



## Friends 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 their interactions with you, their teachers, and their peers. And, friends contribute to their sense of wellbeing.

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

### Step 1. 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 are qualities that you have that make you a good friend?”*
- Make this a regular conversation in your household and particularly during time periods when your child/teen is struggling.
- Use your child’s/teen’s reading or shows to spur conversations about friendship. Ask open-ended questions (with no right or wrong answers) so that your child/teen has the opportunity to consider what it means to be a good friend.
- Discuss the meaning of friendship as a whole family at a family dinner.

**Tip** Sometimes feeling the need for friends, especially when you feel like you don’t have many, can make a child/teen feel alone, vulnerable, and different. Reassure your child/teen that it’s normal 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 is most concerning to them without projecting your own thoughts, concerns, and feelings.

## Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Model introductions for your child/teen. Find chances in the grocery store or at the bank 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 are standing around saying goodbye to their children. Introduce yourself and your child/teen to other parents and other kids. It can be as simple as shaking a hand and exchanging names.
- Discuss your own 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 for ways to start up a connection can add to their comfort level and may even 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 think about adding some additional topics to teach important conversation tools.
- Keep your questions or comments brief and engaging.
- When you or your child/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. 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). And they will. Mistakes are a critical aspect of social learning.

## Step 3. **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 it comes to figuring out who to invite over 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 make 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 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 the later so that they get to interact first.

#### Step 4. **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 are interacting with others: *"Who did you sit with at lunch today? What did you play at gym?"*
- When your child/teen comes to you with an interpersonal problem, such as with a friend or a teacher, reflect back feelings.
- Children/Teens are searching for privacy and trying to find their independence. Too many directed questions can feel like an interrogation and can actually 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 help offer additional support and motivation for your child/teen when tough issues arise.
- Engage in further practice. Create more opportunities to practice when all is calm.

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

- Recognize and call out when it is going well. *"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 child/teen is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, *"Since you made a new friend this week, why don't I call her mom and invite her to our house?"* Encourage opportunities for fun and further connection.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Friends Summary. Ages 11-14*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.



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