

Counselor's Corner

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Friends are Friends Forever?

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Teenage friendships can be wonderful or full of drama and sometimes both. As parents, it's sometimes hard to watch the ups and downs of our kids' relationships. It can be perplexing, too. We have the perspective of being on the other side of teenage-dom—we know that those things they get so worked up about now don't really spell the end of the world, and it's easy for us to see that some friends are a bad influence or have personal issues that are too big for our kids to handle on their own.

It's just not always easy telling our kids that, so how do we help them navigate the sometimes turbulent waters of friendships? There are a few things to keep in mind, and some of it involves science:

- *It really matters.* A recent article in National Geographic discussed some of what's actually going on in an adolescent's brain when it comes to friendships. In a nutshell, the areas in the brain that are associated with social interactions and rewards overlap, a lot. Some brain scan studies have shown that the brain reacts to peer exclusion very much the way it reacts to threats of physical harm, so from a neural perspective, social rejection feels like a threat to existence. Not being invited to that party may really feel like "the end." Telling your child that it doesn't matter won't actually help.
- *Friends and bad decisions.* Ever wonder why your normally smart, reliable child suddenly took a big risk or joined the group in some unkind behaviors? An article in the New York Times showed that in the presence of friends—or even if they think friends are watching—adolescents are much more likely to engage in risky behaviors. The reward centers of the brain light up like a Christmas tree, drowning out the brain's warning signals. It makes it much harder for them to resist going along with the crowd, even when they know better.

So, does that mean that we're stuck on the sidelines until their brains are done forming? Do they now have a handy excuse—"Well, you know, Mom, it's not my fault! It's all in my brain!" Nope, not a bit!

One of the most important things we can do is to listen. Even if you think the matter is a trivial one, listening to your child and acknowledging how she feels makes a big difference. Instead of being judgmental or dismissive in her eyes, you become a safe haven and a trusted source.

Once some of the emotional storm has calmed, you can help your child strategize solutions. You have to resist the temptation just to tell him what to do. You need to walk alongside him and guide him so that he learns how to come to a solution himself.

Is it possible to help our children develop a healthy circle of friends in the first place? Actually, it might be. A 2005 survey found that "parents can act as architects of the friendship choices that their children make." We can help influence their choice of friends by monitoring and supervising them, teaching them how to behave, and forming close relationships with them.

It's something you've probably heard before, but apparently it works—pay attention to whom your kids are hanging out with and what they're doing. Articulate your expectations for their behavior and help them discern the right thing to do. Get to know their friends even if you're an introvert who doesn't like large numbers of noisy kids. It pays off for your kids and for you if you open up your home and heart to those adolescents your children are so devoted to.