

## What If I Don't Like My Kids' Friends?

7/27/23

Lisa here. This week, I'm talking about a topic that comes up often but frequently seems to throw parents for a loop- *your kids' friends*. Every parent wants their kids to have healthy, happy friendships. You want your kids to be good to their friends and to have friends who are good to them. But what happens when your kids have friends who are, shall we say, *problematic*? That's when talking to your kids about their friends can become very complicated.



Problematic friendships can mean a lot of things. Sometimes kids make friends with other kids who are mean to them or who are a bad influence. But sometimes it's more subtle. You may notice that every time your child hangs out with their best friend, they become surly or start giving you attitude when they usually don't. Or maybe they ignore their siblings or are mean to them when their friends are around.



As a parent, you may struggle to figure out how to have productive conversations about problematic friendships. Do any of these phrases sound familiar?

- "Just because your friends are all doing something, doesn't mean you need to do it too."
- "You need to stop hanging out with them."
- "That kid is not really your friend."
- "I don't like how you act when you've been with that friend."
- "You don't need to keep hanging out with them. You won't even be friends with these people in a few years."

If you've found yourself saying any of these things, you've probably also seen your kids roll their eyes, give you a blank look, or agree to your face and then turn around and go play with that same friend. So, why don't these statements make a difference?

It's because you decided for your kids who their friends should be. This does not work! Yes, there are times when you have to put your foot down about someone your kids are spending time with, but in most cases, your kids will feel defensive and will disregard any statements that feel judgmental or like you are trying to pick their friends.

So, what do you say instead? Instead of giving your opinion about their friends and telling them what to do, have a conversation with your kids. In therapy, Sarah and I often help kids and teens clarify the kinds of friendships they want and how they want their friends to treat them. We then help them identify which friendships already have those characteristics and which do not. When they identify the problem areas in their friendships *themselves*, they're more likely to make different choices about who they pick as friends. As parents, you can ask these kinds of questions too. The key is not to jump in and point out which friendships are falling short. Let your kids come to their own conclusions.



Once kids realize that a friendship is not healthy for them, they may not know how to exit or change the friendship. Notice I said they may just need to change the friendship. Just because some aspects of a relationship aren't great doesn't mean your kids need to scrap the friendship entirely. Think about kids who always get into arguments when they play together for too long. That pattern doesn't mean they shouldn't play together anymore; it just means they need shorter playdates. For the kid whose friend says mean things to them, coach them on having a conversation with their friend first and then seeing if the behavior changes. If things don't change, then they'll likely need to end the friendship.

If your kids do need to exit a friendship, they may need help figuring out how to do this. Sometimes, just drifting apart will work- if your kids make themselves less available, they can ease their way out of a friendship. You can also help your kids address problems with friends in the moment. If your teen is with a friend who is being hurtful, they can let the friend know they don't appreciate what they're saying and then they can come home. Over time, the friend will either change their behavior or will realize why your teen doesn't want to hang out.

As you likely know, drifting apart will sometimes be impossible. So, it's important to talk to your kids about how to have difficult conversations with their friends. You can coach them on how to express their feelings about what's been going on in a friendship and why it needs to end.

Although friends have a bigger influence as your kids get older, you don't become irrelevant. Conversations around values and what's important in your family are still important. For instance, if one of your kids ignores or is mean to their siblings when their friends are around, you need to have direct conversations about this behavior. Having general conversations at other times about the importance of family and of siblings sticking by each other will help counteract that tendency to turn on each other when friends are around.



Remember that just because your kids realize that some of their friends may not be good for them does not mean that they will immediately cut off all those friendships. They may need a little time to end or change problematic friendships. As long as nothing dangerous or abusive is going on, you can give them some time to make some new, healthier choices. No matter what, remember that your kids' friendships are important to them. If you approach conversations about friendships with openness and respect for your child's perspective, these conversations will go much more smoothly.