

DEALING WITH THE TOUGH ISSUES ...

Popularity & Friendship Problems



Some children have no problems making friends. Others, though, always appear to be by themselves. Some children are popular, while others get picked on. Some children make friends who encourage them to do well in school. Others find friends who encourage negative behaviors, including smoking, drinking, sexual activity and skipping school.

What makes the difference? Is there anything you can do to help your child learn to make and keep friends? What should you do when you're worried about your child's choice of friends? Here's what you need to know to deal with the tough issues of popularity and friendship problems.

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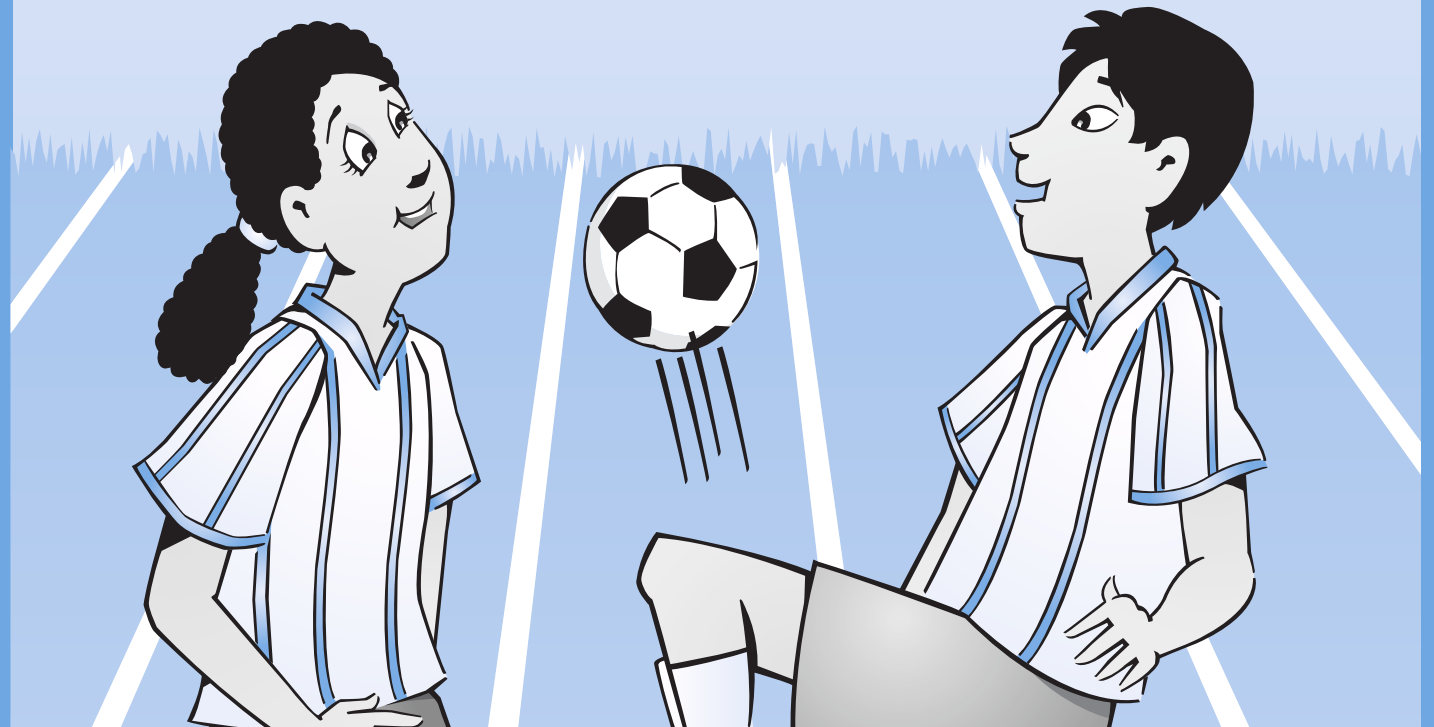
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What Helps Children Make Friends?

The old cliché is true. In order to *make* a friend, you must first *be* a friend. Children who want to make friends need to:

- **Develop an interest.** Children who like playing soccer can usually find friends on a soccer field. Kids who like to sing can find friends in a choir. Sharing common interests is one of the best ways to form and keep strong friendships.
- **Be interested in others.** That's especially hard for children, since they primarily tend to think about themselves.
- **Know when to give in.** Winning arguments doesn't always win friends.

- **Smile.** No one wants to spend time with a sourpuss.
- **Keep confidences.** Children need to learn not to betray a trust.
- **Provide support.** Friends study, play and sit together. They give each other compliments. They're there when the other person has a bad day.
- **Be presentable.** Kids don't need to wear designer clothes to have friends—but they do need to dress neatly. Good manners and a good sense of humor also help.
- **Value themselves.** The best way to make and keep friends is to believe in themselves.





Why Are Friends So Important for Children?

After parents, friends may be a child's most important teachers. Friends teach children lessons about the importance of loyalty, what it means to give *and* take, and how to be a leader and a follower. Sometimes, friends teach children things they can't learn any other way—from how to tie a shoe to how to style their hair.

Friends also help children do better in school. Children who know they have friends are more likely to take positive risks—to try out for a school team, volunteer to work a math problem on the board, or to serve on a school or class committee. Children who have friends also find it easier to make new friends.

I don't like my child's friends.

What Should I Do?

Some friends seem to draw children into negative behaviors. If your instincts tell you that your child's friends are headed for trouble, you need to take



action. Here are some suggestions:

- **Spend time with your child's friends.** That doesn't mean you need to turn into a 10-year-old. But it does mean you'll make a point of being around when your child's friends come over. See if your child wants to invite a friend on a family outing.
- **Help your child find other friends.** Encourage your child to join clubs or scouts. Organizations like 4-H and the Boys and Girls Clubs also give kids a chance to meet a wide group of children.
- **Set limits.** If you think your child's friends are encouraging negative behavior, you may need to set clear limits about whether—and when—your child can spend time with them. And remember, some friends may only be allowed in your home if you are there.

How Can I Help My Child Resist Peer Pressure?

Kids need to fit in. But they also need to know that there are times when they can't go along with the crowd. It's important to teach your child to say "no" to things that are illegal, make him uncomfortable or are against your family's rules. Tell your child:

- **State your values.** "I just don't think that's right, and I wouldn't be comfortable doing that."
- **Make an exit.** "I've gotta get going now."
- **Mention a conflict.** "I know I can't make it."
- **Change the subject.** "Could you believe how hard that history test was?"
- **Offer a better idea.** "Why don't we make a pizza at my house instead?"



If you think your child's friends are encouraging illegal or dangerous behavior, forbid your child to see them. It's always a good idea to know the parents of your child's friends. School events can provide good opportunities to meet them.

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