

Six Ways to Help Your Child Develop Better Friendships

by *Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D.*

Be kind to other people and they will treat you like you want.

— Andy, age six

I'm getting a lot of flack about friends lately. Kids are complaining that they don't have any. Parents are concerned that their children don't have enough, or have too many disagreements with the ones they do have. Everyone is asking for help.

All this reminds me of seven-year-old Freddie. Every day after school he complained, "The girls are bossy," or, "The boys pick on me." True, but underneath Freddie wanted his peers to do *everything* his way. He wouldn't play by the rules. He needed to always win—the game, the sticker for the day, his teacher's attention—and this alienated the other kids. Friendships vanished.

Friendships are important for children and teens. Kids who have them feel good about themselves, are more confident, do better in school and are more likely to grow into well-adjusted adults. Solitude can lead to isolation, depression, poor health and discipline problems. A child's behavior is a common reason for friendship issues. Bossy, disruptive, or self-centered kids annoy their classmates. It's not fun to play with those who don't share or follow rules, or who explode when things don't go their way. Shyness and insecurity can also limit a child's friendship circle, as can being different from others or moving into a new class or school. Whatever the cause, friendship worries signal a need for extra support and understanding.

Your child's imagination is ready to help. Freddie's certainly was. All we needed to do was ask. It took a while, but he learned that when you're nice to others, they are kinder to you. **These six tips can help you support your child develop better friendships:**

BE A CARING COACH: Make sure you're on the same team, even when you think your child is wrong. It's easy to want to correct your child when you see things so clearly from an adult perspective. But this is not about blame; it's about creating a new beginning. Stay out of the right/wrong discussion; it will only cause power struggles. Instead, let your child know you believe he can make (more, better) friends. When he feels that you are on his side, he'll be more open to imagination, suggestions and change.

IMAGINE SIMPLICITY: Invite him to share his peer problem with you. Depending on his age, guide him to explore his feelings with simple or sophisticated emotional language. Then ask him to imagine how he'd like it to be. Encourage him to draw or write about present and future possibilities. Once he has a vision you can help him take the

steps to reach his goal. Whatever kids visualize and mentally rehearse, they are more likely to actualize in life.

CALL ON MAN'S BEST FRIEND: Animal assistance—from an imaginary animal friend to a dog, cat, or ladybug—can provide wise advice and fun gifts that shed light on the friend clash and teach him how to create better friendships. Freddie's imaginary dog Pugg gave him a silver star medallion to wear: "When you blow on the star, it gives you power to speak nicely."

CONSIDER DIFFERENT SCENARIOS: Discuss how to make amends with problem friends or reach out to new ones. Role-play together or write a practice script. How would he like his "friendship show" to go? What does the final act look like?

REFRAME THE GAMES: When a child is *too* competitive, others tire of playing with him. As your child hones his friendship skills, promote cooperation by changing focus. Asking "Who came in first?" or "What was the score?" inadvertently fuels competition. Instead, inquire whether he had fun, or if the team worked well together. You don't have to ignore who won; just don't make it top priority. He'll learn that games can be more than just winning.

LIST OF FRIENDS: Imagining and making a list of friends is a handy skill. When one pal can't play—whether he's unavailable or just doesn't want to—other choices exist. It's a good idea to remember this on the playground and in planning after school or weekend activities.

Your child's imagination is a great partner for solving friendship challenges. It gives a clear picture of his struggle and a safe place to practice healthier responses. Remember: It's the quality of the friendship—not the quantity—that matters. It's not what kind of friends he has, but what kind of friend he *is*.

Please share your child's friendship stories at DrReznick@ImageryForKids.com.

This piece is adapted from "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success."

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