

Friends and friendships: pre-teens and teenager

Source:  raisingchildren.net.au
the australian parenting website

Key points

- Positive friendships give pre-teens and teenagers a sense of belonging, confidence and support.
 - Good parent-child relationships can help pre-teens and teenagers develop friendship skills.
 - You can support teenage friendships by making your child's friends welcome in your home.
 - If pre-teens and teenagers find it hard to make friends, options include new extracurricular or social activities.
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- 1.** Pre-teen and teenage friendships: why they're important
Good friends and friendships are important to pre-teens and teenagers because they give them:
 - a sense of belonging and being valued by people other than their family
 - confidence, security and comfort
 - a safe space to talk about puberty and the changes it brings
 - experience in getting along with people
 - a social group where they can do new things and experiment with values, roles, identities and ideas.
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- 2.** Helping pre-teens and teenagers 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 children having positive relationships with peers. So being warm and supportive, staying connected and actively listening to your child can help them develop 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 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 your child when you see them being fair, trusting and supportive encourages them to keep working on these positive social traits.

3. When pre-teens and teenagers find it hard to make friends

Some children prefer having 1-2 close friends, rather than socialising in a big group. 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 about this, there are some 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 them to join a club, sports team or social group. Mixing with people who share similar interests is a great way to start friendships and build confidence.
- Spend time with extended family and family friends. Plan a barbeque or outing where your child can spend time with people they already know.
- Help 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 them plenty of space when they do.
- Think about casual work or community activity for your child. This can give your child a chance to meet others and practise social skills, especially if they work with young people.
- Try to work out whether there are particular issues that are making it difficult for your child to make friends, like lack of opportunity, social skills or confidence. Then think about ways you can work on these. You might want to ask for professional advice for complex issues. Your GP is a good place to start.
- Give your child plenty of praise and encouragement. Try not to pressure your child about friends or constantly discuss the situation.

4. Balancing friendships and relationships with parents

In the teenage years, young people often spend much more time with friends and less time with parents. But your child still needs you and the secure base you provide. Being interested and available lets your child know that they can turn to you when they need 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 behaviour, appearance or interests to show that they belong to a certain group of friends. As long as your child isn't doing anything destructive or dangerous, this kind of behaviour often shows that your child feels supported and confident enough to try new things.

It's also normal for friendships to change. You might notice that your child drifts away from old friends or needs support to make new friends.

Parents and friends play different roles in teenagers' lives. 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, like appearance and interests. Strong relationships with both parents and friends help teenagers grow into well-adjusted adults with strong social skills.