



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 22

Teenage Friends and Friendships

As your child enters the teenage years, friends will become more important. Positive, accepting and supportive friendships help teenagers develop towards adulthood.

Why teenage friendships are important

For teenagers, good friends can be like a personal support group. They can provide:

- a sense of belonging, a feeling of being valued and help with developing confidence
- a sense of security and comfort in being with others going through the same experiences
- a source of information about the changes that puberty brings, and what's going on physically and emotionally
- a way to experiment with different values, roles, identities and ideas
- experience in getting along with people of the opposite sex (friendships before the teenage years are often single sex)
- a chance to experience early romantic and sexual relationships.

Positive friendships are an important part of the journey to adulthood. They help teenagers learn important social and emotional skills, such as being sensitive to other people's thoughts, feelings and wellbeing.

Helping your child build friendship skills

Teenagers might be focused on their friends, but they still need your help and support to build and maintain positive and supportive friendships.

Good parent-child relationships tend to lead to positive relationships with peers. So being warm and supportive, staying connected and actively listening to your child can help with the development of friendship skills. You'll also be better able to support your child if friendship problems come up.

Being a good role model is important too. Parents who are keen to spend time with their own friends are more likely to have children with lots of healthy friendships. It's also important for your child to see you looking out for your friends, and showing that friendship is a two-way thing.

Praising teenagers when you see them being fair, trusting and supportive of others encourages them to keep working on those positive social traits.

Getting to know your child's friends shows your child you understand how important these friendships are. You can do this by encouraging your child to have friends over and giving them a space in your home, or transporting your child's friend's home after social outings.

Helping teenagers who find it hard to make friends

All children are different. Not all will be outgoing and socialize with a big group of friends. If your child is like this, but seems generally happy and content, there's no need to do anything.

But if your child has trouble making friends and is worried by that, there are a few things you can do together:

- Think about your child's interests and strengths. Based on this, you could look for new extracurricular activities for your child or encourage your child to join a club, sporting team or social group. Mixing with people who share similar interests is a great way to start friendships. If making friends at school seems to be the problem, a group or activity outside school can help your child build friendship skills and confidence.
- Spend time with extended family and family friends. Plan a barbeque or outing where your child can spend time with people who already know him.
- Helping your child plan an activity with friends. This could be watching a movie at home, having a sleepover or a baking afternoon, or playing some sport at the local park.
- Make sure your child feels comfortable inviting friends home, and give her plenty of space when she does.
- Think about a part-time job or volunteer community activity. Working, particularly in a place with other young employees or volunteers, can give your child a chance to practice social skills as well as building job skills for the future. Note, though, that there can be conflicts with schoolwork if teenagers work more than a few hours each week.
- Try to work out whether there are particular issues that are making it difficult for your child to make friends, such as lack of opportunity, lack of particular social skills or lack of confidence. Then think about ways you can work on these. You might want to ask for professional advice for complex issues.
- Give your child lots of praise and encouragement to build self-esteem. Try not to pressure your child about friends or constantly discuss the situation.

Not all friendships are positive or good for children. Among teenagers, negative relationships are sometimes called 'toxic friendships' and the people in them are called 'frenemies'. Your child might need help to avoid or deal with toxic friendships.

Understanding the balance between friends and parents

As children become teenagers, they begin to spend more of their time alone and with friends. By early adolescence, more than 30% of children's social interactions are with their peers.

This means that teenagers spend less time with their parents. Some parents worry that these intense friendships will take over and friends will become more important than family.

But your child still needs you and the secure base you provide. Being interested and available lets your child know that he can turn to you when he needs to. As your child gets older and more mature, you might also notice that your child gives you some support too.

Teenagers do share a lot with and copy a great deal from their friends. For example, teenagers might change their behavior, appearance or interests to show that they belong to a certain group of friends.

These changes are usually just experimentation. As long as your child isn't doing anything destructive or dangerous, this kind of behavior can actually be a positive sign that your child feels supported and confident enough to try something new.

Parents and friends play different roles in a teenager's life. You influence your child's long-term decisions to do with values and morals. Your child's friends are more likely to influence short-term choices, such as appearance and interests. Strong relationships with both parents and friends help teenagers grow into well-adjusted adults with strong social skills.

What teenage friendships look like

During the early teenage years, friendships become more intense, close and supportive. The amount that teenagers communicate with their friends increases.

Teenage friendships tend to be based on personal similarity, acceptance and sharing. Same-sex friendships are the norm during the early high school years. As they get older, though, many teenagers also make friends with the opposite sex.

In general, girls tend to build closeness through conversation. Boys prefer to share activities.

The internet lets teenagers build friendships through social networking. These friendships are different from real-life relationships. In the best cases, they offer teenagers a way to connect easily and a chance to talk about sensitive issues without fear of being judged, and a chance to experiment with identity in a more or less anonymous way.

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