

INSIGHTS

Helping teenagers manage friendship issues



Having a supportive group of friends plays an important role in the life of young people. They can help your young person negotiate the journey from childhood, where they are reliant on parents, to adulthood, where they need to stand on their own two feet.

The importance of peers

To a parent a teenager's friendships may seem all-consuming, taking precedence over family, school and even healthy leisure time. While peers may now begin to take a more prominent place in your young person's life, family is still an important source of belonging and safety for them. It helps if you get to know their friends and discuss any concerns you have about their choice of friends.

Managing peer pressure

We all experience some degree of pressure to conform to the behaviours and norms of our social groups, yet this pressure is heightened in adolescence, when the need to fit in with peers becomes paramount. Ostracism is unthinkable, which makes some teenagers susceptible to negative influence of some peers. You can help by talking to your young person about peer pressure; helping them resist peer pressure while maintaining status and encouraging them to speak out rather than be reliant on the approval of others.

Encouraging more than one set of friends

It's helpful to think of friendships as a series of concentric circles. Most young people will have a few close friends in their inner circle but are surrounded by many friends in the outer circles. Encourage your young person to maintain friendship groups outside of school to help insulate against any teasing or unfriendly behaviour that may occur at school.

When you disapprove

Sometimes parents disapprove of their young person's choice of friends, because of behaviour, poor reputation or the adverse influence they may have on a young person. Young people take criticism of their friends personally so be careful how you handle these issues. If you have worries about your child's choice of friends: Check that your concerns are real. Encourage diversity of friendships. Be available to take your young person and their friends to outings, sports practice, parties and school formals, to familiarise yourself with their social groups. Many parents have found that, when they get to know their children's friends, many of their concerns were unfounded.

Differentiate between online and offline friends

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In all likelihood, your young person will communicate with their friends in real time or through digital technology. Help your young person understand the difference between the two, discussing how behaviours and norms vary between the real world and online. Discuss the ethics and behaviours appropriate to each format so they can enjoy healthy friendships in both the online and offline worlds.

Friendships can be a source of angst and also a source of joy for your young person. Your role as a parent is to promote healthy friendships and encourage your young person to empathise with others, show they are worthy of trust and treat others with respect – all foundations of mature adult relationships.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.