

What if *My Kid* is the Bad Friend?

8/18/23

Lisa here. I hope you got a lot out of Sarah's last two blog posts on talking to your kids about sex. I know it can be a tricky topic for many families, so I hope you found those posts helpful. This week, I'm revisiting a topic I covered a few weeks ago- your kids' friendships. In the 7/27/23 post, I talked about how to talk to your kids when they have problematic friendships. While many parents found that topic helpful, it raised an additional question:

What happens when *your kid* is the problematic friend?



A lot of conversations about kids' friendships revolves around helping them manage difficulties with friends and helping kids improve general social skills. But who helps the kids who struggle to be good to their friends? Let's be clear, there are kids who have deficits or disorders that make it hard for them to understand and/or react appropriately in social interactions. There are a lot of resources out there to help kids who struggle in that way to develop or compensate for the skills they are lacking. That's not who today's post is about. Today, we're talking about the kids who have developed an age-appropriate social understanding but who, for some reason, still struggle to be a good friend.

It can be hard to detect when your kids are the ones causing problems in their friendships, especially as they get older and you have fewer opportunities to observe their social interactions. But here are a few clues that this might be the case:

- Your kid seems to frequently be involved in drama in their friend group.
- Your kid begins to be excluded from activities with their friends.
- Other kids seem wary of your kid when they're around.
- Your kid's complaints about their friends are vague or seem to frequently place blame on others for problems.

The above observations are not definitive signs that your kid is the one being a bad friend- they are just signs that something is going wrong in their friendships. So, how do you figure out the problem? Here are a few suggestions to help you have that conversation with your kids.

Find out how your kids view their friends. Ask them to tell you about their friends, including what they like about them and what they don't. Ask questions about how they get along, particularly if there tends to be a high level of drama in the friend group. How your kids answer these questions can give you some insight into how they treat their friends. If your kids are full of complaints about their friends or they talk about how often their friends get upset with them because of something they say or do, this is an indicator that you need to investigate whether the friends are at the root of the problem or if your kids might be at least part of the problem. A major sign is if your kids do not take responsibility for their actions (e.g., "They always get mad at me because they don't know how to take a joke" or "I only did that because they wouldn't play what I wanted to play.")

If you get the sense that your kids are the ones not being great friends, resist the urge to give them a lecture about being a good friend. Just like trying to talk them out of being friends with kids that you're not a fan of, a lecture about their behavior is going to make them shut down. Instead, you can take a similar approach that you take when you're trying to get your kids to see that other friendships are unhealthy. Talk to them about what they want in their friendships and how they figure out if someone is a good friend. The addition to this conversation is helping them think about what kind of friend *they* want to be.



When Sarah and I talk with kids about their own friendship behaviors, we get them to describe how they want to behave toward their friends, as well as how they want to think and feel about their friends. We then get kids to compare their current behavior with their ideal behavior. While we may point out inconsistencies or ask clarifying questions, we focus on helping kids identify their own problematic behaviors. Again, we help them come to their own conclusions.

For most kids, it's way harder for them to accept that they've been behaving badly than it is to identify other kids' bad behavior. So don't be surprised if you get some resistance or excuses during this conversation. That's ok. You can reassure your kids that you are just trying to help them have the healthiest friendships possible. Remember, you will have spoken to them about their desires for their friendships, so you are just supporting them in reaching those goals.

You may come to realize that your kids' intentions are not matching with their behavior. Help them brainstorm ways to change how they talk to their friends or react to situations. If you begin to see a pattern in which their behavior seems more impulsive or that they have a hard

time controlling themselves, you may need to seek help from a mental health provider who can teach them specific skills. But in many cases, just having this conversation can increase your kids' awareness of their own behavior, which will allow them to be more intentional in their interactions with their friends.

It may take multiple conversations to help your kids realize that they are the ones who need to change their behavior in their friendships. Once they come to this realization, it may take time to see an actual change. That's ok- change takes time. Check in with them regularly to see how things are going. You can help them problem-solve situations that come up or just provide support for their efforts. Keep the lines of communication open and your kids will feel comfortable talking with you about their friendships. Remember, you are a great resource and support.

