

Being a Good Friend – Skills You Can Help Your Child Learn

We all want our children to *have* good friends and *be* good friends, but sometimes we forget that children have to learn *how* to be friends. Through our Assets survey, we know that only 45% of teens here in Arlington report that they have “Interpersonal Competence” – empathy, sensitivity and friendship skills. And when you break that asset data down by gender, 60% of girls say they have these skills, but only 29% of boys! Helping children learn social skills in the elementary years can have a big affect on their friendship skills in the teen years. Here are a few things you may want to think about.

Practicing Friendship Skills

If we want children to have good social skills, we have to make sure they have plenty of opportunity to practice those skills, especially in more informal, unstructured settings.

- When your child has friends over, give them an opportunity to solve their own problems before you offer to help. Learning to negotiate and compromise are valuable skills even pre-schoolers can begin to learn.
- If you do decide to step-in, remember you are trying to help *them* learn, so let *them* own the problem. You can help clarify the issues and identify several solutions, but it is still *their* problem.
- If children are having a really hard time getting along, remember they may be tired or hungry. Sometimes a little break and a snack are all they need.

Helping Your Child with Friendship Troubles

As children develop and grow through the elementary years, friendships become more and more important. As painful as they can be, ups and downs in friendships are inevitable because children are still learning how to be friends. You could:

- Listen, listen, and listen some more. Like all of us, often children just need to know they’ve been heard and that you understand.
- Help children identify their own feelings so they can understand other people’s feelings better. Angry, sad, frustrated, sad are all very different feelings.
- Try not to get emotionally involved in your child’s friendships. For the most part, hurt feelings between your child and their friends are not because kids are “mean and nasty” but because they are still learning *how* to be friends.
- Remember that children are still learning the whole spectrum of friendships. For them, it may appear that you are either “best friends” or “not friends” and this can change dramatically in 24 hours! Talk with your child about all the different types of friendships in your life.

What Words?

We tell children to “use their words”. Unfortunately, we often forget to tell them what those words are. Help children with *specific* suggestions for what they could say in a given situation and then role play the situation so they’re comfortable with the words.

- If your child has been invited to someone’s house and she doesn’t want to go, help her figure out some gentle words to use in declining the invitation.
- If someone is teasing your child, he could say “Stop, you’re hurting my feelings” or “You are making me so angry!”
- Help your child understand that body language and tone of voice are very important too.
- Make it clear that hitting, kicking etc. is ***never*** OK.

Setting a Good Example

Finally, even when we are most unaware, children are watching what we do, what we say and how we relate to other people. There’s nothing more powerful than a positive example!

The Assets Approach is a researched-based plan that is guiding our whole community in making sure ALL our children have what they need to become healthy, caring, responsible adults. After

decades of research, the Search Institute (www.search-institute.org) has named 40 positive experiences, opportunities, relationship, attitudes, skills and values that have a powerful, positive impact on young people. Research shows that these 40 “assets” help children and teens make smart choices and grow-up with the skills they need to be strong, caring resilient adults. Together, the 40 assets provide a strong foundation on which children can build their lives.

For more information about the practical “real-life” application of the Assets Framework, please contact Mary Ann Moran, Assets Liaison at mmoran@co.arlington.va.us or (703) 228-1671.