



**FRIENDSHIP  
SKILLS  
EVERY KID  
NEEDS**

*Audrey Monke, MA*



## 10 Friendship Skills Every Kid Needs



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“Friendships are the gold of childhood.”

-Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

[Michael Thompson](#)'s statement stuck with me long after I attended his session on the social lives of millennial children at an American Camp Association conference several years ago.

After researching the link between positive relationships, happiness, and success, I would go even further and say that friendship is not just the gold of childhood, but also of adulthood.

Unfortunately, our culture is not currently supporting the development of healthy, solid friendships between kids. Their friendships and family relationships are more important than any academic subject or athletic skill, yet the way most kids spend their time does not reflect this importance. For many, there simply isn't time in their adult-supervised, overscheduled lives for the free play required for developing strong, close friendships.

What are our kids learning about friendship in this Instagram and Snapchat-era of “friends?” Many boast hundreds or even thousands of “followers” or “friends” online, and yet some of those same kids report not having one single person in their life who meets the criteria of a true and trusted friend.

Face-to-face social skills, such as being able to read non-verbal cues and listen intently, are learned through practice. If communication is primarily through a screen, then those skills are not being honed. An additional problem is that kids will text or post something much more hurtful than they would say face-to-face. Yet the hurt feelings on the recipient's end are painfully real.

Another cultural factor that is counter-productive to the development of solid friendships is the constant, high-stakes competition our children are constantly in with their peers.

Who's ranked higher at school?

Who made the varsity team?

Who's more popular or gets more “likes” on selfies?

Often, instead of being truly supportive and encouraging to each other, kids are in competition with each other academically, athletically, and also socially.

## **Being Our Kids’ “Friendship Coaches”**

As parents, teachers, camp counselors and other adults who work with kids, we can positively impact our kids’ lives by thinking of ourselves as their “Friendship Skills Coaches.”

Helping our kids build good social skills will help them achieve future success in life much more than providing them with extra tutoring and practice time on academic or athletic skills. Much recent research in positive psychology has confirmed that **positive relationships** are the most consistent predictor of happiness and success in all aspects of life, including academics, career, marriage, and even health.

At school, very little—if any—time is spent teaching these important skills, but for youth who struggle with social skills deficits, this coaching is vital to both their current and future happiness. Deficits in social skills are linked to a myriad of problems for kids and adults, including addiction, anxiety, depression, and obesity, while healthy social skills are associated with many positive life outcomes including more meaningful relationships, better problem solving skills, and a better work ethic. Therefore, it behooves us to teach our kids good social skills. But where do we start?

### **Assess Social Skills Strengths and Deficits**

One place is with a quick assessment of which of the following ten skills needs the most strengthening, then pick just **one** to work on at a time:

- #1 Finding the right “tribe”
- #2 Smiling
- #3 Asking questions
- #4 Inviting/Joining
- #5 Sharing
- #6 Being happy for friends’ victories
- #7 Dealing with difficult emotions (anger, sadness)
- #8 Resolving conflicts
- #9 Empathizing
- #10 Practicing kindness

This is by no means a comprehensive list of ALL the social skills, but it is a good place to start with kids who need some coaching.

## **Start the Conversation about Friendship**

As you introduce a skill, be positive and not condemning or critical. Say something like, “Making friends can be hard sometimes. I’d like to talk with you about something you can do that will help you make friends. How does that sound?”

## **Coaching Techniques**

- **Discussion/Instruction:** Talk about or brainstorm one of the skill areas, such as compliments, questions, manners, or calming down. Discuss some different social scenarios.
- **Self-Assessment:** Older kids may be able to assess their own social skills using an assessment like the one found here:  
[https://my.extension.illinois.edu/documents/257081302080208/lp\\_careadult\\_socialskills.pdf](https://my.extension.illinois.edu/documents/257081302080208/lp_careadult_socialskills.pdf)
- **Modeling:** “Young people need models, not critics.” John Wooden SHOW your kid, through how you treat the people you interact with throughout the day, the social skills you want your kids to learn and practice.
- **Role Playing:** Pick a scenario like inviting a friend to play on the playground, then act it out with your child, taking turns playing each role. Brainstorm possible responses and reactions. Have them practice it out in the world. Regroup and see how it went. Practice more.
- **Reflection and Praise:** Focus on the social skills strengths your child is demonstrating and growing. Use growth mindset praise to let your child know you notice their hard work toward improving a specific skill. The best coaches focus on strengths and growth and bring out more of both.

# 1 FIND THE RIGHT “TRIBE”

One of the most important social skills is the ability to **discern who might be a good friend.**

**Kids need to find other kids who:**

- ➔ **Accept who they are**
- ➔ **Consider them an equal**
- ➔ **Share common interests**

*When you find people who not only tolerate your quirks but celebrate them with glad cries of ‘me, too!’ be sure to cherish them. Because those weirdoes are your tribe.*

One of the most important social skills is the ability to discern who might be a good friend. Kids need to find other kids who accept who they are, consider them an equal, and share some of the same interests. Some kids try to join the perceived “popular” group only to find they are not truly welcome. Such “friendships” are lopsided and unfulfilling, and in fact, often only one child (usually the one not being accepted) considers the friendship viable and is investing in it.

Rather than encouraging children to continue forcing themselves into a friendship or group where they are not whole-heartedly welcome, help them instead discover where their real “tribe” is. And this “tribe” need not be huge. In fact, it may be with just one or two other like-minded kids.

Address your own feelings about who your kids’ friends are, too. As parents, we often want our kids to be friends with the kids of *our* friends, but those kids may not be the best match.

## 2 SMILE!

Children need to learn that by **smiling and presenting a positive demeanor**, more people will be attracted to them as a potential friend.

**Nonverbal communication is POWERFUL!**



*Let us always greet each other with a smile, for the smile is the beginning of love. --Mother Teresa*

Our nonverbal communications are powerful. Teach your children that smiling, standing up straight, giving eye contact, and having an open stance when talking to others all contribute to others naturally perceiving them as friendly and approachable.

Kids who think other kids are being “mean” or leaving them out often aren’t aware of how they are presenting themselves and how they are being perceived by others due to their own negative affect.

Children need to learn that by smiling and presenting a positive demeanor, more people will be attracted to them as a potential friend.



# 3 ASK QUESTIONS

Kids (and adults) who master **question-asking, listening, and follow-up** are well-liked because they give people the opportunity to share about themselves.

**Brainstorm with your child what types of questions they might ask:**



*Friends are those rare people who ask how you are and then wait for an answer.*

Many children love to talk about themselves and forget the importance of asking questions about others.

Asking good questions is often the entry point for building friendships. Brainstorm with your child what types of questions they might ask to get to know another person.

Practice asking each other questions and listening well to the answers. Model for your kid how to ask follow-up questions and encourage them to practice with you.

Kids (and adults) who master question-asking, listening, and follow-up are well-liked because people love the opportunity to talk about themselves!

I've compiled a list of *Questions for Connection* you can download here: <http://sunshine-parenting.com/2016/06/03/questions-for-connection/>



# 4 INVITE/JOIN

For a friendship to begin, **someone has to take action**. This can be one person inviting another to do something or it can be joining in with what a child or group is already doing.

**Brainstorm simple, low-risk invitations:**

Do you want to  
play catch?

Do you want to  
play basketball?



Can I sit  
next to you?

Would you like to  
come over after school?

For a friendship to begin, someone has to take action. This can be one person inviting another to do something or it can be joining in with what a child or group is already doing.

Explain this concept to your kid and brainstorm simple, low-risk invitations:

Do you want to play basketball or something else (during recess)?

Can I sit next to you?

Do you want to play catch?

Would you like to come over after school?

Another way to connect is for the child to ask to join a game. It's important for the child to recognize that it's not always appropriate to ask to join, because it won't be well-received if it disrupts the flow of play. Sometimes, in the middle of a game, it's difficult to include a new player. So, rather than asking to join right then, the child can assess what others are doing and say, "Hey, can I play the next game?" rather than intruding at the midway point.

# 5 SHARE

Sharing is an important social skill, because **if done well, it can enhance friendships**. When lacking or done poorly, it can serve as a social repellant. Share about yourself to help others get to know you, but also **ask questions and listen to what others have to say**.

**Sharing the spotlight is an important skill. Let others be in the high beam sometimes!**

**Young kids need assistance learning to share objects - toys, books, markers, etc.**

**As kids get older, they need to learn to share about themselves in a way that doesn't sound boastful but helps others get to know them.**

Sharing is an important social skill, because if done well, it can enhance friendships. When lacking or done poorly, it can serve as a social repellant.

Young kids need assistance learning to share objects – toys, books, markers, etc. As they get older, kids need to learn to share about themselves in a way that doesn't sound boastful but helps others get to know them.

On a vacation last year, my family and I found ourselves in a Jacuzzi with a boy who went on and on (and on) about how he was professional at parkour. He talked about stunts he performed and how he was the “best” at certain maneuvers.

My kids still talk about him, not because of his apparent parkour skills but because his bragging was unforgettable. It's a lesson for us all. Yes, share about yourself to help others get to know you, but also ask questions and listen to what others have to say.

Sharing the spotlight is an important skill. Let others be in the high beam sometimes.

# 6 BE HAPPY FOR FRIENDS' VICTORIES

Responding positively to others' triumphs is a friendship-enhancing skill that research has proven also **enhances marriages and other relationships**.

**Think of how you feel when your friend beats you in a race or gets a better grade on a test.**

**GREAT JOB! CONGRATS!  
I'M SO HAPPY FOR YOU!**

*Friends don't get jealous of each other or begrudge the other for finding success.*

*They celebrate every victory.*

*Karen Kingsbury*



Responding positively to others' triumphs is a friendship-enhancing skill that research has proven also enhances marriages and other relationships.

If you can truly be as happy and excited for your friend's victory as if it were your own, that's an excellent relational skill.

When talking with younger kids, you could use the example of how you feel when your friend beats you in a race or gets a better grade on a test. While the natural response might be jealousy, celebrating and congratulating your friend will be great for the friendship. When we truly celebrate others' accomplishments, our connection gets stronger; hopefully, the friend reciprocates by being happy for us and our victories.

# **7** DEVELOP COPING STRATEGIES FOR **DIFFICULT EMOTIONS**



**(ANGER, SADNESS)**



Research on which kids are most well-liked by peers and which kids are disliked or rejected, **difficulty handling emotions (self-regulation) appears to be the biggest repellant.**

**Kids (and adults!) who lash out or overreact to negative situations just aren't pleasant to be around and are often disliked by peers.**

In research on which kids are most well-liked by peers and which kids are disliked or rejected, difficulty handling emotions (self-regulation) appears to be the biggest repellant. Kids (and adults!) who lash out or overreact to negative situations just aren't pleasant to be around and are often disliked by peers.

Therefore, it is vitally important that kids who struggle with regulating and acting on their feelings learn to handle difficult emotions in a constructive way.

For more ideas to help your child find coping strategies that work, read [10 Ways to Teach Kids to Calm Down](#).

# 8

## RESOLVE CONFLICTS AND SOLVE PROBLEMS WITHOUT RUNNING TO AN ADULT RIGHT AWAY

Kids who run to an adult every time they get their feelings hurt or can't solve a problem with a peer need assistance **learning to resolve their own conflicts.**

**They specifically need to learn how to respond to:**

**Teasing**   **Unkind Comments**   **Losing**  
**Being Left Out**   **Accusations**

Kids who run to an adult every time they get their feelings hurt or can't solve a problem with a peer need assistance learning to resolve their own conflicts. They specifically need to learn how to respond to teasing, unkind comments, losing, accusations, being left out, and peer pressure. Reviewing different ways to resolve conflicts and solve problems can help kids learn important life and relationship skills.

[Read more about teaching kids to resolve conflicts.](#)

# 9 EMPATHIZE

Generally, empathy is our ability to **sense others' emotions** and imagine what they may be thinking or feeling.

**Empathy skills all children must come to know:**

**Self-awareness**

**Self-Regulation**    **Ability to take  
another's perspective**

Empathy is a social skill that is difficult to teach and, in fact, difficult to define. Generally, empathy is our ability to sense others' emotions and imagine what they may be thinking or feeling.

Gwen Dewar, Ph.D., calls empathic responses “standard-issue, grown-up social skills,” yet even adults have trouble with them. If adults struggle with empathy, how much more difficult must it be for children! But self-awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to take another's perspective are all skills children must come to know.

[Dewar outlines ten tips for teaching kids empathy for those of us embarking on this challenge.](#)

# 10 PRACTICE KINDNESS

Some kids are naturally kind and giving to others, but most need help **developing their “kindness muscles.”**

**There are many ways to teach kindness:**

**Giving to others**

**Complimenting others**

**Check the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation!**

Some kids are naturally kind and giving to others, but most need help developing their “kindness muscles.” There are many ways to teach kindness.

[Giving to others is a good start.](#) Complimenting others is also a great way to show kindness and a good skill to practice. Need some kindness ideas? [The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation has some great ones!](#)

Our kids' friendships are so important, because they are both the source of much childhood joy AND the building blocks and practice for later positive adult relationships.

Positive relationships are what make a happy life, so let's help our kids build the social skills they need to have strong friendships!

**Learn More:**

[Quick Friendship Activities](#)

[Podcast Episode 2: 10 Friendship Skills Every Kid Needs](#)

[Making Friends: 3 Communication Skills Your Child Needs](#)

[Making Friends: Developing Emotional Intelligence](#)

[Making Friends: Managing Difficult Emotions](#)

[Why my Family is Celebrating World Kindness Day](#)

[One Simple Way to Increase Happiness](#)

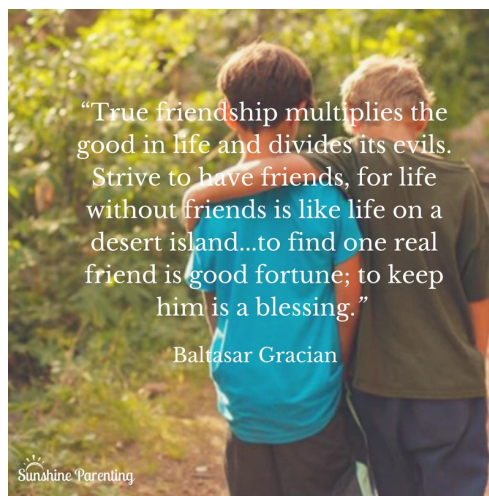
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*Thank you for reading and have a happy day with your kids!*