



A guide to supporting young people with their friendships

**The
Children's
Society**

Adult's guide

Advice, ideas and tips from young people

The Children's Society has been researching young people's well-being for more than 15 years and we have surveyed over 39,000 young people about how they feel about their lives. By hearing directly from young people themselves, we can actually know what's going on in their lives, and work out how best to support those young people who might be struggling.

Every year we publish what we learn from young people in our Good Childhood Report, which you can find on our website [childrenssociety.org.uk](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

Since 2015, we have found that young people in the UK seem to be getting less happy with their friends - something we have explored in more detail in this year's report.

To understand this trend better, in spring 2020 we asked young people aged 8 to 19 in schools and in youth clubs across the country about friendship.

We asked them what adults can do to help them with their friendships, and also what they think doesn't help.



Why focus on friendships?

Our research has shown that friends can have a big impact on young people's well-being.

We know that friendships:

- Are an important part of a child's social development.
- Help young people to discover and form their own identities.
- Help young people to develop autonomy and gain independence.
- Have a positive impact on children's mental health.

But friendships are complex and can be difficult to navigate for young people. So we have created this adults guide to young people's friendships, based on what young people themselves have told us.

Alongside this guide, we also asked young people what advice they would share with other young people about friendships. This advice from young people has been put into a separate guide, which you can also find on our website if you would like to share it with the young people in your life.

What young people told us

From what young people told us it is clear that friendships are complicated and unique. There is no magic formula to make sure that friendships work well.

Some young people were very honest and said they didn't know what would help them.

But lots of young people came up with some very helpful advice for adults on the things that adults should and shouldn't do when trying to help them with their friends.

'I still don't think that I've managed to figure out what makes some friendships really good and what makes some really bad...it's like on a case by case basis. You just have to figure it out as you go along, I don't think there is a magical formula, it's just how your brains click.'

The advice is presented in three sections:

1. Listen

The first section is about the importance of listening when supporting young people's friendships.

2. Act

This section considers when adults should or should not act, and how best to go about it.

3. Build

The last section provides advice on supporting young people to build better friendships.

Listen

We asked young people 'what can adults do to help when you are experiencing difficulties with your friendships?'. A significant number of the comments and advice from young people focused on how important it is for adults to listen.

This first section of the guide looks at the advice young people provided for adults about listening.

'Be there to listen.'

'Listen to the child. If he/she/they are actually going through a tough time with their friends eg being bullied, or are in a toxic friendship, then it's serious.'

'Stop butting in when I am speaking.'

1. Be available

- Be available for help and advice.
- Young people want to know that they can come to an adult if they want to.
- If a young person comes to you, give them space to talk.
- Listen to them, don't probe them for information they are unwilling to share.

'They might want to have some time alone and get the anger out of them.'

'[It doesn't help when adults]...Ask you what's wrong when you don't want to talk about it.'

'Sometimes it just helps to have someone listen to your problems.'

'It's super hard to ask for help from adults. In one way it's not exactly the adult's fault that it's hard to do that, but it shouldn't be as hard as it is I think.'

2. Avoid making assumptions

- Don't take sides or assume that one person is to blame.
- When a young person comes to you it's important to listen properly to avoid making assumptions.
- Don't jump to conclusions.
- If more than one young person comes to you for help about the same friendship, try to give each of them time to share their point of view.

'Adults assuming they (the young person) are in the wrong is not helpful.'

'[It doesn't help when adults]...Take sides or assume what is going on is insignificant.'

'Give everyone a chance to speak, get their point of view, be fair.'

'Not helpful if adults think they know what's going on in the heads of young people. Adults do not always know the full picture.'

3. Don't diminish how they are feeling

Young people told us that it's unhelpful when adults don't take their feelings about their friendship problems seriously.

'Tell you that it'll all blow over. To get over it. To just forgive and forget.'

'Telling us maybe to be strong and it's nothing to get upset about.'

'It doesn't help when adults belittle problems and are patronising when young people try and open up to them.'

'Definitely treat the kids emotions like they're serious. Because they are serious. They're serious to the kid even if it may seem like a trivial problem.'

4. Try not to rush to solutions

- When a child comes to them with a problem, adults can often be keen to offer solutions which suggest they haven't listened properly.
- Young people told us that this is not always helpful or even wanted. Sometimes they just want to vent.

What adults do that is unhelpful...

'...tell you not to interact with them.'

'When they just say "block them".'

'...barge in and try to control the situation straight away.'

'...Adults getting involved...it's good for adults to listen but not talk to the people you are having problems with.'



Act

While listening to young people is the most important first step, young people told us that they understand that sometimes adults need to act based on what they're told.

Some of the young people's comments referred very broadly to adults stepping in and intervening.

However, young people were very clear when, how and why adults should take action. The young people felt strongly that adults should not simply wade in and intervene without being asked. Deciding when to act and when to simply carry on listening needs careful consideration.

The next section of this guide provides advice from young people on the ways adults can take action to help a young person with a friendship problem.

'Not helpful if they ignore it.'

'Try to stop an argument. Talk to both parties to find out why they are arguing and get a resolution.'

'Try to talk to you both and see what's happened.'

1. When not to act

An overwhelming message from young people is that adults should not get involved without being asked.

- Sometimes adult involvement can make a situation worse for the young person, particularly when there is bullying involved.
- Don't assume that the young people involved can't resolve things on their own.
- Sometimes adults take over a situation. This can result in the wishes of the young person being ignored.
- It's ok to monitor and watch, but be respectful – don't invade privacy or break confidentiality.

'...I think that if there are problems with friendships, and nobody is being harmed by the problem, that adults should keep out of it.'

'Leave it alone.'

'Bullying: Not helpful when a teacher says "leave them alone" they just come back and re-bully you.'

'The adult could say something and this could wreck the relationship of the children.'

2. When to act

Only intervene if absolutely necessary.
Young people said it is okay when:

- **The young person asks you.** See 'Be Available' in the 'Listening' section of this guide.
- **You have concerns about a young person's safety,** for example severe bullying or a safeguarding concern.
- **The relationship is damaging:** The word 'toxic' was used by young people frequently to describe damaging relationships. Don't leave young people to flounder in difficult, overwhelming or unsafe friendships. Young people would like help from adults on identifying what toxic relationships look like.

'I think adults can only get involved if the problems get serious (bullying).'

'Let the children figure it out, but if it goes very bad then just tell them they don't need to be friends but tolerate each other.'

'The main thing that would have helped me as a kid and just with friendships in general was actually having somebody to tell me that you can step away from a relationship and not be a bad person. And if your friend is having issues then you can take yourself out of that situation because it's not healthy for you without being a bad person, especially as a kid, you're not supposed to take that kind of stuff on.'

3. How to act

- If it is necessary to act, make sure you do so with the young person's full knowledge.
- The young person should lead on any decisions made about adults intervening in their friendships. If you have listened well you should be confident that your actions are in line with the young person's wishes.
- Even if you're acting in response to a safeguarding concern, ensure that you are transparent with the young people involved as much as possible.

4. Mediation

Mediation is a key skill in conflict resolution – young people told us that it can be helpful when done in the right way.

- Both parties need to consent to it.
- It is not as simple as encouraging both parties to apologise.
- Adults should stay neutral.
- Refrain from trying to control the outcome of friends talking about their friendship problems.
- Meetings should be facilitated calmly.
- Mediation can include adults educating young people about friendships, raising awareness about behaviours and what might have gone wrong.

Young people have also highlighted some unhelpful approaches adults have used to encourage communication between friends.

'To try and sort out the problems with us.'

'Not helpful to say "just say sorry" because they say it but do not mean it.'

'A not useful thing is putting them in the same room and shouting at them.'

Build

What does a good friendship look like? In the Good Childhood Report 2020 we explored what young people thought made a good friend.

They identified a number of qualities:

- Trust.
- Honesty.
- Being kind and caring.
- Understanding and empathy.
- Loyalty.
- Having fun.
- A sense of humour.
- Being yourself.
- Time together.

'You need to remember that you have to put time and effort into your friendship, they are people too and they will also want it to last. But remember if they start saying negative things to you, and/or anyone else, to try to distance yourself or help them see what they are doing is wrong.'

A key message from young people we consulted for this guide was that they would like support from the adults around them on how to build and nurture good friendships. The next section of the guide details the ideas young people have about how adults can do this.

1. Understand the importance of friendships

Friendships are important for our well-being, and have a significant impact on young people's lives.

'They want to have relationships with people their age and an adult being like "I'll be your friend" or like "it's ok, you've always got your family" or something like that, that's not going to make a difference in that kid's mind. They want to have people their age around them and that's what's going to make them feel better.'

2. Share from your own experiences

Young people want to see adults reflect on their own friendships and give realistic advice from their own experiences – it can help to open up a dialogue by sharing.

3. Enable new friendship opportunities

Help young people to make new friends. Key advice from young people in the peer to peer guide was that having friends outside of school, for example in youth clubs and online, can take the pressure off having to rely on one friendship group. Young people thought that a way adults could help when there are friendship problems would be to create opportunities for the young people to spend time together.

*'Be good listeners.
Give advice from
their own experiences.'*

*'Adults can help children
make new friends or
give them advice to fix
their relationships with
their old friends.'*

*'Help them find another
friendship group.'*

*'Supporting your kids' online friendships
and supporting your kids' going to clubs and
building friendships over there, hanging out
with those friends – that is what gets kids
who are bullied at school through life.'*

4. Signpost

Young people made some reference to the role of adults in helping young people to find additional support when experiencing friendship problems.

Alongside this guide, we also asked young people what advice they would share with other young people about friendships. This advice from young people has been put into a separate peer advice guide, which you can find at childrenssociety.org.uk and share with the young people in your life.

Advice and support for children and young people

Young people can also contact Childline for free by calling **0800 1111** or by visiting their website childline.org.uk

Advice and support for parents

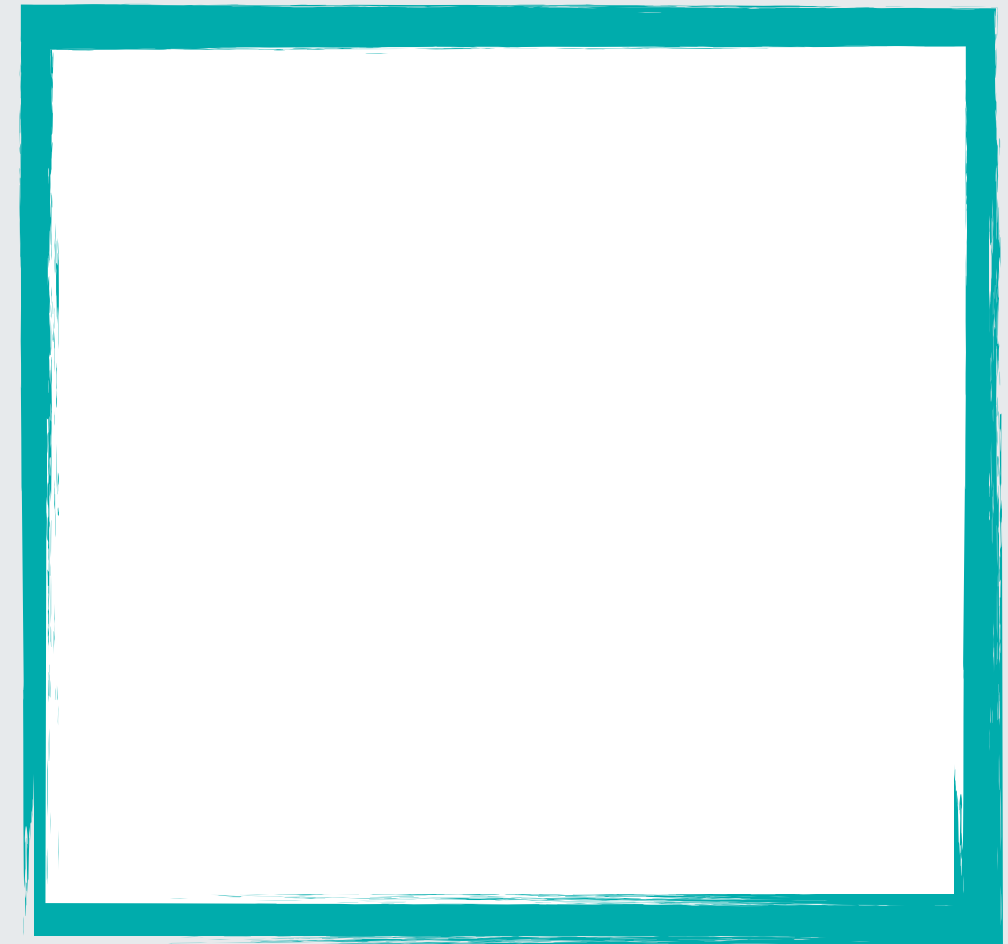
If you are a parent or carer looking for advice or support, you can contact the YoungMinds parent helpline:

youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/

You can also call the helpline for free on **0808 802 5544**.

Reflection activity

After reading this guide, you might like to use this space for your own thoughts about the three most important pieces of advice that stand out for you.



Every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That's why we run services and campaigns that make children's lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

The Children's Society is bringing hope back to children's lives.

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