

Friendship Success at All (Developmental) Stages

10/20/2020

Sarah here. Since September, our blog has focused on various aspects of social interactions, some of which have been impacted by COVID-19 and face masks. A few weeks ago, Lisa shared ideas for being your kids' relationship coach (*Get in the Game, Coach!*). Today, I'm focusing on a related topic: how making friends varies based on developmental stage. I hope that it'll get you thinking about your own experiences growing up with peers and help provide some perspective on what your kids' social landscape may feel like. Armed with your memories, I hope that you'll be able to empathize with your kids about their social experiences and will be an even better relationship coach for them.

Depending on who you are, what you do, the age of your kids and your own interpersonal style, you may or may not spend much time thinking about striking up conversations or making friends. But, take a minute to think about your own experiences initiating conversations and making friends as a kid, as a teen, as a young adult and as an adult. Was there a point at which it felt easier or harder to start conversations with strangers? How about to meet new people or make friends? Now think about how you went about these social endeavors. Did someone explicitly teach you how to initiate conversations, engage others and/or make friends?

These are issues that Lisa and I spend a tremendous amount of time thinking about and talking about with patients *of all ages* and their families. The sticking points and issues that arise differ depending on age, developmental stage and phase of life. Think about little kids: they may be "shy" and may avoid interacting with strangers. Some toddlers may be fearful of adults but may readily engage with their peers, while others are slower to warm up to everyone.



Some elementary school-aged kids make friends everywhere they go. At this age, “making friends” may be as easy as walking up to someone new on the playground. Case in point: this weekend, a little girl approached my daughter and announced, “I like Ariel!” to which my daughter replied, “I like Ariel, too.” The little girl exclaimed, “We *both* like Ariel!” and that was it. They were friends- at least for the afternoon. It doesn’t necessarily take a lot to talk to other kids or make friends for younger kids- sometimes all that is required is being at the right place at the right time. Friendships may not be long lasting or deep, but they’re still enjoyable.



As kids get older, making friends feels different. Friendship takes on a different meaning and kids become more aware of social norms. At this age, making friends may take more time and may revolve around a shared interest or activity. Older elementary- to middle school-aged kids may be more likely to struggle with feeling left out or may avoid initiating or engaging in social situations based on perceptions about feeling “awkward” or “embarrassed.”



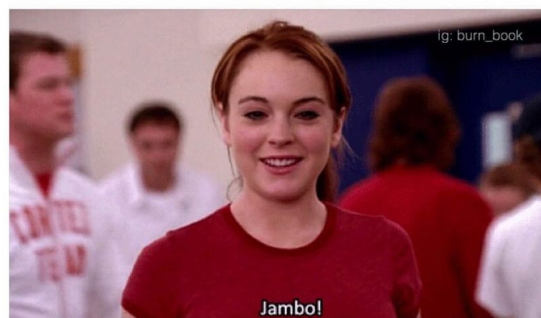
Since many kids have figured out what activities they enjoy by high school, these interests become a natural place to make or strengthen friendships. Electives, extracurricular activities

and part-time jobs can be great for socializing, since teens often spend a fair amount of time doing these things. While teens may be somewhat established socially, they may unexpectedly find themselves isolated if they begin moving in a different direction than their friends or if their friends make new friends or begin dating. I've worked with teens who were happy to keep fishing or playing videogames with friends, but found their friends had "moved on" to other interests, like going to parties or vaping, which effectively ended the relationships. I've also worked with teens who wound up being the third wheel when their friends got boyfriends.



For many older teens to 20 somethings, the next chapter of life may involve starting over. They may be moving away and attending a different college than their friends. They may be working or training in a trade while their friends go to college. Or, they may be in the same place as their high school friends and discover that those BFFs were actually BFFNs (Best Friends for Now). At any rate, this age range often involves meeting new people and making friends.

Me trying to make new friends
"Play it cool, don't make it awkward"
Me:



Remember how I asked you to think about your own experiences making friends? Try to think about the good *and* bad experiences. Remember what it was like to fall flat socially (assuming that you—like most adults—have had some social misfires). What situations were tough for you? Starting up a conversation with strangers? Knowing how to respond when someone else tried to talk to you? Transitioning from being classmates to being actual outside-of-school friends? Setting aside time to do things with friends? Making friends once you no longer had an easy built-in reason for making friends (like being in the same class or playing the same sport)?

The good and bad thing about being an adult is that hopefully you are more comfortable in your own skin, you know who you are and what you like. Hopefully you also can look back at your younger self with compassion and a sense of humor. When it comes to helping your kids with their social relationships, their developmental perspective is key. You know what's hard about making and maintaining friendships for yourself right now, as an adult. You may not remember what life felt like- what was important to you, your strengths and weaknesses and how it felt to make friends- when you were 8 or 14 years old. You also don't know what it's like to make friends as an 8- or 14-year-old right now. In 2020. With the Internet. And social media. Even though I talk to kids of all ages every day, I really have no clue what it *feels* like to be in school (physically or virtually) right now, dealing with COVID-19 restrictions and trying to make friends or sustain relationships.

When it comes to friends, I cannot imagine what it would feel like to have a major academic, social and life transitional year right now- starting Kindergarten, attending 1st grade, 6th or 7th grade, 8th or 9th grade, 12th grade, or being a college Freshman or Senior. There are lots of ways that people's lives have been seriously affected by the events of 2020. Kids of all ages are having an ongoing experience of 2020, too. Based on your kids' developmental stage, who they are and where they're at socially, their lives may feel disproportionately impacted by this year.

So, what does this mean for you as a parent and as your kids' relationship coach? A lot of the standard advice and relationship coaching we may give to kids at different time points just

doesn't apply right now. For example, before the school year started, I bought lunchbox notes for my daughter, to encourage her to practice reading. I quickly realized that 1 pack of notes wasn't usable this year, since it includes stuff like, "Share your school supplies," "Give a friend a high five when passing them" and "Sit and eat lunch with someone who is eating alone." Regardless of your personal feelings about COVID-19 or the resulting school and social distancing restrictions, it doesn't make sense to advise a child to do these things right now. Similarly, I work with multiple young adults who started college this Fall and advising them about how to make friends has been challenging, since a lot of the things I often suggest (e.g., attend various school-sponsored events for Freshman kickoff) aren't happening this year.

So, as with all things: know your child! But, take it a step further and know where your child is developmentally. What is it they would normally be doing socially? What are the normal expectations and rules for that developmental stage? Think about how things may be different right now, given the current circumstances of 2020. Don't be afraid to share some of your epic social successes and failures with your kids- in a developmentally appropriate way, of course. Just don't go too far with over-identifying with your kids- remember that you can't really know what it's like for them. But, you can use your own experiences to inform your perspective and foster empathy, to provide examples and to normalize their experiences. You can also talk with them about their social experiences so you have a better sense of what socializing and making friends are like from their perspective. By combining the information you get from your kids with what you've learned from your own past experiences, you'll be better equipped to coach your kids the way they need you to.