



# Friends Summary

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## Why Friends?

As a parent, you play an essential role in your teen's success. Helping your teen to grow healthy friendships is essential. Through relationships, your teen develops a sense of belonging. They come to better understand themselves through their interactions with you, their teachers, and their peers. Teens and emerging 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.

## 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?"*
- Learn about the meaning of friendship: *"What do you think it means to be a good friend?"*

**Tip** Sometimes feeling the need for friends especially when you feel like you don't have many can make a teen feel alone, vulnerable, and different. Reassure your teen that it's normal for every person to want to grow friendships. We all go through challenging times trying to find new friends.

**Trap** Be sure you talk about stressful friendship challenges at a calm time when you and your teen are not stressed!

**Tip** Use your teen's reading to spur conversations about friendship. When reading together or reflecting on a book they are reading for school, ask about characters' choices and how they might support a friendship and destroy a friendship. Ask open-ended questions (with no right or wrong answers) so that your teen has the opportunity to consider what it means to be a good friend.

## Step 2. Teach New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Model introductions for your teen.
- Discuss your own friendship challenges. Though in the past, your teen may have not shown any interest in your friendships, now they may be keenly paying attention to how you manage your relationships.
- Learn strategies together. Brainstorm ideas together for ways to start up a connection and add to their comfort level.
- 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 think about adding some additional topics to teach your teen important conversation tools.
- Keep your questions or comments brief and engaging.
- When you or your teen are in the uncomfortable position of disagreeing or arguing with another, it can be difficult to know how to respond in ways that won't harm yourself or others. Practice "I-messages" like: *"I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (insert feeling word) when you \_\_\_\_\_ (name the words or actions that upset you) because \_\_\_\_\_."*
- Repair harm. A critical step in teaching our teens about friendships is learning how to repair harm they've caused (physical or emotional). And they will. Mistakes are a critical aspect of social learning.

**Tip** I-messages can be challenging for adults to recall, so certainly our teens need practice if they are going to use this effective tool. In addition to modeling it, you can also offer the word structure when you see a conflict between siblings. That prompting will help them use it and practice it.

**Tip** Find small opportunities to help your teen mend relationships. Siblings offer a regular chance to practice this! If there's fighting, then talk to your teen about how they feel first. When you've identified that they had a role in causing harm, brainstorm together how they might make their sister feel better. You might ask, *"What could you do?"* Allow your teen to supply answers, and you may be surprised at how many options they come up with.

**Trap** If you tell or even command your teen to make an apology, how will they ever learn to genuinely apologize with feeling? In fact, apologizing or making things right should never be assigned as a punishment since then the control lies with the adult and robs the teen of the opportunity to learn the skill and internalize the value of repairing harm. Instead, ask your teen how they want to make up for the hurt they've caused and help them implement their idea.

### Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills, Confidence, 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 you got frustrated. That's communicating assertively."*
- Schedule friend dates or social outings.
- 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 make the most sense. How about - we leave doors unlocked, we watch movies rated PG 13 or under, and we only play appropriate games?"*

**Tip** Our teens have plenty of time and space for screen time. 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 novelty 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 are interacting with others.
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present differing 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 help offer additional support and motivation for your teen when tough issues arise.

**Tip** 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. Perhaps offer supportive language that will help them broach the topic. Then, show your confidence that they can manage their own communications and work through their own problems.

**Trap** Teens are searching for privacy and trying to find their independence. They don't like to be in the spotlight feeling questioned by parents. Too many directed questions can feel like an interrogation and can actually close the door to future conversations about friends. So, if you ask open-ended questions out of curiosity, don't expect an immediate answer. In fact, leave the question hanging. Your teen may return to you days later with a response having thought about what they might say.

**Trap** Don't criticize your teen's friends or classmates, even if your teen is. Friendships and loyalties change quickly in the teen years. Your teen may not confide in you if they feel you are going to judge. Listen with an open mind and open ears to show they can trust you as a confidant and support. If your teen's friends are acting in harmful ways, ask good questions to help your teen think through what they believe is right and wrong.

## Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Notice when your teen is using the communications tools: *"I noticed you introduced yourself to the other girl at the store. Yes! That's the way to initiate a friendship."*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Find small ways your teen is making an effort and let them know that you see them.
- 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.

**Tip** Be specific. "Good job" seems to not carry much meaning. However, a specific compliment about a pointed behavior - *"You went and found a common interest with the new girl you met - love seeing that!"* - can promote more of the same.

**Trap** Avoid gifts or other physical rewards for performance. These actually have a de-motivating effect on teens. When you remove the money, for example, have they internalized the skills and also the sense of responsibility for performing them? There's less of a chance if you've offered a "bribe." Focus on your attention as the best reward. Your attention and recognition add to their feelings of competence.

**Celebrate yourself** for making it your parenting priority to work on cultivating the social and emotional skills that are most critical for your teen's success today and in their future!

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