

Friend or Foe?

By Colleen Marble

Help your child navigate his social world by equipping him with the skills he needs to choose friends wisely.

I came to the realization this past year that the days of handpicking my son's friends are officially over. As a kindergartner, Christian spent the better part of each weekday with 16 other kids, 14 of whom I had never met.

Being a high-energy kid himself, Christian was drawn to the other high-energy kids in class, some of whom didn't always choose the best way to express that energy. After watching these little guys in action, I found myself wondering what I could do to help Christian choose some other friends that would bring out the best in him, rather than the worst.

By reading up on the subject, discussing it with my pediatrician, and talking with parents who've already navigated these waters before, I've discovered there are some ways parents can help encourage healthier relationships in their children's lives.

Educate

The best advice I received was to approach teaching Christian how to recognize a good friend, just as I would teach him about bike safety or stranger danger or any other important subject dealing with his health, safety, and well being. At 6, Christian is just beginning to learn how to build a relationship. The more I can guide him in this process, the better off he'll be.

Talk with your child often about how friends should treat one another. Explain that good friends



respect others, follow the rules, and help those in need. The more children know about what makes a good friend, the easier it will be for them to recognize one when they meet that child — and to be one himself.

Emulate

As you strive to teach your child about healthy friendships, don't forget to model them in your own life. Demonstrating good relationships skills with your spouse or partner, and taking time to nurture close friendships with others, is as important as simply talking about these skills if not more so.

"Children learn how to relate to people outside of their family from relationships within the family," explains Ed Schor, M.D., FAAP, and editor of *Caring for Your School-Age Child, Ages 5 to 12*. "One would hope that the parents would be friends and would get along well, compromise, etc. Children learn from those exchanges."

Communicate

While it's important to talk about what makes a good friend, it's also good to identify which behaviors are not welcome.

Do not focus on specific children and why they are "bad" and others are "good." Instead, explain the values that you live by in your home, such as positive language, respect for others, sharing, and fair play.

It could be as simple as saying, "In our house, we have certain rules that we follow. When someone comes to visit and refuses to follow those rules, he is not showing respect, and that makes everyone sad." You can balance that by saying, "We have so much more fun when we spend time with friends who do follow the rules."

Facilitate

To encourage healthy relationships, create opportunities for your child to play with kids who you think have a positive influence on her. Set up playdates at your house where you can observe the children playing together, and then encourage repeat dates with the kids that you feel are good role models for your child.

"You ought to play an active role in choosing your children's friends. Who better to do this than the parents?" notes Schor. "Know your children's friends, observe what's going on, and see if they demonstrate the values you desire."

If possible, choose to live in a neighborhood with high-quality schools. An Ohio State University study found a direct correlation between school quality and the types of kids that adolescents choose as friends. Kids in better schools tend to choose friends with more "prosocial" characteristics, such as good grades, good attendance, and involvement in extracurricular activities.

Relate

Finally, focus on your relationship with your child. The Ohio State study found that teens are more likely to report positive friendships when they have a good relationship with their parents. (A "good relationship" was defined as one in which the child and parents get involved in activities together, talk frequently, and express affection for one another.)

The more involved you are in your child's life, the more opportunity you have to help your child develop friendships that can stand the test of time. ●



The Bully Factor

No matter how many good friends your child has, there may still be times when he finds himself the target of a bully. Talk with him about bullying and share these five tips.

- 1. Walk away:** Bullies are generally looking for a reaction from those they target. When they don't get one, they're likely to move on.
- 2. Speak up:** If a bully keeps on bullying, stand tall, look him square in the eye, and say in a clear, loud voice, "I don't like what you're doing. Please stop it now."
- 3. Ask for help:** Talk to a trusted adult about the problem. A teacher or parent can help make the situation better.
- 4. Find good friends:** A bully is only one person. Concentrate on making strong friendships with people who make you feel good.
- 5. Keep having fun:** Don't let a bully stop you from being part of the activities you enjoy.

For more information on how to deal with bullies, visit www.StopBullyingNow.hrsa.gov.