



Friendships

Introduction

Friendships are part of our social network. They can be casual, close, on/off, with peers the same age as us or older or younger, and made online or in real life. Everyone has different friendship needs and there is no 'normal' number of friends to have. Yet having many friends can still be seen as a sign of popularity which can lead to a wish to 'collect' friends. However, lasting friendships are founded on mutual trust and respect, both of which need time to develop and deepen. This usually requires meeting up in person and spending time talking and doing things together. Our online friendships can feel close but without in person contact, we miss out on some of the more subtle aspects of connectedness such as shared laughter or tears, hearing compassion in a friend's voice or picking up on their warmth and compassion. As well, misunderstandings, hurt feelings and conflict are better understood when we can meet up and work things out together.

.... What have you noticed about friendships in your peer group? Are they mostly online or in person? Do they tend to last or are they often changing?

Making friends

None of us are taught how to make friends. We each approach this in our own way and usually through trial and error! For some, it comes naturally while others might need to work at it. Whatever our age, it can be hard to admit that we are looking for new friends. We can easily feel embarrassed if we think we have too few friends or if a friend moves on when we don't want them to. It helps to know that everyone has phases in life when friendships aren't going as they'd wish, or when they don't have people in their life they'd call friends – it's normal!

.... What is your personal story – are friends important to you?

How many friends do we need?

We might envy those who have a large circle of friends but how many do we really need? Many of us have no more than one or two close friendships and even go through phases of not having any. Research reminds us that it is not the number of friends that counts but the quality of the relationship. It can take time to find and build friendships worth investing in.

.... What can we bring to our current or future friendships?

Friendships can change

Often, friendships don't last longer term as we all change over time and friends can grow apart. At different points in our life, we might find we need to make new friends. Our ability to make friends can also change, depending on a number of factors. For instance, if we're in a new school or workplace, it might be easier or harder for us, depending on our own response to change and how we fit in. It could be that we found making friends relatively straightforward in childhood, more difficult in secondary school or Sixth Form and then perhaps easier again. Others can find making friends a challenge throughout life. It's unhelpful to judge ourselves on whether we make friends with ease or not, just as there is no 'good' or 'bad' number of friends to have.

.... **What might make it difficult for someone to form a strong friendship?**

Some friendships never take off

An experience common to us all is trying to start a friendship but then finding it doesn't go anywhere. People drift away, cut us off or give us mixed messages, sometimes responding to us and at other times ignoring us. This needn't be seen as a sign of failure. Instead of being hard on ourselves, we can take pride in reaching out and making the effort to try to find friends. If it doesn't work out, so be it. There will be other opportunities to make friends, if not now, then at different stages of life.

.... **What are some of the reasons why friendships fizzle out? What feelings come up if we lose a friend we'd hoped to keep?**

Strong friendships help us grow

Social research tells us that we don't usually make friends when we go out looking for them. Instead, friendships usually evolve when we join an activity or a group that we care about for its own sake. Turning a casual acquaintance into a friendship may require some work. If we tap into an interest we share with someone else, a friendship could grow.

.... **Have you tried making friends by joining a group or a club? If so, how did it go? If not, what would hold you back from trying this approach?**

Learning how to form friendship bonds is a social skill we can build

Research into social groups also tells us that almost everyone goes through stages when they can't seem to make friends. This can feel painful. It is easy to blame ourselves, imagining it must be something to do with who we are. Or perhaps we tell ourselves it will always be like this. This kind of thinking is harmful to us and we need to change the message we give ourselves. Instead of seeing ourselves in a negative light, we can acknowledge that finding friendships that work almost always takes time.

.... **Listen in to your 'self-talk'. What are you telling yourself about your potential for making friends? Can you give yourself encouragement?**

Times when friends are hard to find

Making and keeping friends is a life-long process. We all go through good phases and more difficult ones. Sometimes, friendships are very difficult to make. Loneliness can set in, and we can yearn for someone to share with. Being on our own can be something we all have to go through for different reasons, but it doesn't last forever. When we're short of friends, we can make the effort to find things we like to do and get involved with others who share our interests. The important thing is to never give up - there are all sorts of ways to connect with people. If we put in the work, we will be rewarded!

.... **What are some of the reasons why we might find ourselves without friends?**

Ups and downs in friendships

Once we've made a good friend or more, it is likely that we'll experience some ups and downs. Even within a mutually supportive, solid friendship, conflict can flare up or a misunderstanding arise. When this occurs, it never helps to assign blame or simply end the relationship in a moment of anger or hurt. Instead, we need to confront the issue with a willingness to work it through. If we can try to understand it from different perspectives, forgiveness is usually possible and our friendship becomes closer and stronger.

.... **What are some of the issues or reasons for conflict that can come up in any friendship?**

Envy and competition

Just as in sibling relationships, envy and competition can feature in friendships. For instance, we might feel like equals at the beginning of a friendship but then either one or the other does something or gets something that provokes envy. Competitive urges can then come to the surface. Or perhaps other tensions arise linked to feeling left behind or left out. Particularly painful are those times when a close friend forms another friendship, and we feel at risk of losing out. These challenges are difficult for everyone to cope with. It can help to make time to talk with someone we trust so that we can work out how best to bring it up with our friend. Or, if we are the one who is envied, we can think about how to approach this.

.... **What kinds of experiences could lead to envy and competition?**

Knowing when to end a friendship

From time to time, we may need to let go of a friendship. Knowing when to do so can be difficult to judge. For instance, if a friend is making choices that we feel uncomfortable with, we can try to talk to them about it. If this doesn't bring about a change, then it might be best to move on. It can be a little painful to break up a friendship but ultimately we need to do what feels right.

.... **What are some of the choices a friend might make which could cause us concern? How do we let go in a way that is not too hurtful?**

Mutually enriching & supportive friendships are worth the investment of time!



Personal qualities needed to make friendships work

All relationships rely on our willingness to develop essential qualities, as outlined below. Self-reflection and learning from experience are an important part of this.

Empathy and kindness often go together. When we try to see things from the other person's perspective, it is possible to empathise with their point of view or relate to their experiences. If we practice empathy, we feel a stronger connection with others. It also makes it more likely that they'll show us empathy too. When we can build a deeper understand what things are like for someone else, we generally feel more compassion for them and treat them with greater kindness. Being empathic means we are less likely to judge or blame others.

Boundaries

In everyday life, we think of boundaries as demarcating physical space such as a hedge around a public park or a border between countries. However, there is another type of boundary which is linked to our friendships and other relationships. We all have the right to personal space and privacy which is a way of describing relationship boundaries. Even when we are in a close friendship or relationship, our privacy and personal space should be respected. This includes what we say as well as what we do. For instance, we wouldn't expect potentially embarrassing comments to be made or to be asked intrusive or unwelcome questions. We show our respect to others by treating them just as sensitively.

Reflection

When difficulties arise in friendships, we learn to pause and reflect on the situation rather than react and risk saying something that might make things worse. It can help to find either a trusted adult or another friend to talk things through with. Life is complex and all friendships and relationships will go through ups and downs. It is important to be able to reflect on breakdowns or misunderstandings and find a way to move forward.

Forgiveness

We can all say something we regret or act in ways that can upset others. As well, our feelings will be hurt from time to time. This is an unavoidable fact of life. We need to develop compassion so that we can look more closely, better understand the rupture, and repair it. Putting in this emotional work enables us to let go and move on. Forgiveness can take time and practice – perhaps a very long time if the hurt is deep – but it can help to remember that we all need to be forgiven sometimes too.