

Five Tips to Help Children Make Friends This School Year

Tony Penn – Boys Town Press Author

He asked if I liked to eat crayons. I'd just moved to the area in the middle of first grade and wanted desperately to make friends, so I said I did. He smiled and a friendship was born. My father viewed my new friend with a skeptical eye, and I knew soon he'd render a judgement. I definitely felt bad for lying to my new friend and was worried that one day I'd have to fess up — or chow down. Fortunately, that day never came. He and I remained friends through elementary school, and I have nothing but fond memories of that time. However, I still pause upon glimpsing a Crayola box of 64 and wonder...

As a parent, you want your children to choose friends wisely, knowing that those friends will have a lasting influence, and one that's in many ways commensurate with yours. How, then, do you help your children navigate the occasionally rough waters of friendship? Here are five tips to help.

1. Remember there's something to learn from everyone.

What I learned from my first-grade friend was that it is OK to overlook something in everyone. And as long as the thing in question isn't a moral deal-breaker, then a culinary or other such eccentricity only adds flavor (so to speak!) to the relationship. Children should be encouraged to celebrate the differences in their friends and appreciate their various perspectives and backgrounds. That said, when children express discomfort at the behavior of a friend, you should really listen, and support them if they decide it's time to end the friendship.

2. Remind them that we, too, are often challenging to others.

Odds are, if you don't have a challenging friend, then it's you. Do you go on and on about politics? Still listen to Yanis and think everyone in the car wants to hear him as well? Rest assured there's something about you your friends would rather change — but clearly there's plenty in you to love or they wouldn't be your friends in the first place. Your children, too, have attributes that can be challenging for others to accept. When they complain about a friend, ask them to point out all of their friend's good qualities and guess as why they might be acting a certain way. Also, try asking your children if they think there's anything they themselves are doing that their friends may find objectionable. These exercises can help your children develop sympathy and empathy.

3. Eccentricity or bad apple? Help them know the difference.

Defining the line between odd-but-permissible and friendship-ending behaviors can be difficult, but to do so requires a conversation about morality that can be difficult to have with some children. Depending on their age, you should regularly discuss what constitutes good and bad behavior. Telling stories from your childhood can be effective. Was there something a friend of yours once did that made you reevaluate or end the friendship? Being frank with your children about such things can help them understand that they, too, should evaluate the behaviors of their friends and determine if they should remain friends.



4. Know when it's time to step in.

Children should be the ones to determine whom they are friends with and negotiating a difficult friendship is a skill that will help them enormously later in life. But on certain rare occasions your children's friends will do something so beyond the pale that it warrants some action on your part. That can be either having a conversation about whether or not they should remain friends, or perhaps simply prohibiting them from spending time with certain people. Ideally, your children will come to this decision on their own, guided by you, but sometimes that will not happen. If not, you should intervene and prohibit your child from associating with a certain person. As long as you justify your decision, making it clear precisely why you made that choice, rest assured you've done the right thing, although you might face some push-back, especially with older children. Again, an anecdote from your own life can be helpful when explaining this decision.

5. Encourage your children to read.

Encourage your children to read novels which deal with the complexities, challenges, and beauty of friendship. This can help prepare them for the various challenges that may lie ahead and a good deal of research indicates that reading fiction increases empathy and compassion. Such titles include: *Making Friends is an Art*, *Cliques Just Don't Make Cents*, and *I Want to Be the Only Dog* for younger children, and *The Misadventures of Michael McMichaels*, *Friend Me!*, and *A Good Friend: How to Make One, How to Be One* for older children.

About my new crayon-connoisseur companion? My father ultimately declared, "He's weird, but he's a good kid. I'm glad you're friends."

He was right.

This article, written by Boys Town Press Author Tony Penn, was originally posted on the First for Women blog. Penn's series, The Misadventures of Michael McMichaels, offers humor and adventure while delivering powerful messages about courage, honesty and friendship. The series and activity guides are available through Boys Town Press.

