

What About Their Friends?

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Have you ever found yourself asking your kids the following questions?

Why don't you give one of your friends a call?

Why don't you go over there and play with the other kids?

OR

How come you're never at home?

How am I supposed to keep up with all your "friends?"

How do your kids respond when you ask those questions? If you're like most of the moms that Sarah and I work with, you probably get a lot of eye rolling and sighing. You may even get a response along the lines of, "Because." These interactions usually leave both of you feeling frustrated and misunderstood.



But, why are these interactions so frustrating for you and your kids? You're just trying to look out for your kids' best interests, right? You want them to have a healthy, balanced social life. Not staying at home being isolated like a hermit, but not out with friends all the time. You want them to find people who are positive influences that accept them and provide them with support and encouragement.

So, why don't your efforts work? Why do your kids resist when you offer suggestions about their social lives? Is it just because they're kids, and kids disagree with their parents just on principle?

Well, while that may be true for some kids, most kids don't argue with their parents about their social lives just to be difficult.

Ok, I want you to stay with me here. Is it possible that maybe, just maybe your kids are happy with their social lives the way they are? And is it possible that what they want might be okay?

You and your kids may have different perspectives on what they need in their social lives. A few months ago, I talked a little about introverts and extroverts (Who Are These People? 4/24/2020). Remember, introverts get their energy from having time to themselves, while extroverts get their energy from interacting with other people. Introverts may enjoy being around other people, but they need breaks to recharge. Extroverts may need some alone time, but they need social interaction to recharge. Most people are some combination of the two, but your kids likely lean more one way or the other.

Whether your kids tend to be more introverted or extroverted influences their social relationships. Your introverted kids may have a few close friends. They may not want to go to parties or large gatherings, or they may not be inclined to invite friends to go places (although they would happily go if invited) or. They may also spend a lot of time alone. That does not mean that they don't have quality friendships or that they don't have real friends. Remember, being around other people, especially in informal social situations, requires a lot of energy from introverts even when they're having a good time.



On the other hand, your extroverted kids may seek out a number of close friendships and acquaintances. They may constantly ask to go places with friends or to have friends over. While they may talk with friends via electronics, they also enjoy physically being with their friends. You may have a hard time getting them to stay at home (or to come home after they've gone somewhere with friends). But, their tendency to have larger friend groups doesn't mean that they don't have close, meaningful friendships.



So, what happens when there's a mismatch between you and your kids? If you're an introvert, your extroverted kids' need for frequent social interaction may feel overwhelming and you may not understand why they won't just quietly go do something by themselves. If you're an extrovert, you may feel frustrated and bewildered by your introverted kids' resistance to approaching groups of kids or to inviting friends over. Many of the parents that Sarah and I see struggle with just this kind of mismatch.

So, what do you do about it? First, you need to determine whether your kids are actually struggling socially or if they are just different from you in terms of their need for social engagement. If they seem to have a hard time connecting with others or are truly experiencing social isolation, they may need help or intervention aimed at helping them learn and practice the skills they need to develop successful social relationships. However, most kids don't actually need intervention.

One way to find out if your kids are struggling socially is just to ask them. It's very tempting to go by what you observe. If you see your kids spending a lot of time in their rooms, it can be easy to assume that they don't have friends. If your kids are always wanting to go out, it can

lead to the conclusion that they don't want to be around their family or that they aren't taking care of other responsibilities. But those conclusions aren't necessarily accurate. Instead of jumping right in with suggestions about your kids' social lives, have a conversation first. Ask about friends and what they like to do together. Talk with them about how their friends support them and vice versa. Also, ask them about whether they enjoy being around other people or if they feel more enjoyment having down time by themselves.

If you and your kids have an introvert/extrovert mismatch, it's even more important that you listen to what they have to say about their friendships. You know your kids- if they're resistant to hanging out with large groups, is it necessary that do so? If they love going out with friends, is there a way to balance that with their other responsibilities at home or school? Showing your kids that you understand their social needs and helping them identify areas where they may want or need to make small changes is going to get you a lot farther than lecturing them or putting them in awkward social situations. Overall, keep this in mind: If your kids are happy with how their social relationships are going, isn't that the goal?

