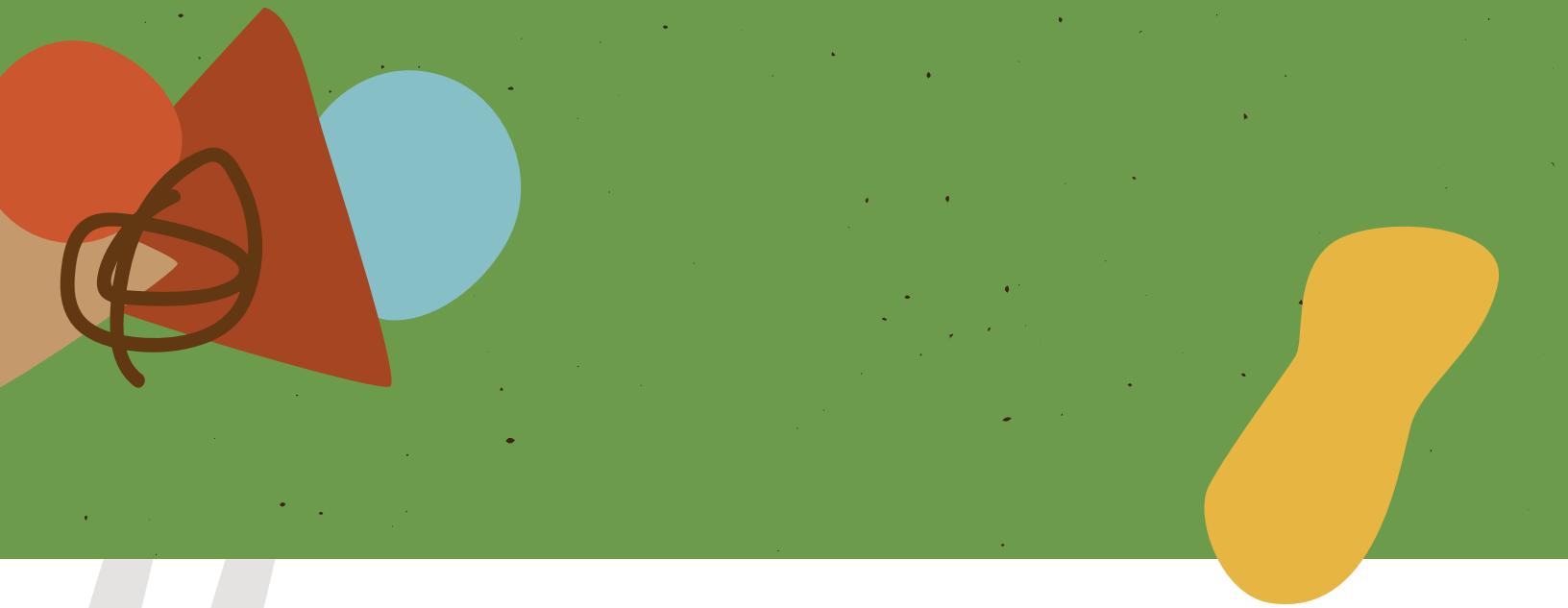




PARENT GUIDE

Loneliness



“There are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally.”

G.K. CHESTERTON

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The final season of ***The Summer I Turned Pretty*** took the world by storm in 2025—and while the show centers on romantic love, there's another relationship at play: the friendship between main character Belly and her childhood best friend Taylor. They are portrayed as consistently supporting one another throughout heartbreak and complicated family dynamics, leading some to label theirs the "**real love story**" of the show. Perhaps that's because good friends can be hard to find, especially in the tumultuous teenage years.

We all want to see our kids find healthy, supportive, and fun friendships at every age. But the latest report from the World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection says that teenagers are **the loneliest people in the world**. They discovered that between 17-21% of 13- to 29-year-olds reported feeling lonely, with "the highest rates among teenagers." The unfortunate winner in this statistical category **has long been elderly people**, but this teenage generation is flipping the script. Before we can combat the teen loneliness epidemic, we need to understand it, first.



Why is teen loneliness on the rise?

Despite the constant digital connection available to most teens today, many describe themselves as socially isolated. That's because loneliness is not the same thing as being alone. Instead, it's a *felt* experience—one that can happen even in the middle of a packed schedule, a phone full of notifications, and a slew of in-person social interactions. So what's to blame for this epidemic?

Teenagers **know** they spend too much time on social media. But at the same time, 74% of them say that spending time on social media platforms *does* help them feel connected to their friends and peers.

Because of this, there is pressure for our teens to be accessible to their friends 24/7, and parental guardrails can help teenagers drift into boundary-less media use.

But teens are not *just* talking with their friends online. **A recent report from Common Sense Media** found that more than half of today's teens converse with AI chatbots regularly. Artificial intelligence is becoming a fixture in many teens' lives. Some AI chatbots encourage users to relate with them romantically, which can lead to all sorts of problematic outcomes (check out our episode of **The Conversation Starter** for more on this topic).

In an **interview with Boston public radio station GBH**, Dr. Gene Beresin, author of *Ways to Help Your Lonely Teen*, suggests that both excessive screen time and excessive real-life scheduling make teen loneliness inevitable.

They're booked 24/7, from school-aged kids through high school and even college. There's pressure to achieve academically, to play sports, and to help others. It goes on and on. It's not like when I was growing up, when the weekend was boring, and I would get on my bike and ride around and try to find a pick-up basketball game... The teenage brain needs time to process experience... Put the phones down, take a walk in the woods, use creative arts—which I can't stress enough. It brings out what's going on in young people in a very effective way.

Teens, Social Media and Mental Health

Most teens credit social media with feeling more connected to friends. Still, roughly 1 in 5 say social media sites hurt their mental health, and growing shares think they harm people their age

BY MICHELLE FAVERIO, MONICA ANDERSON AND EUGENIE PARK



Could it be that teenagers are lonely because they don't have space to simply... make friends?

We all want our kids to soak up their teenage years. Joining a baseball team, a theater production, or the high school band can foster some of the best friendships in your child's life. But even beloved extracurricular activities can become a net negative when we don't leave room for margin and balance.

Ongoing loneliness can result in anxiety, depression, self-harm, or suicidal ideation. That makes stepping in to take the temperature on your child's emotional health essential.



How do today's teens make friends?

Everything about teenagers can feel like a mystery, from **their emotions** to their obsession with online influencers we've never heard of. We certainly don't want them to feel lonely, but we may not know how to encourage them in friendship. What drives teen friendships today? How do our kids find friends, and how do they keep them?

The Pew Research Center has found that even in a loneliness epidemic, many teenagers *have found someone to lean on*: **64% of teenagers** say they have one to four close friends. These relationships are a promising signal for their future, as **teenagers with healthy friendships** are less likely to experience depression, anxiety, and poor self-image in adulthood.



Friendship green flags

Most everybody is looking for the same things in a friendship: acceptance, belonging, support, and fun. Here are some of the biggest "green flags" when it comes to your teen's friendships:

- **Fostering identity and independence:** The teenage years help us develop a **sense of self**, from accepting our bodies to using our own judgment to make choices. As teenagers grow in identity and independence, they rely more intensely on their peers and less on their parents. This pulling away might feel painful to you, but it's natural, even healthy, for your teenager to learn who they are outside of your family dynamic.
- **Offering support and acceptance:** Even as teenagers figure out who they are, they want to fit in. Finding friends who support their current interests and future dreams has a positive impact on their self-esteem. Even more importantly, they're looking for friends who will accept who they are—quirks, faults, and differences included.
- **Bonding over healthy shared interests:** Friendship is built on commonality. Some teens bond over Taylor Swift (or any other pop princess of their choosing), while others are texting about the latest hit show. Some are chatting while they play each other in video games, and others are bonding with their teammates on the bus on the way to a game. This is why shared hobbies and activities play such a vital role in teen friendships. They get to explore their favorite things in community with others.



Why teens keep—and don't keep—their friends

Despite so many cultural and technological changes, there are still lots of similarities between how the older generations made friends as teenagers and how teens do today. Specifically, friendships often grow at school, in youth groups, on sports teams, through extracurriculars, in neighborhoods, and through mutual acquaintances.

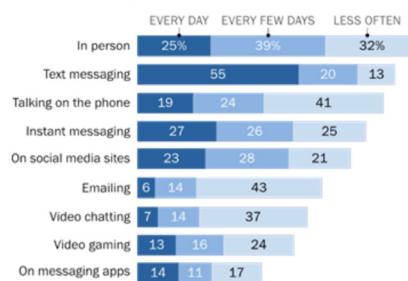
But the internet has opened up a new world of potential friendships for all ages. About **60%** of 15-17-year-olds have made at least one friend online, primarily through social media or online video games.

But research shows that teenagers aren't using the internet to make new friends nearly as much as they use it to keep up with their existing ones. **Only 25% of teens** get to see their friends in person apart from school daily, so they use smartphones to fill in the gaps. In fact, 41% of teenagers say they get in touch with their friends "many times a day."

But if finding friends is straightforward, keeping them can be anything but. "Teen drama" is more than just a TV genre, as most parents will know all too well. **Studies show** that only about half of adolescents' friendships are maintained over a school year. Blame it on the prefrontal cortex. It is the part of the brain that is responsible for rational decision-making and impulse control, and it won't be fully developed until your child reaches age 25. Couple that with intense emotions brought on by hormonal changes, and the fact that teenagers are still in self-discovery mode, and the roller coaster makes sense!

More Than Half of Teens Text With Friends Daily

% of all teens who spend time with friends...



Source: Pew Research Center Teens Relationships Survey, Sept. 25-Oct. 9, 2014, and Feb. 10-March 16, 2015. (n=1060 teens ages 13 to 17.)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



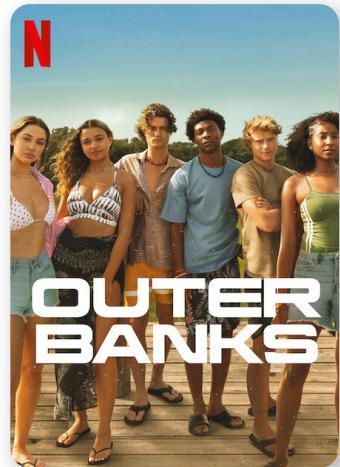
What pop culture teaches teens about friendship

Adventures, tension, and mischief galore—hit teen dramas are advertised that way for a reason. Some of the most popular shows in recent years include *Riverdale*, a murder mystery show where the “core four” bond over their shared scary experiences; *Euphoria*, a racy depiction of high school where drugs, sex, and trauma abound; and *Outer Banks*, a treasure hunt with a side of tension between the haves and have-nots. Other coming-of-age takes on the teenage years include Netflix hits *Ginny and Georgia* and *Never Have I Ever*, which both show just how complicated it can be to navigate family life, friendships, crushes, and academics all at the same time.

Are there beautiful moments of friendship in these shows? Absolutely. *Outer Banks* gives the audience a look inside friendships that have been rock-solid since the third grade, and depicts a brotherhood that stands up against some serious foes throughout the seasons.

But there's also a huge amount of conflict, secrets, cliques, and escapades in these dramas that make the “normal” middle and high school experience seem rather tame. When our kids watch these shows, what do they learn? Are they hoping for a wilder and more adventurous life than the one they're currently living? Do they feel the pressure to find a ragtag crew of friends or a bestie for life, like all the main characters seem to find effortlessly?

There's no way to know except to talk to them. Pop culture—especially paired with thoughtful questions—can bring powerful insights into how your teenagers think and feel about their own friendship world. But it's not the only source we should draw from.



What does the Bible say about friendship and loneliness?



The Bible has plenty to say about loneliness, community, and friendship. Jesus tells his disciples that there is no greater love than someone who lays down his life for his friends. He embodies what true friendship is: sacrificial love. He invites us to follow his example.

Consider the way we're called to make each other better in Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 highlights the importance of friendship during hard times: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up."

We see the power of unconditional love in Proverbs 17:17: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." Proverbs 13:20 reminds us of the importance of choosing our friends wisely: "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm." We're also warned about the influence of bad friends in Proverbs 22:24-25: "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared."

While the Bible is full of instruction and wisdom about friendship, it is also full of accounts of real people experiencing painful emotions.

Scripture is full of experiences of loneliness. King David's emotions are captured throughout the Psalms, moments of deep joy and sorrow. Psalm 25:16 documents David's despair while he was fleeing for his life from Saul, crying out to the Lord: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted." The Psalms are not just full of pretty poems, it is full of honest accounts of David's fear, loneliness and anxiety. These passages can offer great comfort to teens who wonder if God cares about their loneliness. It gives them language to express those feelings back to the One who can understand and empathize with them perfectly—Jesus!

Even Jesus experienced loneliness. As he sat in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, he articulated the profound dread, anxiety and loneliness he was experiencing in anticipation of his death in Matthew 26:37 saying, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." Only for his disciples to fall asleep and for him to be by himself, again.

This is an account of Jesus' loneliness that Christians are familiar with. But Jesus did not just have a *moment* of loneliness; His life was *marked* by it. Isaiah 53:3, a prophecy about the coming messiah, said that Jesus would be somebody familiar with loneliness: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." He knows what it means to be lonely.

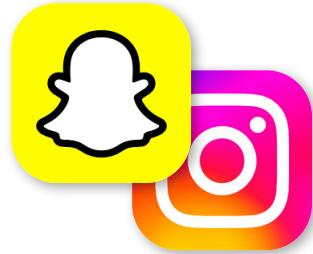


What if my teen isn't making friends?



Finding the root of teen loneliness

It's a scenario no parent wants their child to face: they see a cool party on **Instagram** or see their "best friends" hanging out together on Snapchat, and realize that they weren't invited to join. Or maybe you're dealing with a different problem: your teen doesn't mention the **Snapchat** or Instagram story... because they never mention having friends, at all. You wonder if they go through their days alone at school, eating lunch without friends by their side, and sitting in the back corner of the classroom.



Boundaries and restrictions

Some teens are allowed to have smartphones and social media accounts, while others aren't. Curfew times vary. Co-ed hangout rules differ.

There's just a *lot* of variety in the way each kid experiences their teenage years, and sometimes, those with stricter boundaries miss out on certain experiences. That's not inherently bad. But it can be... complicated. *Sometimes parental restrictions are at the root of teen loneliness.* When this is the case, parents must be open to careful, discernment-led compromises.

Different life experiences

Some teens have never been kissed, others already have a string of exes in their wake. Some have never even been in the presence of drugs or alcohol, much less tried a **vape pen**, **opioids**, or **marijuana** themselves. Other teens have already experimented with all of it.

In the minds of many teens, these experiences (or lack thereof) can put teenagers into two categories: those who are "mature" about topics like sex and drugs and those who are "sheltered" or "naive." If your teenager is feeling left out because they're not participating in illegal activities or maintaining sexual boundaries, be proud of them and tell them so! Holding on to their own convictions and standards in the midst of so much social pressure is not easy.

But if your teen is feeling left out of what they see as "rites of passage," or if they aren't able to develop a sense of independence away from you, parents should consider prioritizing experiences that cultivate independence and confidence.



Drama, drama, drama

Has your teenager experienced past friendships as an emotional tornado? If blocking, unfriending, and excluding are a consistent part of their behavior, your teenager getting left out could be the best thing for them—even if it hurts in the moment.

If your teenager is struggling to cut ties, it's okay to support them by limiting their interactions with this group. You could be saving them from further heartbreak and hurt feelings. But in these cases, parents must also prioritize exposure to outside groups of peers who can become their new friends, and in the meantime, fill the void with support and care.

Social anxiety

Some teenagers are shy, introverted, or just prefer being alone. But even the most introverted teenagers need community and friendship. Express to your child that they don't need to win a popularity contest, but sometimes, they do need to "go first" in reaching out and being kind to those around them.

But what about if it goes deeper than shyness? Social anxiety is real, especially in years that can feel harsh and relationally volatile. Instead of forcing interactions that could make things worse, ask your teenager what the next step is that they could comfortably take. Teens with social anxiety can be especially vulnerable to loneliness, so coming alongside them as they look for friends needs to be a parent's priority.

An empty calendar

The exhaustion that comes from overscheduling is real, but so is the isolation that comes from a blank schedule. A lack of activities on the calendar often translates to a lack of friendships and shared experiences. Encourage your teen to get involved somewhere, whether that is church, a part-time job or a team/club with their school. Start with just one and have them commit to it for the duration of a season or semester to see if it is a good fit.

Hygiene issues

This is a sensitive topic, but poor hygiene could be holding your teenager back from the friendships they want most. Puberty hormones don't just bring a slew of emotions—they also bring body odor, acne, and new hair growth. As they enter the teenage years, they have to learn how to tackle greasy hair, bad breath, and stinky armpits. Some "uncool" features like braces or acne can't always be avoided, but unpleasant sights and smells certainly can. Don't let hygiene get in the way of them connecting with others. Bring home a themed soap to try, and make sure they have deodorant and other hygiene products on hand.

Mean teens

Parents tend to assume that their teenagers are easy to be around, but that may not be the case. You might not discover how your teen behaves at school, sports practice, or youth group activities until a leader or another parent brings it to your attention, or you may suspect gossip or bullying from comments you pick up on at home.

Either way, this is an important signal to sit down and have a conversation with your teenager. They don't have to like everyone they've ever met—that's okay. But they *should* treat everyone with respect, kindness, and dignity.

Social skills

Nobody wants to be labeled "the weird kid," but unfortunately, social dynamics in the teenage years can be brutal. If your child sees the world a little differently than everyone else, they might face a lot of cruelty from their peers. Whether this gap is due to neurodivergence, a learning disability, or a lack of social skills, it's worth considering professional help. Therapy or counseling can help your teen feel supported in who they are and how they process the world around them while also providing resources and tools that will help them grow socially.



12 Practical Tips for Helping Your Teen Fight Loneliness

As a parent, you want your teenager to flourish in his or her friendships, both now and for the rest of their lives. So how can you help them do it? Here are 12 practical ways to help them build a firm friendship foundation.

1. Make your home a safe place.

Teenagers face lots of pressure as they grow up, but ultimately, they are still just kids. Make your home a place that indulges the fact that they're still young and offers a haven from the weight of the outside world. They're not too old to engage in playful activities, whether that means a competitive board game, a de-stressing color-by-number session, a family charades night, a family cooking challenge, or a quick game of frisbee or cornhole in the backyard. When you create a safe environment for them to truly be themselves, they may even discover new interests or talents that they can take into the world as they grow up.

2. Engage your teenagers in team-based activities.

Whether it's through sports, arts, or academic and social clubs, teenagers benefit from **being on a team**. Participation in a shared experience builds community, and attempting to conquer a challenge together fosters resilience and persistence.



3. Make friendship a regular conversation topic.

Talk about friendship regularly. Share insights about your own friendships, speak up about positive dynamics in your teens' friendship circles, and express possible concerns with curiosity. Remember: judging your teen's friends can trigger defensiveness. Make casual conversation about friendship a regular occurrence, so that your teenagers feel comfortable bringing it up on their own when they have something to share.

4. Model healthy friendship.

No matter what we teach our teens about friendship, they'll learn so much from simply observing our lives. Identify the positive traits you see in your friends, show your kids that we all need to ask someone for forgiveness sometimes, and show up in meaningful ways for the friendships you cherish most. Teaching your kids that friendships take intentionality can happen without you ever saying a word!



5. Be a good listener.

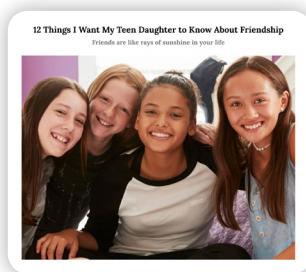
Some parents might wish their teen would talk to them more, while others would love a little more peace and quiet. Whenever your teenager does open up to you, try to listen attentively. Listening can tell you a lot about their interests, social circles, and future goals—but as you listen, you're also modeling the importance of sharing airtime. Hopefully, they'll think of you as a great listener and strive to become one, too.

6. Teach them that boundaries are a good thing.

Whether it's putting down the phone from time to time, saying no to a social engagement because the schedule is too full, or stepping back from a friendship that's grown unhealthy, teenagers are in a prime position to learn how to exercise personal boundaries. While it's hard to set limits, they are essential to creating whole-life balance and protecting themselves from unhealthy relationships.

7. Remind them that popularity is overrated.

Despite what might be depicted in the movies, popularity is an empty goal to strive for. This may feel trite when they're sad that a certain group doesn't like them, but it's **far better to have a few genuine friendships** than to be admired by lots of people but not really known at all. Being totally true to themselves probably won't earn them first prize in a popularity contest, but the friends they do have will love them for exactly who they are—and that's the real win.



8. Let them express their emotions.

Teenagers can have a lot of feelings, but they don't always know how to identify them accurately or handle them in a healthy way. Create space for your teenager to tell you how they're feeling, then help them figure out what to do with that emotion. Emotional regulation is a skill that many adults haven't yet grasped, so if your teenagers can learn it early, the future of their friendships will be bright indeed.

9. Correct their own friendship errors gently.

Teenagers are hypersensitive to feeling judged, but they're also looking to their parents for guidance and wisdom. If you notice your teenager has handled a situation poorly, approach them with curiosity about it. "How did you feel about the way you handled that conversation? Would you do anything differently next time?" Often, they're aware that they didn't respond well, but they're not sure how to fix it. They can look to you to find regulated, wise advice for the future.



10. Remind them of some friendship truths.

- Friendship is fun, difficult, supportive, and scary—sometimes all at once. If your teenager is sharing frustrations about his or her friendships, consider gently sharing some of the larger truths about friendships:
- Building deep friendships **takes time**.
- Some friendships will last a lifetime; others will evolve and fade with different seasons of life.
- Even between the closest of friends, conflict and hurt can happen and how they handle that hurt can save or ruin the relationship.
- Sometimes they'll feel left out, even if no one meant to make them feel that way.
- Even when we try our best in friendships, we miss the mark sometimes, and we have to apologize.

These truths, along with others you've learned in your own friendship journey, will help them see friendship clearly, taking off their rose colored glasses and discovering that while the "real thing" is more complex, it's definitely worth it.

11. Show them how to be generous, not exclusive.

It's perfectly fine to have a best friend, but it's not okay to keep that friend all to yourself. Jealousy is a friendship killer, and sharing the people we love with others creates an important and healthy balance. Help your kids see that it's normal for their friends—even their best friends—to have other important friendships in their lives.

On the same note, cliques don't serve anyone well. The people outside the clique feel rejected and excluded, and the people inside the clique are often fighting for pole position or dealing with drama. Instead, teach your teens to be welcoming to everyone. This doesn't mean they can't spend time with their favorite group of friends—but it does mean rejecting the **Mean Girls mentality** of "You can't sit with us."



12. Teach them that they will always have a friend in Jesus.

No matter what life throws at your teenager, there's one friend they can always rely on. This friend loves them even more than you do! That friend is Jesus. If your teenager is already a Christian, encourage them to dig into the Word, spend time in prayer, and lean on Jesus when they feel hurt, sad, or lonely. If your teenager is not a Christian, you can model this unconditional love to them to the best of your ability (knowing that you're human and will make mistakes)! You can also share about your own friendship with Jesus and how much of a difference it's made in your life.



Reflection Questions

- Has your teenager struggled with loneliness? If so, can you identify any reasons why?
- Does your current family calendar help your teenager thrive? What might you need to add? Remove?
- What kind of friendship have you modeled for your teenager? What do you think they've learned from you so far?
- Is there a biblical truth about friendship that you need to put into practice in your own life?

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever felt lonely? What did you do when you realized you were feeling that way?
- What does the Bible have to say about friendship?
- If your teenager has a friend you're not fond of, ask, "What do you like about your relationship with him/her?"
- If your teenager is struggling to make friends, ask, "What is something you love to do? How do you think you could make friends doing that?"
- If your teenager is dealing with conflict, ask, "How did you feel when _____ happened?"

