



Friends Summary

Why Friends?

As a parent or someone 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 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.

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 and particularly during times when your teen is struggling.
- Use your teen's reading and shows 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 or 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.
- 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 teen feel alone, vulnerable, and different. Reassure your 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 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 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. *“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 may even 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 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 _____.”*
- Promote a “Safety Buddy” policy. In order to keep your teen safe, always identify a close friend that 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 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.
- 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, and you may be surprised at how many options they generate.
- If you tell or even command your teen to make an apology, how will they ever learn to genuinely apologize? 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 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.
- Learn about where your teen likes to see friends. Teens need spaces and places where they can be social, and 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 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 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 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. 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. 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.
- 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. 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.
- Don't criticize your teen's friends or classmates, even if your 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? 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.
- 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 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.

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