



A Parent's Guide to
FRIENDSHIP

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Friendship... is born at the moment when one man says to another, "What! You too? I thought that I was the only one!"

— C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ✓ What is the importance of friendship?
- ✓ What elements form friendship dynamics?
- ✓ How does social media affect friendship?
- ✓ How does scripture explain healthy friendships?
- ✓ How can I help my teen while they are fostering new friendships?

Two Peas in a Pod

Who was your first best friend? Maybe it was the girl you used to walk home from school with, or the boy who always met you on the playground. Maybe they're still your friend, maybe not. Maybe they're just a warm memory in the back of your mind, a reminder of innocent times and the special sweetness of feeling for the first time that you've found a special bond with another person.

In Lucy Maud Montgomery's novel *Anne of Green Gables*, her heroine Anne finds a friend in the neighbor girl, Diana. To Anne, though, Diana is more than a friend; she's a kindred spirit. The idea of a kindred spirit speaks to a connection deeper than the one implied by the word "friend." It suggests equity of souls, a bond between two like imaginations. Connections like this show just how friendship can highlight exactly how important the bonds we make truly are.

Friendship is different from many of the other relationships we have because it's something we choose and create ourselves. No one is forcing the people into the relationship, and it doesn't require anything specific of either member. They stay friends because they enjoy each other's company and like doing things together. These kinds of relationships are essential to human happiness and wellbeing. In many ways, friendships shape our lives more than any other relationships we have.

Why does friendship matter?

According to the [Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health](#), "Numerous studies have reported that being connected to people seems to confer various forms of health benefits...social relationships remain an important health resource into very old age." Friendship helps us feel less alone, and the knowledge that another person cares for us and can help us drastically reduce stress, which has a net positive effect on our bodies.

Not only does friendship physiologically matter, but it's also essential to our emotional and mental development. Friends teach children to value themselves by valuing them, allowing children to mirror their friends and develop positive feelings about themselves while also learning essential

life skills such as trust, communication, consistency, and resilience. Friendships provide a safe space for conflict management and help us learn how to express ourselves.

Children and teens can be themselves around friends in a way that they can't around their parents, which allows for the healthy development of self-awareness and a sense of identity. As they mature into adulthood, friendships create a foundation on which teenagers build their beliefs about what does and doesn't matter and receive regular feedback about their behavior, desires, and goals.

While all of the above health and social benefits of creating friendships are important, there is one incentive for forming friendships that surpasses any other: avoiding loneliness. Though it may sound backwards at first, loneliness is defined by friendship. For a literal definition, [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) defines the feeling as “destitute of sympathetic or friendly companionship.” In a more figurative sense, the feeling of being lonely stems from feeling alone and, oftentimes, misunderstood. We as human beings are not designed to face life by ourselves. Before the creation of Eve, God said of Adam, “It is not good for man to be alone” ([Genesis 2:18](#)). Loneliness is a feeling that eats away at us, causing feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.

An article published in the [Annals of Behavioral Medicine](#) explained that “As a social species, humans rely on safe, secure social surroundings to survive and thrive. Perceptions of social isolation, or loneliness, increase vigilance for threat and heighten feelings of vulnerability while also raising the desire to reconnect.” In other words, when we perceive that we are alone, we become more aware of our potential vulnerability—be that physical or social. *Feeling* alone gets our hackles up, which has repercussions the longer we feel that way. The article goes on to say that continued vigilance for social threats negatively affects physiological functioning, sleep quality, and general healthiness.

A desire to ease feelings of loneliness is built into our human nature. That's why friendship is such an essential piece of the human experience. Speaking from a purely biological perspective, friends form our packs—they are our protection and our community.

The less lonely we are, the better people we have the capacity to be. Friends teach us how and who we want to be, they form what kind of people we become, and they are the foundation on which we build our social lives as well as our sense of self.

Reflection: At what point in your life have you felt loneliness? How did you work through that feeling? What sorts of friends do you have currently in your life?

How do friend groups affect teens?

Friends can come in pairs, triads, or even a whole pack. Friend groups can be both deeply beneficial and seriously dangerous, depending on the health of their individual members. In [an article for The Atlantic](#), Lydia Denworth draws a comparison between teenage friend groups and two scientists' experiments with mice. In the test, the two scientists randomly assigned the mice to be tested alone or in the presence of their peers, and tested half as juveniles (the equivalent of adolescents) and half as adults. The mice were given alcohol, and in the presence of other mice, adolescent mice drank more than they did when they were alone. In adults, there was no difference in the amount that they drank. The experiment led to the conclusion that mammals' brains are extremely susceptible to peer influence during adolescence.

Groups can encourage young people to pursue pleasure and intensity of experience, which is often harmless. Roughhousing, running, yelling, and other rambunctious activities are common to especially young adolescents. As they grow older, activities evolve to include the sharing of secrets, deep conversations, and more structured events like parties and sleepovers.

However, there is the possibility that groups will encourage individual teenagers to seek out more dangerous activities, such as drinking and drugs. The above Atlantic article stated that teens are unlikely to try drinking or drugs for the first time by themselves, and that most teenage experiences with substances are the result of trying to impress or fit into a group that is partaking in those activities.

This doesn't mean that if your student has a friend group that they're automatically going down the path of risky behavior. Instead of fearing for your student's choices, encourage them to clearly be able to state who they are and what they believe in so that if they are faced with a situation that they are not comfortable with, they are more easily able to say no. Another great conversation point to bring up with your teen is whether or not they are around the kind of people who would place them in that kind of situation. If they are, ask your teen if that's really the kind of person they want to be influenced by.

Reflection: What are some positive and not-so-positive experiences you have had while hanging out with a group of people? How have you faced pressure from peers in the past?

What about “best friends”?

There are some people that we “click” with more than others, who we consider to be our best friends. Though these relationships can come and go, their presence reminds us that we are uniquely loveable. Sometimes best friends last years, or even a lifetime, and become just as important to our identity and sense of self as a spouse or children. While not everyone has a best friend during all of their phases of life, when this type of friend is present, it is an intimate, deep connection that has a distinctive impact on a person’s life—especially teens who are learning to define their identities.

Many parents face concerns about their children’s best friends. What if they’re too exclusive? What if they become someone around their best friend that they wouldn’t otherwise be? What if they feel closer to their best friend than they do to family? These are all valid concerns, but it’s important to remember that having a best friend is normal and healthy. Best friends teach children how to have a significant relationship with one person, which not only prepares them for a potential spouse, but allows a level of trust and vulnerability to develop that might not be found in a group or with family. Having a best friend is an impactful relationship that can be extremely fulfilling. However, as a parent, it is always wise to note any change in your teen’s behavior that aligns with a new close friend entering their life. Sometimes everyone needs a little reminder that true friends don’t change who you are on the inside, and should instead uplift the good qualities you already have and make you the best person you can be.

Reflection: Who was your first best friend? How did that relationship make you feel?

How is social media changing friendships?

Gen Z and Gen Alpha are growing up in strange times, when friendship no longer requires the physical presence of another person for them to qualify as a friend. Online friends are becoming more and more common in the digital age, and it's normal for teenagers to feel they've found a community in an online space, be it Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Tumblr, or somewhere else. All these platforms are designed to foster a type of community; they encourage comments and expressions of appreciation in the form of likes, and they support dialogue and the same kind of mirroring one would find in an offline friend group.

Social media allows students to develop their relationships with their in-person friends more regularly as well. A [Pew Research Center study](#) reports that "Six-in-ten teens say they spend time with their friends online every day or almost every day, compared with 24% who spend time with their friends in person with the same frequency (not including school or school-related activities)." This instant access social media provides has become an important part of friendships in the 21st century. Our ability to connect with others right away can help create friendships that, in some ways, are closer than ever before. We can be available to our friends at all times.

Of course, there are negatives to this availability. Teens can find unhealthy communities online just as they can find unhealthy groups in person. However, it can be easier to access these unhealthy groups because teens don't have to leave the house to interact with their online friends.

There is also the pressure to perform online that isn't necessarily there offline. Peer pressure is magnified by the sheer number of eyes students may feel are on them through social media. The student might become someone different online from who they are in person. There is also always the chance that who someone thinks they are talking to online is not who they are. Safety is always an important factor to keep at the forefront of both you and your child's mind when approaching the topic of online relationships.

Online friendships aren't going away. In fact, they will likely become more common as social media and online interactions become more ingrained in our daily lives. This isn't necessarily a problem; it just underscores the importance of teaching good, comprehensive internet safety to children

and teens, and keeping open pathways of communication to ensure they feel safe and heard should they find themselves in a dangerous situation.

Reflection: In what ways do you currently use social media? How often do you interact with your friends or their posts on social platforms?

What role does family play in friendships?

Though it might not be the first thing most people think of, family is an essential part of friendship, both as an influence and a source. Who our family is determines how we see friendship, how we interact with others, and how we view ourselves in friendships. Parents model friendship for their children, and siblings practice friendship with each other. It's important to recognize family's significance in developing friendships so that influence and family friendships can be developed in healthy, thoughtful ways.

For the first years of their lives, children require constant and consistent care and attention. As they grow older, they begin to share the need for this care and attention with friends. A healthy parent can share the job of fulfilling that need with their child's friends; allowing them to shoulder part of the responsibility of caring for them. Sharing this can look like a child's friends helping them learn who they are and where they belong by trying different activities together, and working with them to deal with failure and rejection. Though it might be difficult to release these responsibilities, it is essential that children begin to develop a social circle beyond the family so they can eventually be ready to move out on their own.

However, family is not just the launching pad for friendships. It can be a source of some of the most important friendships a young person will ever have. As a teen grows from childhood to adulthood, there is an opportunity for parents to form a friendship with them, shifting from a hierarchy to respectful equity with them. Friendships with one's parents can be some of the most rewarding relationships in a young person's life. After all, what better friend to have than someone who's been around your whole life?

The line between parent and friend can be difficult to walk. It can be tempting on the one hand to release the responsibility of parenting and step into a role as your child's closest friend. On the other hand, the burden of parenting may weigh heavily enough that the idea of developing a friendship with your child seems impossible. The balance is found in communication. Keeping open lines of discussion with your student allows them to feel heard and valued as a friend, but also informs your decisions as a parent.

Reflection: If your child told you they needed you to be more of a friend to them as a parent, how would you respond? What are some ways that you can uphold the balance between being a friend and being a parent?

How much physical intimacy is normal in friendships?

A popular online joke is the phrase “kiss the homies goodnight”; a light-hearted reminder to young men to show physical affection to their friends as a way to disconnect from the stereotype that men should not be affectionate with one another. Though the trend is not actually filled with depictions of teen boys kissing each other goodnight, it is filled with small acts of friendship between young men that many generations before may have misinterpreted as romantic or sexual.

This idea may seem ludicrous to these previous generations because of the often emotionally repressive social norms of the 19th and early 20th centuries, or because of a fear of returning to the extreme sexuality that many associate with the 1960s and 70s. Despite the difference in generational outlooks, showing physical affection to friends is far from a new practice, and the concern about it is a distinctly Western one.

Biblically, there is evidence for close, physical platonic relationships. David and Jonathan display one of the healthiest friendships found in Scripture, and their love was described as “more wonderful than the love of a woman” ([2 Samuel 1:26](#)). Judas betrayed Jesus “with a kiss” ([Luke 22:48](#)), which would have been seen as an act of friendship. Paul often ended his letters with the command

to “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” In many Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Asian countries it is normal for people to walk hand in hand or with their arms around their friends of the same sex. Only in the West, which has become undeniably hypersexual over the last several decades, is physical closeness with friends seen as signifying sexual attraction.

That said, there should be boundaries to physical affection within friendships, as there should be boundaries to all intimacy within friendships. As mentioned above, the West is particularly sex-obsessed and questions about sexual attraction will often be present when friends are physically close. For young people who are taught that any feelings for the same sex automatically mean that they’re gay, physical closeness may feed those thoughts and concerns.

As always, maintain open communication. If your son or daughter cuddles or holds hands with their friends, ask them why, and how they feel when they do so Does this kind of thing happen often? For how long? Are they the only ones holding hands in a group or is it a common occurrence? What do they think the difference is between romantic and platonic physical intimacy? These are all questions that can help your teen stay healthy and aware, fostering strong friendships without crossing boundaries.

Reflection: How have you seen firsthand that the West is sex-obsessed? What are your views on the difference between romantic and physical intimacy?

Where is the line between platonic and romantic relationships?

Not only is the West hypersexual, it is hyper-romantic. Every romantic comedy, teen TV show, and young adult novel preaches the same narrative: girls and boys cannot be just friends. They have to fall in love. With changing conversations surrounding sexuality and attraction, the narrative has begun extending to same-sex friendships as well. Friends cannot always be just friends. If they are close, the question of whether or not their relationship is more than platonic is almost certain to be brought up. The insistence that closeness can never be platonic encroaches on the

sanctity of friendship and robs young people of precious relationships they might have otherwise formed if not for the fear that the other person or those around them will “get the wrong idea.”

Not only is this narrative potentially damaging for a young person’s teenage friendships, it has repercussions for later in life. If children are taught that closeness with the opposite gender always leads to romance, that will inhibit their relationships with coworkers, friends’ spouses, and any other friendships that may be formed with the opposite gender. [Psychology Today](#) says of the importance of “boy-girl” friendships: “These friendships can provide a very healthy basis for later male-female relationships. They enable children to see members of the opposite sex as regular people rather than as mysterious, different, and even frightening ‘others.’” Distinguishing the romantic element from opposite gender friendships allows for the healthy development of person-to-person relationships that have no basis in sexuality.

Additionally, it’s essential to remove the romantic narrative from same-sex friendships. Just because media often presents gay relationships as arising from these friendships does not mean that is a given. It is normal for girls to be close with other girls, and boys to be close with other boys. This narrative of closeness equating to romantic intimacy is more often pushed on young men than young women, but both genders have the right to experience emotional and healthy, platonic physical intimacy with members of the same sex. In fact, it is essential to development, and creates bonds that form the foundation for community. Teaching your student that their friendships are valuable even if—and, at times, especially if—they don’t turn into romantic relationships will help them grow, develop, and prepare for future relationships throughout the rest of their lives.

Reflection: How do you approach opposite-sex friendships in your child’s life? In what ways can boundaries be established while also encouraging growth in your child’s friendships with a wide variety of people?

How do I help my teen foster good friendships?

It's been said before, but we'll say it again: communication. By talking with your teen often, you can encourage them to express not only their own feelings about their friendships, but how they think about friendship as an idea—what makes a good friend, what makes a bad friend, why do they like the friends they have, and how they think they could deepen their friendships.

As tempting as it might be to step in and keep unhealthy friendships or groups out of our students' lives by forbidding them to see or talk to certain people, it's important to remember that teens can learn as much from bad friendships as they can from good ones. Encourage teens in unhealthy or even toxic relationships to examine what exactly makes the friendship unhealthy, and ask them about why they may want to leave the relationship when they see it for what it is. Of course, if your teen is in danger you have a responsibility to protect them, but allowing them to have their own experiences and learn from them will help them grow into adults with wisdom and discernment about who they choose as their friends.

Encourage your teens to choose their best friends carefully, to ask themselves questions like:

- ⦿ Will this person support me?
- ⦿ Will they tell me the truth, even if I don't want to hear it?
- ⦿ What do I have in common with this person?
- ⦿ What are our differences?
- ⦿ Why do I want this person as my friend?
- ⦿ What characteristics do they have that will make them a good friend to me?

Friendship is the space where teens begin to understand and decide who they are. As parents, we have the amazing opportunity to help our teens form these relationships, from facilitating “play dates” when they're young to being the “[hangout house](#)” as they grow older. Parents are the models on which children will build their ideas about what relationships are, so it's essential to know what a healthy friendship looks like for yourself so you can help your student step into healthy friendships of their own.

Friendship is the building block on which our children's social skills are built and, in an even larger sense, a major component of what exactly it is that makes us human. Deep relationships like friendships offer a glimpse into the perfect relationship that God desires with us. As a parent, praying for good friendships and healthy boundaries is crucial to helping your child experience the gift that a close friend can be.

Reflection: How have your own friendships shaped your life? What sort of people would you like to see your child be friends with? How can you communicate what makes a good friend to your child?

Closer Than a Brother

Friendship is not something humans invented, it was designed by and is part of God Himself. Before time, the Triune God existed in eternal community with Himself. Each member of the Trinity completely satisfied the others' needs and desires for relationship. Every facet of community exists in wholeness in the relationship between each member of the Trinity.

When God created the world, one of His first acts was to reflect that community in his creation. Each animal was given its equal opposite: a mate with whom it would procreate and reproduce. When God created humankind, he existed in community with them and gave them to one another to form relationships. Adam and Eve existed in perfect friendship with God, mirroring the perfect friendship of the Trinity.

During his life on Earth, Jesus continued to demonstrate perfect friendship in the relationships he formed throughout his ministry. From all of his followers, Jesus selected a group of twelve close friends, people he could trust to carry out his mission and support him in his ministry. From those twelve, he had an inner circle of three—James, John, and Peter—and of those only John bore the title “the disciple whom Jesus loved” ([John 19:26-27](#)). Outside of this group of friends, Jesus also had other significant people in his life, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom Scripture also refers to as those whom he loved. Jesus modeled health in friendships: boundaries with the crowds,

emotional intimacy with a select few, and a reliance on only those whom he knew he could trust. In this way Jesus reflected his own community and friendship with the Father and the Spirit, the latter of whom sustained and supported the friendship of the apostles as they traveled and gave them common ground on which to maintain their relationships.

We learn from Scripture that friendship is built on trust and truth, and protects us from danger. As [Proverbs 18:24](#) says, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” The friends who stick close to us and keep us on the right path are the people we carry through life. These are the friends with whom we mirror the perfect community of the Trinity, and in doing so live out the redeemed kind of friendship that God has created for us to have.

Reflection: What are some examples of friendly acts that you can think of from the Bible? In what ways is Jesus a friend to you as an adult? How can you encourage your teens to see Jesus as their closest friend?

Questions to start the conversation with your teens:

- ◉ Who are your best friends? What about your relationship makes it different from other friendships?
- ◉ What makes a good friend? Who do you know who you think is a good friend to others?
- ◉ What makes a bad friend? Have you had any bad friendships?
- ◉ How do you see friendships portrayed in TV and movies? Do you think the friendships in your favorite shows are healthy or not?
- ◉ Do you have any boundaries with your friends? What are they? How did you decide on them?
- ◉ What do you think Scripture means when it calls Jesus our friend?

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org/give. Thank you!

Sources:

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