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# THE FRIENDSHIP FORMULA

*One day they're BFFs, the next day they won't talk to each other. Your teen's friendships are complicated, unfixed, and absolutely vital to their social development. To understand what's going on behind the scenes, you have to understand their stage of adolescence. By Abby Hill*

**W**e are designed to need the companionship of other people. As young children, we select friends based on our compatibility as playmates. During adolescence, friendship takes on a more psychological purpose as young people turn to friends for trust, assistance, and emotional support—roles previously filled only by parents and family.

Developmentally, teens are defining who they are as individuals while still wanting desperately to fit in with peers. Friendships are their way of sorting this out.

Healthy friendships are a reflection of a teen's overall well-being. Teens with healthy friendships are better able to cope with life stressors, such as peer rejection, conflict, and school transitions. Adolescents with good friendships often experience less loneliness and depression, and are more pro-social and cooperative. They do better academically, and having friends may help insulate an adolescent from becoming a victim of bullying. Strong friendships during adolescence also predict a greater sense of self-worth as a young adult.

Many friendships established in adolescence do not withstand the test of time. In fact, most middle school friendships don't survive high school. This is because friendships are built upon trait similarity between friends, and these don't reach stability in the individual until late adolescence. Trait dissimilarities such as popularity with peers, use of physical aggression, and academic performance often cause adolescent friendships to dissolve. Yet, even friendships that end are valuable, as your teenager is learning and practicing what it means to have friends and to be a friend.

Here are some things your teen may be going through depending on his or her stage of adolescence:

## YOUNG TEEN (13-15)

The friendship experience during middle school and early high school is probably the most "dramatic" for teens. Peer influence is the strongest at this time, and the desire to fit in can be overwhelming. School transitions often forge changes



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in friendships, as teens have to coordinate old and new friendships as they move from middle school to high school.

There may be jealousy from the old friends who now feel abandoned. Friendships are intense, yet often fleeting, so making and keeping friends requires a lot of emotional risk-taking for the young teen.

### MIDDLE TEEN (16-17)

Friendships tend to stabilize in the later high school years as middle teens become more self-assured in themselves and in their friendship choices. Yet, romantic relationships may enter the picture and challenge the teen to balance and resolve the differences between friendships and dating relationships.

Friends are highly influential in romantic relationships, serving as advisors and offering support for their friend during the ups and downs of dating.

### OLDER TEEN (18-20)

College presents brand new opportunities for friendships. However, the work of maintaining old friendships from high school and establishing new college friendships requires a lot of social energy and can create stress for the older teen. Making friends in college often takes teens outside their typical friend profile, as selecting friends becomes a matter of availability and survival.

College friends serve as family while the teen is living away from home, sharing living quarters, meals, and transportation, and taking care of each other when one is sick. Finding friends with the same religious beliefs may be particularly important during the college years as the young person is establishing his or her own independent spiritual life.

### WHAT TO DO

Know your teen's friends. Meet them. Talk to them. Know what is going on in their life and in their family. Meet their parents.

Get the friends' phone numbers. This is important if you are ever having trouble contacting your teen. “Friend”

your teenager on Facebook®, Instagram®, Tumblr®, Snapchat®, and other social networking sites so that you can keep up with what is going on with them and their friends. If this meets with resistance from your teen, explain it this way: I respect your private conversations on the phone or face-to-face, but when you are posting on the web for the whole world to see, “privacy” no longer applies.

(Another social media tip: If you don't see certain friends on your teen's page, it could indicate there is a second account you don't know about.)

Have reasonable expectations and accept that your teen will likely have a friend you are not especially thrilled about. Determine what you can overlook in your teen's choices in friends and what you cannot. A friend's drug use is probably a deal-breaker, but gender or academic status may not be. Establish these guidelines and make them clear to your teen.

Give your teen an “out” if they ever wish to cut ties with a problem friend. Agree to rescue your teen from a party gone wrong, and have their back if they need to use the “My terrible parents won't let me” excuse for bowing out of an invitation. Let your teen know that if they ever have a real concern about their friend, it is not violating the friendship to share information with an adult that can help.

The good news is that while peer influence is powerful during adolescence, parents still remain significant social influencers for their teen. Building and maintaining a solid parent-child relationship is the best way to ensure that your teen will select “good” friends.

Consider your teen's friends as your teammates, rather than adversaries, in providing a solid support system for your child. Pray for your teen's friends. Better yet, pray with your teen, for their friends.

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