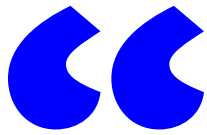


LIFE SKILLS

A Parent's Guide to
FRIENDSHIP

axis



Friendship ... is born at the moment when one man says to another, "What! You too? I thought that I was the only one!"

—C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

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Intro

"Tonight I'll dream, while I'm in bed
When silly thoughts go through my head
About the bugs and alphabet
And when I wake tomorrow, I'll bet
That you and I will walk together again"

We're Gonna Be Friends, the White Stripes

Who was your first best friend? Maybe it was the girl you used to walk home from school with, or the boy who always met you on the playground. Maybe they're still your friend, maybe not. Maybe they're just a warm memory in the back of your mind, a reminder of innocent times and the special sweetness of knowing for the first time that you've found your person.

In Lucy Maud Montgomery's timeless novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, her heroine—the vivacious and precocious Anne—finds a friend in the neighbor girl, Diana. To Anne, though, Diana is more than a friend, she's a kindred spirit. The phrase is an interesting one, and casts light onto the complexities of friendship. A kindred spirit speaks to a connection deeper than the one implied by the word "friend". It suggests an equity of souls, a bond between two like imaginations. The depth of a friendship like that is something many people never experience. For those who do, there is an understanding of how essential friendship is to our humanity. In many ways, friendship is one of the key things that make us human.

What is friendship?

Friendship, simply, is closeness between two people. However, it is in practice much more complicated than that. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines friendship as a "state of enduring affection, esteem, intimacy, and trust between two people." In an article published by the US National Library of Health and the National Institutes of Health, they point out that definitions like this,

"...indicate that friendship is recognized as a dyadic relationship by both members of the relationship and is characterized by a bond or tie of reciprocated affection. It is not obligatory, carrying with it no formal duties or legal obligations to one another, and is typically egalitarian in nature and almost always characterized by companionship and shared activities (Berger et al. 2017)."

Now that's pretty dense, so let's break it down. Friendship is a relationship between two people who view each other as important. No one is forcing the people into the relationship, and it doesn't require anything specific of either member. Both people see each other as equals, and they stay friends because they enjoy each other's company and like doing things together. These kinds of relationships, the article goes on to say, are essential to human happiness and wellbeing. Friendships are the bonds on which much of our lives are built, whether we know it or not.

Why does friendship matter?

Not only do friendships make us happy, they are essential for our survival. Research has shown that without friendships, our health can decline; whereas those with several strong friendships tend to experience a greater degree of health and happiness. According to the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, "Numerous studies have reported that being connected to people seems to confer various forms of health benefits... social relationships remain an important health resource into very old age." Friendship helps us feel less alone, and the knowledge that another person cares for us and can help us drastically reduces stress, which has a net positive effect on our bodies.

Not only does friendship physiologically matter, it's essential to our emotional and mental development. An article published in *The Atlantic* speaks to the significance of having friends in middle school:

"It seems logical that when parents no longer serve as social buffers, friends might take over, given how important friends are to teenagers. A 2011 study found evidence for exactly that

in 11- and 12-year-olds. The children regularly recorded how they felt about themselves and their experiences throughout their days, and they recorded who was with them. Their cortisol levels were measured as well. Having a best friend present during an experience significantly buffered any negative feelings, lowering cortisol levels and boosting a sense of self-worth."

Friends teach children to value themselves by valuing them, allowing children to mirror their friends and develop positive feelings about themselves. Friends teach essential life skills such as trust, communication, consistency, and resilience. They provide a safe space for conflict management and allow for the first instances of social expression. Children and teens can be themselves around friends in a way that they can't around their parents, which allows for healthy development of self-awareness and a sense of identity. As they mature into adulthood, friendships create a foundation on which teenagers build their beliefs about what matters and what doesn't and receive regular feedback about their behavior, desires, and goals.

There is one incentive for forming friendships that surpasses any other: loneliness. Loneliness is, in fact, defined by friendship; Dictionary.com defines it as "Sadness because one has no friends or company." We as human beings are not designed to be alone. Before the creation of Eve, God said of Adam, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). Loneliness eats away at us, causing feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation. An article published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* says:

"As a social species, humans rely on a safe, secure social surroundings to survive and thrive. Perceptions of social isolation, or loneliness, increase vigilance for threat and heighten feelings of vulnerability while also raising the desire to reconnect. Implicit hypervigilance for social threat alters psychological processes that influence physiological functioning, diminish sleep quality, and increase morbidity and mortality." (Louise C. Hawkley)

A desire to assuage loneliness is built into our human nature. That's why friendship is such an essential piece of the human experience. Speaking from a purely biological perspective, friends form our packs—they are our protection, our community, the people with whom we hunt and gather. Newport Academy, a residential therapy group, discusses the scientific social significance of friendship:

“One study used data from a nationally representative sample of more than 111,000 adolescents. The researchers investigated whether teenagers who were integrated into friendship networks had better mental health, as measured by a number of depressive symptoms. Subsequently, the findings made clear that teens with more friends had fewer symptoms of depression. In addition, teens with a friendship network felt a sense of belonging. As a result, those teens had more positive feelings about their relationships with other people in society.”

The less lonely we are, the better people we have the capacity to be. Friends teach us how and who to be, they form what kind of people we become, and they are the foundation on which we build our social lives as well as our sense of self.

What makes a friendship?

There are many pieces of friendship, especially in the technological age where friendship is often defined by more than just “the person you spend the most time with”. Some of the dynamics that shape how friendships develop include groups, best friends, social media, family, physical intimacy, and romance. It’s important to recognize and be able to understand the different components of a friendship in order to ensure that they are all being dealt with in a healthy way and none are creating toxicity in the relationship.

Groups

Friends often come in pairs, triads, or even a whole pack. Friend groups can be both deeply beneficial and seriously dangerous, depending on the health of their individual members. In an article for The Atlantic, Lydia Denworth draws a comparison between teenage friend groups and two scientists’ experiment with mice:

“After raising peer groups of mice, Steinberg and Chein gave them alcohol, which triggers reward systems in mouse brains just as it does in human brains. They randomly assigned the mice to be tested alone or in the presence of their peers, and

tested half as juveniles (the equivalent of adolescents) and half as adults. In the presence of other mice, adolescent mice drank more than they did when they were alone. In adults, there was no difference in the amount that they drank.

“There’s something about the brain during adolescence in mammals that is hardwired to be especially sensitive to peer influence and to be more reward-seeking in the presence of peers,” Steinberg said. Instead of calling the phenomenon peer pressure, they began calling it “peer presence.”

Groups can encourage young people to pursue pleasure and intensity of experience, which is often harmless. Roughhousing, running, yelling, and other rambunctious activities are high-energy, high-reward activities that are common to especially young adolescents. As they grow older, reward-based activities can include the sharing of secrets, deep conversations, joking and laughing, and general tomfoolery. These activities can activate the reward centers of teens’ brains by producing oxytocin, a bonding hormone, and endorphins, which make them feel good.

However, there is a danger that groups will encourage individual teenagers to seek out faster, more intense reward-based activities, such as drinking and drugs. The above Atlantic article stated that teens are unlikely to try drinking or drugs for the first time by themselves, and that most teenage experiences with substances are the result of trying to impress or fit into a group that is partaking in those activities. Teens who were put into a driving simulator alone on the whole made half as many mistakes as teens who were in the simulator with friends. There’s no denying it, the presence of groups can make life more difficult and dangerous for a teenager who is not rooted in their beliefs and practices—as few teens are.

This doesn’t mean, though, that if your student has a friend group that they’re automatically going down the path of substance abuse. Instead of fearing for your student’s choices, encourage them to clearly be able to state who they are and what they believe in so that if they are offered drugs or alcohol they are more easily able to say no. And, if they are around the kind of people who would offer those things, ask your student if that’s really the kind of person they want to be around. Sometimes all teens need is an out; after all, innocent fun produces more and better reward neurotransmitters than substances do; like oxytocin and other bonding hormones rather than straight dopamine.

Best friends

It's rare for someone to go through life without finding a best friend for at least one period of time. Though best friends can come and go, their presence reminds us that we are uniquely loveable. Sometimes best friends last years, or even a lifetime, and become just as important to our identity and sense of self as a spouse or children. According to a Pew Research study, 98% of teens say they have a best friend, while only 2% say they don't have anyone they consider a close friend.

Many parents face concerns about their children's best friends. What if they're too exclusive? What if they exclude other children and make them feel less valuable? What if they become someone around their best friend that they wouldn't otherwise be? These are all valid concerns, but it's important to remember that having a best friend is normal and healthy. Best friends teach children how to have a significant relationship with one person, which not only prepares them for a spouse, but allows a level of trust and vulnerability to develop that might not be found in a group or with family. It's okay to have a single best friend and does not mean that your child is excluding others—not everyone has to be their best friend, because not everyone is suited to be.

Social media

Gen Z and Gen Alpha are growing up in strange times, when friendship is no longer determined simply by whose presence you spend the most time in. Online friends are becoming more and more common in the technological era, and it's normal for teenagers to feel they've found a community in an online space, be it Instagram, TikTok, or Reddit. All these platforms are designed to foster a type of community; they encourage comments and expressions of appreciation (likes), and they support dialogue and the same kind of mirroring one would find in an offline friend group.

Social media allows students to develop their relationships with their in-person friends more regularly as well. The same Pew study as above found that six out of ten students spend daily time online with their friends, whereas only two out of ten students said they spend daily time with them in person. This instant access has become an important part of friendships in the 21st century. Our ability to connect with others right away can help create friendships that, in some ways, are closer than ever before. We can

be available to our friends at all times.

Of course, there are negatives to this availability. Children can find unhealthy communities online just as they can find unhealthy groups in person. However, it can be easier to access these unhealthy groups because students don't have to leave the house to interact with their online friends. There is also the pressure to perform; peer pressure that is magnified by the sheer number of eyes students may feel are on them. The student might become someone different online from who they are in person.

Online friendships aren't going away. In fact, it will likely be more and more common for children to have friends who exist exclusively online. This isn't necessarily a problem; it just underscores the importance of teaching good, comprehensive internet safety to children and teens, and keeping open pathways of communication to ensure they feel safe and heard should they find themselves in a dangerous situation.

Family

Though it might not be the first thing most people think of, family is an essential part of friendship, both as an influence and a source. Who our family is determines how we see friendship, how we interact with others, and how we view ourselves in friendships. Parents model friendship for their children, and siblings practice friendship with each other. It's important to recognize family's significance in developing friendships so that influence and family friendships can be used and developed in healthy, thoughtful ways.

For the first years of their lives, children require constant and consistent care. As they grow older, children begin to share the burden of this care with friends. A healthy parent can give that burden over to their child's friends; allowing them to shoulder part of the responsibility of caring for them, helping them understand who they are and where they belong, and helping them deal with failure and rejection. Though it might be difficult to release these responsibilities, it is essential that children begin to develop a social circle beyond the family if they are to develop and eventually be ready to move out on their own.

However, family is not just the launching pad for friendships. It can be a source of some of the most important friendships a student will ever have. As a teen grows from childhood to adulthood, their natural inclination will often be to make friends with their parents, shifting from total responsibility

to them to at least partial equity with them. Friendships with one's parents can be some of the most rewarding relationships in a young person's life; after all, what better friend to have than someone who knows you better than anyone else?

The line between parent and friend can be difficult to walk. It can be tempting on the one hand to release the responsibility of parenting and step into a role as your child's closest friend—on the other hand the burden of parenting may weigh heavily enough on you that the idea of developing a friendship with your child seems impossible. The balance is found in communication; keeping open lines of discussion with your student allows them to feel heard and valued as a friend, but also informs your decisions as a parent. And, of course, you can ask your child how they feel you are balancing friendship and parenthood.

Physical intimacy

C.S. Lewis said of friendship: "To the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves, the crown of life and the school of virtue" (The Four Loves). The Iliad tells of the friendship of Patroclus and Achilles, which was so physical and passionate that many modern scholars have read it as sexual—despite there being no historical evidence to support this. Gen Z and Gen Alpha might be closer to the Ancients, to Patroclus and Achilles, than any other generation before them, and their capacity for physical intimacy in friendships shows it. Gen Z in particular prizes platonic friendships above romantic relationships in a world that does completely the opposite, and in so doing has managed to distinguish physicality from sexuality by associating it with friends just as often, if not more often, than lovers.

A popular TikTok phrase and trend is "kiss the homies goodnight"; a reminder to young men to show physical affection to their friends as a way to disconnect from the stereotype that men should not be affectionate with one another. Though the idea may seem ludicrous to generations shaped by the hyper-conservative physical philosophy of the 1950s, or those fearing a return to the extreme sexuality of the 60s and 70s, showing physical affection to friends is far from a new practice, and in fact, the concern about it is a distinctly Western one.

Biblically, there is evidence for close, physical platonic relationships. David and Jonathan display one of the healthiest friendships found in Scripture,

and their love was described as “more wonderful than the love of a woman” (2 Samuel 1:26). Judas betrayed Jesus “with a kiss” (Luke 22:48), which would have been seen as an act of friendship. Paul often ended his letters with the command to “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” In many Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Asian countries it is normal for men and women to walk hand in hand or with their arms around each other. Only in the West, which has become undeniably sex-obsessed over the last several decades, is physical closeness with friends seen as signifying sexual attraction without a doubt.

That said, there should be boundaries to physical affection within friendships, as there should be boundaries to all intimacy within friendships. As mentioned above, the West particularly is sex-obsessed and questions about sexual attraction will often be present when friends are physically close, whether those questions come from without or within a friendship. For young people who are taught that any feelings for the same sex must signify a non-heterosexual orientation, physical closeness may feed those thoughts and concerns. The way to help your child experience physical intimacy with a friend without casting doubt on their sexuality or sexual development as a whole is to, as always, maintain open communication. Asking your student why they cuddle or hold hands with their friends and how they feel when they do will encourage them to maintain a healthy criticism of their own actions and a focus on self-awareness. How often do they cuddle with their friends, and for how long? Are they the only ones holding hands in a group or is it a common occurrence? When they make a comment about the physicality of the relationship, is it ever sexual in nature? What do they think the difference is between sexual and platonic physical intimacy, and how do they express that difference? These are all questions that can help your teen stay healthy and aware, fostering strong friendships without crossing boundaries.

Romance

Not only is the West sex-obsessed, it is romance-obsessed. Every romantic comedy, teen TV show, and young adult novel preaches the same narrative: girls and boys cannot be just friends. They have to fall in love. And, with changing conversations surrounding sexuality and attraction, the narrative has extended to same-sex friendships as well. Friends cannot be just friends. If they are close, that means they must be in love. It's a dangerous insistence. It encroaches on the sanctity of platonic friendship and robs

young people of precious relationships they might have otherwise formed if not for the fear that the other person or those around them will “get the wrong idea”.

Not only is this narrative concerning, but it has repercussions for later in life. If children are taught that closeness with the opposite gender always leads to romance when they are young, that will inhibit their relationships with coworkers, friends' spouses, and any other friendships that may be formed with the opposite gender. Psychology Today says of the importance of “boy-girl” friendships that: “These friendships can provide a very healthy basis for later male-female relationships. They enable children to see members of the opposite sex as regular people rather than as mysterious, different, and even frightening ‘others’”. Distinguishing the romantic element from opposite gender friendships allows for the healthy development of person-to-person relationships that have no basis in sexuality.

Additionally, it's essential to remove the romantic narrative from same-sex friendships. Just because media often presents homosexual relationships as arising from these friendships does not mean that is a given. It is normal for girls to be close with other girls, and boys to be close with other boys. This narrative applies more to young men than it does to young women, but both genders have the right to experience intimacy (as discussed above) with members of the same sex. In fact, it is essential to development. An article published by Bar Ilan University in Israel says as much:

“Intimacy is central to an adolescent's socioemotional adaptation (Sullivan, 1953) and is considered an important resource in developing his or her interpersonal and intrapersonal growth (Buhrmester, 1990). Intrapersonally, ego identity is necessary for the processing of intimate interactions (Erikson, 1963). Interpersonally, intimacy in adolescent friendships imbues individuals with a sense of belonging and self-worth (Erikson, 1963; Rawlins, 1992). The close friend also serves as an important source of emotional support and a safe environment for self-exploration and identity formation (Buhrmester, 1990; Parker & Gottman, 1989)” (JSPR Magazine).

Intimacy in friendships that remain platonic is far from impossible. Teaching your student that their friendships are valuable even if they don't turn into romantic relationships will help them grow and develop healthily and prepare for future relationships throughout the rest of their lives.

What does Scripture say about friendship?

Though many passages of Scripture speak about the importance of friendship, it's important that we look to the source of all relationships as we discuss what makes a good relationship: the Trinity. Before time, the Triune God existed in eternal community with Himself. Each member of the Trinity completely satisfied the others' needs and desires for relationship. Every facet of community exists in wholeness in the relationship between each member of the Trinity. When God created the world, one of His first acts was to reflect that community in his creation. Each animal was given its equal opposite: a mate with whom it would procreate and reproduce. When God created humankind, he existed in community with them and gave them to one another to form relationships. Adam and Eve existed in perfect friendship with God, mirroring the perfect friendship of the Trinity.

This perfect friendship, though broken by the Fall, is glimpsed throughout Scripture. Aside from the many verses in the Old Testament about friendship (such as Proverbs 27:9, which says, "A sweet friendship replenishes the soul" or Ecclesiastes 4:12, which says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken"), Jesus prioritized friendship throughout his life on Earth. From all of his followers, Jesus selected a group of twelve close friends, people he could trust, who would carry out his mission and support him in his ministry. From those twelve, he had an inner circle of three—James, John, and Peter—and of those only John bore the title "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 19:26-27). Outside of this group of friends, Jesus also had other significant people in his life, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom Scripture also refers to as those whom he loved. Jesus modeled health in friendships: boundaries with the crowds, emotional intimacy with a select few, and a reliance on only those whom he knew he could trust. In this modeling Jesus reflected his own community and friendship with the Father and the Spirit, the latter of whom sustained and supported the friendship of the apostles as they traveled and gave them common ground on which to maintain their relationships.

We learn from Scripture that friendship is built on trust and truth, and protects us from danger. As Proverbs 18:24 says, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." The friends who stick closer to us than even our family are the people we carry

through life, with whom we mirror the perfect community of the Trinity, and in doing so live out the redeemed kind of friendship that God has created us to have.

How do I help my teen foster good friendships?

It's been said before, but we'll say it again: communication. By talking with your teen often, you can encourage them to express not only their own feelings about their friendships, but how they think about friendship as an idea—what makes a good friend, what makes a bad friend, why do they like the friends they have, and how they think they could deepen their friendships.

As tempting as it might be to step in and keep unhealthy friendships or groups out of your students' lives permanently, it's important to remember that teens can learn as much from bad friendships as they can from good ones. Encourage teens in unhealthy or even toxic relationships to examine what exactly makes the friendship unhealthy, and ask them about why they may want to leave the relationship when they see it for what it is.

Model Jesus' friendship framework by helping your student understand that not everyone has to be their closest friend—that boundaries are safe and okay to establish, and that some friendships require more boundaries than others. Encourage them to choose their best friends carefully, to ask themselves questions like: Will this person support me? Will they tell me the truth, even if I don't want to hear it? What do this person and I have in common? What are our differences? Why do I want this person as my best friend? What characteristics do they have that will make them a good friend to me? These are the kinds of questions that will help your student think critically about their relationships both now and into their adulthood.

It's important to recognize how essential friendships are to your teen. Reachout.com says:

“It's important for teenagers to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance from their peers. Friendships can be a network of great support and can offer protection against negative peer relationships such as bullies. Learning positive friendship skills can help them

socially so they feel happier and more confident. So it's good for your child's happiness to be a great friend to someone and to have a group of good friends supporting them. It's also important for you to understand and respect that, during their teenage years, your child is figuring out who they are beyond the family. Shared interests, attitudes, social struggles and being in circumstances that may resemble their own are some of the reasons young people will reach out and find comfort in close connections with friends. These connections can help your child learn about trust, respect, acceptance and intimacy, which will be important concepts for them to understand as they enter adulthood."

Friendship is the space where teens begin to understand and form who they are. As a parent, you have the amazing opportunity to help them form these relationships, either by facilitating "play dates" when they're young or being a safe place for discussion as they grow older. Parents are the models on which children will build their ideas about what relationships are, so it's essential to know what a healthy friendship looks like for yourself so you can help your student step into healthy friendships of their own.

A Parent's Guide to **FRIENDSHIP**

Recap

Friendship is closeness between two people who have things in common and don't require anything from each other, which is affectionate and mutually beneficial. Friendship is important because it provides a space for us to express ourselves and learn who we are, and because it prevents loneliness. There are many different aspects of friendships, such as groups, best friends, social media, family, physical intimacy, and romance. It is important to understand all of them so as to maintain the health of each individual facet. Scripture teaches us that friendship is not only important, but is a reflection of the Trinity and is redeemed through the person of Christ, who had many friends of different levels of closeness. Parents can help their children foster healthy friendships by keeping open lines of communication, allowing their children to grow through unhealthy relationships, and setting boundaries with the friends they have.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

A Parent's Guide to **FRIENDSHIP**

Discussion Questions

- What makes a good friend?
- Who is your closest friend? Why do you like them?
- Have you ever been in a bad friendship? What did you learn?
- What do you think the Trinity teaches us about friendship?
- What is the hardest thing about having friends in the technological world? What's the easiest thing?
- Do you think opposite-gender friendships are important? Why?
- What do you think culture teaches about friendship?
- What is one thing (students) you wish your parent or caring adult understood about friendship?
- What is one thing (parents and caring adults) you wish your student understood about friendship?
- Why do you think we need friends?
- How do you feel when you don't have friends?
- How does friendship change as you get older?
- What is the best way to make friends? Why?
- Do adults need friends the same way teenagers do? Why or why not?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a free weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- Conversations Kit on Friendship
- Parent Guide on Rejection
- Parent Guide on Loneliness
- Check out axis.org for even more resources!
- [Join Axis](#) to receive all our digital resources and start a new conversation today!

Additional Resources

- Adolescent Intimacy Revisited, The US National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health
- Why Your Friends are More Important Than You Think, Greater Good Magazine
- Raisingchildren.net.au
- The Outsize Influence of Your Middle-School Friends, The Atlantic
- Verywellfamily.com
- Newportacademy.com
- Reachout.com
- Healthforteens.co.uk
- Teens, friendships, and online groups, Pew Research Group

Support Axis to get more resources like this!