

# Parent Guide



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## What is this resource and how do I use it?

Friendships are often a big part of a child's life and they can provide joy. However, sometimes friendships can be the source of difficulties too. Being able to talk to your child about friendships is helpful as it enables you to offer your child support and guidance when friendship problems arise. This guide offers practical tips and advice.

## What is the focus of this resource?

Friendships

Supporting Children

Having Conversations

## Further Ideas and Suggestions

For more resources to support parents, head to the **Parent Guides** section of our **Parents Hub**. There are a range of other guides to talking to your child, such as this guide to **talking to your child about upsetting news** and this **guide to using role-play to talk about emotions**.

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# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## Why are friendships important for children?

As your child grows older, their social world gets bigger. School, clubs and activities in the community, all provide them with opportunities for getting to know other children and building friendships.

Building connections with people outside of the family is important for children. Friendships can help to increase their self-esteem, and sense of belonging and can prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation. Friendships can also help children to build valuable social skills, such as conflict resolution, compromise and sharing. While these skills can also be developed within the family, it is helpful and healthy for children to have the opportunity to discover these skills for themselves amongst friends. It is empowering for children to independently forge their own friendships and discover different aspects of their personality in different environments.

Children often enjoy socialising with other children their age. With friends, they can play games, delve into their imagination and develop connections with other people who are at a similar stage of development and who have similar interests. If your child is at school, friendships can also help your child to feel settled away from home and they can contribute to their overall happiness, success and education.

It is important to remember though that, although friendships are really important for your child, family is still at the heart of their lives. While friendships can blow hot and cold as your child works out how to navigate their social life, family is likely to remain more constant. Strong and supportive family relationships can help your child to manage friendships outside of the home.



## Why is talking about friendships important?

Sometimes friendships are wonderful and sometimes they can be very difficult. This is true for both adults and children. As a parent, it can be helpful for you to create an environment in which supportive conversations about friendships, the positives and the negatives, are valued and encouraged. This way your child will know that they can come and talk to you about friendships, whether it is to share a friendship joy or woe. Open communication can really help children to manage relationships outside of the family and to develop more robust social and problem-solving skills.

# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## How to set up a conversation about friendships



It can be hard to know how to talk to your child about friendships. If you jump the topic on them, your child may not be ready to talk and if you take too long broaching the subject the friendship issue may have moved on.

Some children open up easily to their parents about what is going on in their life away from home and some find it difficult to talk about school and friendships. If your child doesn't open up much then that's ok! They may be a thinker who likes to spend time processing things in their own head, they may find it easier to keep the different aspects of their life separate or they may find it hard to know how to talk about their life away from home. Whatever the reason, you can find gentle ways to help them talk about friendships and this is likely to help them manage relationships and feel supported.

There are lots of ways to set up or start a conversation about friendships and the method you choose is dependent on the personality and temperament of your child.

### Here are a few suggestions for how to set up a conversation about friendships:

- Use a book or TV show as a stimulus. If friendship issues emerge in the book or show, ask your child what they think about it, whether they have ever experienced anything like that and what they think the character should do.
- Develop a routine of asking your child about who they played with or how playtimes were after school. Ask open-ended questions, such as - 'Did you play any good games today?'
- Share a memory from your own childhood about friendships. This can help to lead into a conversation about your child's experiences.
- Offer an insightful, but non-judgemental comment, such as - 'I've noticed you haven't mentioned...for a while. Is everything ok?'



- Listen to what your child is talking about and pay attention to their emotions and mood. They may be trying to set up a conversation about friendships themselves and just need you to notice and ask them about it.
- Ask your child outright - would you like to talk to me about friendships? Would that be helpful for you?

# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## How to talk to your child about friendships

Once you have set up and started a conversation with your child about friendships, you will be eager to make sure the conversation is positive and supportive.

### Listen Without Judgement

The most important thing is to **listen without judgement**. When your child is talking, try to listen carefully and not interrupt. Respond with curiosity and avoid making critical or negative comments as this is likely to make your child feel as though you are passing judgement on the situation or criticising them. Show that you are listening by giving your child your full attention, keeping your body language open and receptive and offering signs to show you have heard, such as nodding your head or parroting back keywords or phrases.

### Ask Questions

**Asking questions** is another great way of showing you are listening and helping the direction of the conversation. Try to avoid asking leading questions and instead make your questions inquisitive and supportive.

#### Good questions to ask:

- How did that make you feel?
- What happened next?
- What were you hoping would happen?
- What upset you most about what happened?
- If you could go back in time, would you do anything differently?
- How can I help you?



# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## Empathise

Your child will want to know that you are supporting them, so **empathising** during the conversation is extremely important. Empathy will help your child to feel heard and understood. This will enable them to problem-solve and work through their situation. You can empathise through your body language, through physical touch, such as a hug or held hand, and also verbally.

### Good phrases to say to show empathy:

- That must have been really hard.
- It must have been difficult for you to stay focused in class after that happened.
- I'm so sorry that happened to you today.
- I'm so glad you've opened up to me about this. It must have been really weighing on your mind.



## Ask How You Can Help

**Asking how you can help** sends the message to your child that you are there to support them, but that you wish to problem-solve with them rather than for them. This is important because if you jump in and problem-solve for your child it prevents them from learning key skills, such as conflict resolution and knowing how and when to apologise. Your child may want to solve the problem independently or they might want lots of support from you. Try to listen to their needs and wants and follow their lead.

## Problem Solve Together

A key part of talking to your child about friendships is problem-solving. Whatever the issue is that you have been discussing, there is likely to be a need to solve a problem, however big or small. Encouraging your child to problem solve sends the message to them that they have the power to change and improve difficult situations. Brainstorm ideas together, offer suggestions if your child wishes you to and follow up in a later conversation to ask how things are going.

# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## Keep the Conversation Open

Let your child know that the conversation will remain open for as long as they need it to. Tell them that they can come and talk to you again and ask if they are happy for you to check in with them about their friendship issues. You could also ask your child if they'd like to set up a regular time for chatting up friendships or whether they'd rather keep things casual.

## What not to do...

Conversations can be very tricky and you as a parent are learning how to navigate difficult conversations with your child as much as your child is learning. If the conversation doesn't go as well as you'd hoped or if your child is not ready to engage, then don't panic! Take some time to reflect and cool down and then try again in a different way.

There are some 'don'ts' to bear in mind when you're opening up conversations with your child about friendships, such as

- Don't jump in and fix the problem. This is unhelpful as this removes power and control from your child which ultimately prevents them from developing problem-solving skills. What's more, your solution might make the situation worse. So try to focus on listening and problem-solving with your child rather than trying to fix things for them.
- Try not to become overly protective of your child or assume they are the victim. Doing this may warp your child's view of what is happening and it may also make them feel smothered and unable to open up to you for fear of meeting with an overreaction. Remaining calm and level-headed is the best attitude to take as this helps your child to feel supported and heard.



- It is not your place to force your child to end friendships or change friendships. You can make gentle suggestions or ask what your child thinks about this but applying any kind of force will likely cause problems down the line.
- Don't laugh at the situation or dismiss it as being silly. Even if the problem seems small to you, it likely feels mountainous to your child. Children like to be taken seriously and to know that you are there for them no matter how big or small the problem is.
- Try not to make any assumptions. It can be tricky to know exactly what is going on when the issues are happening away from home and out of your sight. If you feel you need greater clarity, you could talk to your child's school and ask for support.

# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## Other ways of supporting your child with friendships

As well as talking to your child about friendships, you can also support them in a range of other practical ways.

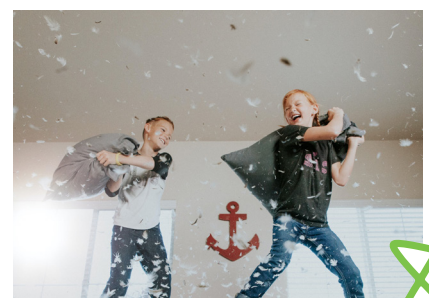
### Get to Know your child's friends

You could do this by encouraging play dates, inviting friends for parties, making friends with their parents and organising family days out with your child's friend's family. Getting to know your child's friends will help you to understand the dynamics of their relationships, it will help your child to know that you value and appreciate their friendship and it may also offer you insight into any difficulties in the friendship.



### Organise playdates

Playdates can be a great way of helping your child to deepen a friendship. Sometimes children can find it hard to navigate friendships in the busy school environment and may find it easier on a 1 to 1 basis at home. To make sure your playdate is successful, plan ahead. Choose a time and length that will work for your child, start with a snack to break the ice, set up some crafts or games in case your child and their friend struggle to play independently and talk to your child in advance about what they could do during their play date to help them prepare.



# Talking to Your Child About Friendships

## Involve school

Sometimes it might be helpful to involve your child's school in any friendship issues that arise. Often, it is best to talk and problem-solve at home first, but if you feel a situation is escalating then contact your child's teacher and ask for a meeting to chat about your concerns. Your child might feel better supported if they know that their teacher is keeping an eye on things too and a simple chat with the teacher might help to resolve any issues.



## Encourage them to participate in extracurricular activities

Children can sometimes become bogged down in the social aspect of school life. They spend time with the same children every day and may start to define themselves in terms of their relationships with their classmates. It can be helpful for children to socialise in other environments besides school. Extra-curricular activities provide your child with the opportunity to get to know other children besides their classmates, discover different social citations and meet with people who have similar interests.



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