

When You Don't Like Your Child's Friend

"Worry is the darkroom in which negatives are developed."—Anonymous

You hate to admit it, but your child has a friend you don't like. Sometimes your dislike is based on something small, such as an annoying habit or quirk. But sometimes, your dislike is based on a major reason for concern, and you're worried that your child's friend will influence him or her in ways you don't like. It's not unusual for you not to like all of your kid's friends. In fact, as kids grow, they'll befriend all kinds of people. Here's how to handle this situation.

Try it...

For all parents

- Know that only your *kids* can pick their friends. You can create opportunities for them to hang out with certain kids (especially when they're younger), but your kids will be drawn to some people over others. It's important to allow and respect that.
- If your child chooses a friend you don't like, get to know that friend. Invite that friend over to your home so that you can learn more about him or her and monitor the situation a bit.
- If possible, get to know the friend's parents in some way.
- Identify what bothers you about the friend. Is the friend bringing out an aspect in your child you don't like (such as being more independent)? Does the friend remind you of a negative experience you've had in the past? Or is it a feeling that you can't name yet? Become more aware of the specifics of what bothers you.
- Ask your child what he or she likes about this friend. (But be careful not to express your disapproval too strongly, since sometimes that will strengthen a friendship based on rebellion.) Discern what the attraction is to your child.
- Be a strong, positive influence on your child, particularly when you believe that a friend is a negative influence. Have your child spend time with other caring adults who are also positive influences. Try to counterbalance the negative with the positive.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Don't be surprised if most young children under the age of 3 ignore other children. This is developmentally common, and it's no cause for concern.
- As preschool children become more aware of other children and begin playing with them, some will develop strong preferences for certain kids while others will play with anybody. Both can happen, and both are normal.

- Some preschoolers have imaginary friends in addition to real friends, and some play only with imaginary friends. Ask your child for the imaginary friend's name, and get to know that imaginary friend through your child. Take imaginary friends seriously, since they're important to your child. If your child starts to use an imaginary friend as an excuse for bad behavior, be clear that *all* children, including imaginary ones, need to follow the rules.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- A lot of children during this age are very concerned about the "goodness" and "badness" of others. Many are quick to tattle on each other, and some can say downright mean things to each other. Be clear about what's acceptable and what's not, and remember that children are still learning what it means to be a friend.
- Bullying can be a problem at this age, and it's important to intervene immediately and help all kids (bullies, victims, and other kids) learn how to get along, how to resolve conflicts peacefully, and how not to label each other so that a "bully," "tattle tale," or "victim" label sticks for the rest of their lives.
- Notice your child's friendship patterns. Some children always seem to have a group of friends. Some constantly change friends. Some have one or two close friends. This all depends on their personality and whether kids are introverted and prefer one or two close friends or extroverted and prefer lots of friends. A helpful book is [*Nurture by Nature*](#) by Paul Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Be aware that friendships can shift dramatically during this age period, particularly if your child had a lot of friends of the opposite sex. (Kids at this age tend to befriend kids of their own gender.)
- Friendships can become intense and all-consuming at this age. Your child can constantly be on the phone, text messaging others, and wanting to be running with friends. Monitor their friendships and make observations if you have concerns. For example, if your child is drawn to a child who has no boundaries, say, "It seems fun to have a friend who gets to do anything. I understand that. But I also worry, because your friend is always well during the weekend but then misses school two days a week because of not getting any sleep on the weekend. Friends are important, but so is school."
- Don't pry, but create an atmosphere of openness for your young teen. They need to figure out where they fit with friends and other peers, but invite them to come to you when they get overwhelmed or stuck.
- Continue to be aware for bullying and meanness. As kids go through puberty and become more aware of their sexuality, kids can become vulgar toward each other. Walk the fine line between letting them work out their own problems but also be ready to intervene if they get in over their heads.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- A teenager falling in love can be upsetting and worrisome to parents, especially if the relationship is intense and moves fast. Teenagers sometimes ignore all their other friends just to spend every moment with the person they're dating. Acknowledge and respect the love that they feel, but talk about how it's important to maintain other friendships as well.
- Talk to your teenager about what their friends are doing in terms of drinking, using

drugs, doing pranks, and other activities. This can be a difficult age, particularly if your teenager wants to fit in with a group that requires questionable activities. Offer alternatives. Some teenagers can attend parties where alcohol is served, but not drink. Others find that too tempting. Keep the conversation open and inviting so that your teenager doesn't feel judged.

- Even though your teenager is separating from you, talk with your teenager when you have concerns about a friend. Read the article [*When You Don't Like Your Kid's Friends*](#) that highlights when to step in (and when to stand back).
- Invite your teenager's friends over often and get to know them by name. You'll see most of them as they zip past you to your teenager's room, but greet them as they scurry by and tell them how glad you are to see them (even if you have mixed or negative feelings about them).