

Friendship:

Intermediates often mean turbulent times for friendships. Young people who were inseparable through primary school suddenly - or slowly - begin to travel different paths. Often this is a one-sided affair, in which one preadolescent drifts away while his/ her friend is left feeling confused, hurt, and extremely alone. As parents, we feel helpless, knowing there is no good way to intervene.

On the other hand, it is equally worrisome when our preadolescent chooses a new friend. And it's downright chilling when it's a person of the opposite sex. We wonder what kind of influence this new friend will be. This is a more serious concern during preadolescence than it was earlier.

There is no doubt that preadolescents' friendships greatly affect other areas of their lives: school work, use of unstructured time, clubs to join, or out-of-school groups, even their behavior at the local shopping mall. And, of course, everyone knows that preadolescent friendships gave birth to the phrases:

"Everyone else gets to go..." and, "No one else's parents said..."

We find ourselves in the paradoxical position of aching for our children to have friends, but hoping they don't get too involved with them.

So that you and your child both survive

Intermediate friendships, here are some guidelines.

First, expect to be left out. As friends begin to replace family as the center of preadolescent life, many parents feel hurt and / or anxious about their child's growing sense of secrecy surrounding their friends and their activities. (This secrecy, by the way, is nonexistent if you happen to be the driver of a car containing a load of preadolescents.) This does not mean that you should be less demanding in ascertaining where your preadolescent is going, with whom, and for how long. It does mean, though, that you won't be let in on what they did once they got there.

Part of this is a power play - keeping you in the dark gives kids a sense of power over you and over their own lives. This is hard to accept, but your son

or daughter is growing up and does need a “personal life” separate from you and the rest of the family. Nonetheless, an early and strict curfew, a strong stance against unsupervised gatherings, and a constant vigilance against long periods of unsupervised time is necessary during the preadolescent years. Parents need to work together to decide about dating, parties in homes, and other preadolescent social events. Remember, a preadolescent is not a full adolescent and is not yet ready for adolescent responsibilities.

This is a good time to encourage out-of-school activities. Sometimes cliques at school pressure your child to be part of a group or push your child out of a group. Participating in activities with kids other than his / her regular classmates gives a preadolescent a chance to be a “different” person. Making friends and experiencing success outside of school might make school time friendships a little easier.

During the preadolescent years, work extra hard at building self-esteem. Whether a preadolescent is losing a friend or gaining new ones, the best coping skill we can offer any child is a strong sense of self-worth. This is not easy to come by, since preadolescents have a lot of trouble believing in themselves and their own good qualities. Build on your child’s strengths rather than highlight his or her weaknesses. Of the last 10 comments you made to your preadolescent, how many were positive? Nothing helps a child fight peer pressure or cope with the loss of a friend better than feeling good about himself or herself.

If your child is in the midst of a longtime friendship that is falling apart, the best you can do is stand by and be a good listener. It is devastating for us to see our children hurting, but taking sides or intervening is not appropriate, nor will it help. Preadolescents do survive these hurts, especially if they know we are there to listen to their pain.

All friendships have ups and downs. Children need to learn that being “best friends” isn’t always smooth sailing. People have differences of opinion and even get angry with one another, but they still care for each other. This is what’s going on when we get involved in those “I-hate-her-she-is-so-stuck-up-and-how-could-she-do-this-to-me” conversations. As parents we must help our kids see that one problem doesn’t ruin a relationship, but stubbornness might. Preadolescents have a lot of spats and falling-outs, but often the friends are back together again in a short time.

Friends are people who accept us as we are. They listen, they don't needlessly criticize, they back us up when we're right and pick us up when we're down. Be a friend to your preadolescent - some days kids feel you're the only one they have.