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How to Find a Best Friend

It is harder for children to form lasting friendships; rising screen time and lots of activities get in the way



By **SUE SHELLNBARGER**

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Parents and psychologists are discussing a subtle concern: Children today face a lot of obstacles to having a best friend.

Many forces are contributing, from the much-discussed rising screen time and less free neighborhood playtime to the growth of team sports and changes in how schools organize classes. Parents can help their children overcome the hurdles, researchers say, by helping them learn the nuances of finding and keeping close friends, and not by intervening in playground battles.

Having a best friend has a bigger influence on children than shallower friendships, research shows. It buffers a child from stress, loneliness, teasing and abuse by peers. Children with best friends tend to be kinder and friendlier and have a better reputation on the playground. They also have less depression and anxiety through adolescence and beyond, research shows.

Schools are changing in ways that tend to disrupt stable friendships. Administrators are re-shuffling classroom groupings more frequently during the day, and year-to-year. To allay bullying, they also break up close relationships that bear any resemblance to a clique. The most common meeting place for best friends, by far, is school; 61% of children met their first best friend at school, according to a Harris Poll of 395 U.S. parents of children ages 3 to 17 conducted online last month in partnership with The Wall Street Journal.



Meredith Ethington of Salt Lake City with her children, left to right, Kyle, 6, Avery, 8, and Chandler, 3. Ms. Ethington has urged Avery to consider whether friends make her happy or sad and to seek out children who make her happy. *PHOTO: CECILEY HALLMAN*

Spending more time on extracurricular activities and sports is draining time from best friends too. “Teams are overall a good thing, and a place to meet potential friends, but they don’t replace the benefits of a best friend,” says Fred Frankel, author of “Friends Forever,” a book for parents about children’s friendships and founder of a children’s friendship-skills program at UCLA. “Many psychologists agree that having a best friend is one of the most significant social outcomes of childhood.”

Erin O’Marra, a mother in Westfield, N.J., has given a lot of thought to teaching her daughters, Teela, 9, and Tanis, 7, to be friends. She started coaching them on basic social skills when they were in preschool—that it’s important to be kind to everyone, to notice when others are sad and to include them in play. When she was angry, she’d say, “This is my mad face,” or take note of her daughters’ mood by saying, “You look sad. What’s going on?” She also asked when reading books to them what they thought the characters in the illustrations were feeling.

Teela met her best friend at camp last summer. He lives a mile away and is in a different class at school. They play at recess, when weather permits. Ms. O’Marra sets up play dates for them and has become friendly with the boy’s mother. Other times, they stay in touch by playing Minecraft online. By contrast, Ms. O’Marra, 40, says her mother just set her free outside and said come back at lunch.

While texting and social networking online can help maintain close friendships when children are apart, online connections also put pressure on children to have a larger number of shallow contacts. A 2012 Stanford University study of 3,461 girls ages 8 to 12 found those who spent a lot of time multitasking online



Erin O'Marra of Westfield, N.J., with her daughters Tanis, 7, in the middle, and Teela, 9. Ms. O'Marra has emphasized reading other people's feelings since the girls were in preschool. *PHOTO: JAMES ANDERSON*

had fewer and poorer-quality friendships.

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There's evidence that online activity weakens children's social skills. A 2014 study led by UCLA researchers found that 11- to 13-year-olds who spent five days at a nature camp with no electronic devices scored higher afterward, compared with controls, on a test of their ability to read emotions on others' faces. That emotional distance makes it "easier on social media to be unkind to people," says

Kate Eshleman, a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic. The study of 105 children was published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*.

Nearly 3 in 4 people say it's harder for children to form close one-on-one friendships today than when they were children, according to the Harris Poll survey of a total of more than 2,000 U.S. adults. Among leading reasons, 83% say children have less time to play freely in their neighborhoods, where many found best friends in the past; 70% of participants cite a rise in time spent social networking online. Some 7% of children have never had a best friend, based on responses from 395 parents who participated in the poll.



Children play together and practice group interaction at the UCLA Children's Friendship Program. *PHOTO: JOHN FRANCIS PETERS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Meredith Ethington was surprised when a first-grade classmate gave her daughter Avery a "Best Friends Forever" necklace. It seemed risky at an age when children "change their minds so quickly," says Ms. Ethington, of Salt Lake City. Indeed, the classmate soon took the necklace back for no apparent reason, and Avery "really took it to heart."

Ms. Ethington comforted Avery and encouraged her to look for friends who share her interests and make her happy, rather than sad and upset, says Ms. Ethington, who wrote about the incident on her blog. "It was heartbreaking for me as a parent to see her go through that, but that's how they learn. It's going to make her stronger," Ms. Ethington says in an interview. Avery, now 8, has made several new friends this year.

Teaching children to choose friends based on shared interests, rather than chasing their most popular classmate, is important. Another valuable skill is "relationship repair"—helping a child patch up an important friendship, says

Eileen Kennedy-Moore, a Princeton, N.J., psychologist and co-author of “The Unwritten Rules of Friendship.”

Some children are prone to arguing because they always want to be right, she says. Encourage the child to think about whether being right is worth losing a friend, and to try listening, compromising and forgiveness instead.

Basic social skills are the foundation for forming close friendships, and they can be taught. The UCLA Children’s Friendship Program has been coaching elementary-schoolers to get along on the playground since 1992, and it has spawned many imitators. It enrolls children who lag their peers in social skills, as well as children with ADHD, autism and other disorders. About 15% of children have significant problems making friends, Dr. Frankel says.

Children learn “playing detective”—asking other children questions to discover shared interests, a potential basis for friendship, says Cynthia Whitham, director of the program. They also master the art of “slipping in” smoothly to a group playing together, without disrupting it.

Just as essential, Ms. Whitham says, is learning to deal with rejection. “We teach that 50% of the time people get turned down” when asking to play with others, often for reasons that have nothing to do with the child, Ms. Whitham says. Saying, “That’s cool,” or politely turning away rather than arguing, will improve their reputation on the playground.

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