

Friends Age 16 Summary

Why Friends?

As a parent or those in a parenting role, you play an essential role in your teen's success. Helping your teen grow healthy friendships is essential. Through relationships, your teen develops a sense of belonging. They come to better understand themselves through interactions with you, their teachers, and their peers. Teens and young adults ages 15-19 are in the process of carving out their identity, and their measuring stick is often their peers' opinions and approval.

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

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

STEP

1



Get Your Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Engage your teen in a conversation about friendship. You could ask:
 - *“What are some characteristics you look for in a friend?”*
 - *“What makes you a good friend?”*
 - *“Who do you count as friends? Why?”*
 - *“What’s important about having friends?”*
 - *“How can you start new friendships?”*
- Practice actively listening to your teen's thoughts, feelings, and worries about friendships. Use your best listening skills.
- Learn about the meaning of friendship. *“What do you think it means to be a good friend?”*
- Make this a regular conversation in your household, particularly when your teen finds it challenging.
- Use your teen's videos or music to spur conversations about friendship. When reflecting on a video they are watching or music they are listening to ask about the characters' choices and how they might support or destroy a friendship. Ask open-ended questions (with no right or wrong answers) so your 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 teen feel alone, vulnerable, and different. Reassure your 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 teen's worries. Listen closely to what is most concerning to your teen without assuming your teen shares your same thoughts, concerns, and feelings. For example, you may be worried that your teen only has one friend instead of a large group of friends like you did as a kid. Realize that your teen may only need one good friend to be happy and understood.

STEP

2



Teach New Skills

- Model introductions for your teen.
- Discuss your friendship challenges. Though your teen may not have shown any interest in your friendships in the past, now they may be keenly paying attention to how you manage your relationships. *“June didn’t invite me to a party I know she’s throwing. 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 for ways to start up a connection can add to their comfort level and boost their motivation to take that healthy risk.
- Listening for understanding and connection is a skill set that can be built over time with practice and support. Model 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 your teen meaningful conversation tools.
- Keep your questions or comments brief and engaging.
- When you or your teen are uncomfortable disagreeing or arguing with another, knowing how to respond in ways that won’t harm yourself or others can be challenging, practice “I-messages” like, *“I feel _____ (insert feeling word) when you _____ (name the words or actions that upset you) because _____.”*
- Promote a “Safety Buddy” policy. To keep your teen safe, always identify a close friend who can become the safety buddy for the evening. Establish an agreement before going out that if either one of you is uncomfortable or feeling unsafe, you will find an easy way to exit together.
- Repair harm. A critical step in teaching your teen about friendship is learning how to repair harm they’ve caused (physical or emotional). Resist forcing your teen to apologize. Forcing a teen to apologize teaches your teen a memorized response. An apology may make you feel better, but it does not teach your teen to accept responsibility for their actions or to begin to understand another's feelings. Instead, ask your teen how they want to compensate for the hurt they’ve caused and help them implement their idea.
- Find small opportunities to help your teen mend relationships. Siblings offer a regular chance to practice this! You might ask, “What could you do?” Allow your teen to supply answers; you may be surprised at how many options they generate.

**STEP
3****Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits**

- Use “I’d love to see...” statements. *“I’d love to see how you start a conversation with our new neighbor.”*
- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements. *“I notice how you used an I-message statement with your sister when frustrated. That’s communicating assertively.”*
- Schedule friend dates or social outings.
- Learn about where your teen likes to see friends. Teens need spaces and places to be social; if they don’t have them, they’ll create them. 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 or the recreation center.
- Discuss a few simple rules with your teen in advance. *“Each family has different rules. Let’s figure out a few for our house that makes the most sense. How about we leave doors unlocked, watch movies rated PG 13 or under, and only play appropriate games?”*

Tip Teens have plenty of time and space for screens. Social gatherings should not be one of them if you want to maximize your 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 that your teens get to interact first.

**STEP
4****Support Your Teen’s Development and Success**

- Ask key questions to learn about your teen’s free time at school and whether they interact with others. Ask: *“Who did you sit with at lunch today?”*
- When your teen comes to you with an interpersonal problem (whether with a friend or a teacher), reflect back feelings. Ask what choices your teen might have in communicating with this other person. Offer supportive language that will help them broach the topic. Then, show your confidence that they can manage their communications and work through their problems.
- Teens are searching for privacy and trying to find their independence. Too many questions can feel like an interrogation and can close the door to future conversations about friends. So, don’t expect an immediate answer if you ask open-ended questions out of curiosity. Leave the question hanging. Your teen may return to you days later with a response, having thought about what they might say.
- Don’t criticize your teen’s friends or classmates, even if your teen does.
- 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? 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 teen when tough issues arise.
- Engage in further practice. Create more opportunities to practice when all is calm.

STEP
5



Recognize Efforts

- No matter how old your teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your teen's efforts. It is essential to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three parenting behaviors have different impacts on your teen's behavior.
 - **Recognition** occurs after you observe the desired behavior in your 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 neighbor you met -- that is great!"* Recognition can include nonverbal cues such as a fist bump, 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 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 teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a teen's internal motivation.
 - 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 teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for a snack on the way home if the 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, *"Since you made a new friend this week, why don't you call her and invite her to come over to our house?"* Encourage opportunities for fun and further connection.

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