes to you with an interpersonal problem, such as with a friend or a teacher.
- Children/Teens are searching for privacy and trying to find their independence. Too many directed questions can feel like an interrogation and can close the door to future conversations about friends.
- Avoid criticizing your child’s/teen’s friends or classmates, even if your child/teen is.
- Learn about development. Each new age will present different social challenges.
- Reflect on outcomes. *“Remember we met Sam together on your first day of school, and you are still hanging out with him in middle school? He’s become a good friend.”*
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different friendship-building strategies can offer additional support and motivation for your child/teen when challenging issues arise.
- Engage in further practice. Create more opportunities to practice when all is calm.

STEP
5



Recognize Efforts

- No matter how old your child/teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- You can reinforce your child's/teen's efforts in many ways. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three parenting behaviors impact your child's/teen's behavior differently.
 - **Recognition** occurs after you observe the desired behavior in your child/teen. Noticing and naming the specific behavior you want to reinforce is key to promoting more of it. For example, *"You found a common interest with the new person you met -- that is great!"* Recognition can include nonverbal acknowledgment such as a smile, high five, or hug.
 - **Rewards** can be helpful in certain situations by providing a concrete, timely, and positive incentive for doing a good job. A reward is determined ahead of time so that the child/teen knows what to expect, like *"If you make a new friend at volleyball camp, you may invite them over to our house this weekend."* (if you XX, then I'll XX) It stops any negotiations in the heat of the moment. A reward could be used to teach positive behavior or break a bad habit. The goal should be to help your child/teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. Rewards can decrease a child's/teen's internal motivation if used too often.
 - Unlike a reward, **bribes** aren't planned ahead of time and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role is in a crisis (like a child/teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for ice cream on the way home if the child/teen will stop arguing and leave the event). While bribes can be helpful in the short term to manage stressful situations, they will not grow lasting motivation, or behavior change and should be avoided.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, if your child/teen meets and includes a new classmate at lunch, recognize their effort and offer a time they could hang out outside of school.

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