



February's Focus on Friendship

Friendship

A normal aspect of healthy social development is the formation of friendships; “having friends and socializing in school is an important part of a child’s development and happiness”

(Family Education, 2009). Friends hang out together and make each other feel wanted; each feels a sense of belonging, or that they fit in. “Being part of a group can help people develop relationship skills, feel close to others, get and give support, share ideas, discover what’s important to them, and have fun” (KidsHealth, 2009). Student social groups may range from as few as two individuals to many times that number and are typically of

the same age and gender. Mutual interests often bring students together, like extracurricular activities, sports or school assignments. Students form groups because they feel “they have a place where they are welcome and supported, and where they can be themselves, quirks and all”

(KidsHealth, 2009). As commonalities come and go, so do formed friendships as new interests develop and different friends are made. “People can move in and out of different groups and can even be part of several at the same time”

(KidsHealth, 2009). When social groups are healthy, the attitude is



“Fitting in with peers becomes a vital part of a child’s life.”

(Family Education, 2009)

welcoming and flexible. This group of friends may stick together but they also accept others into their group. When groups become restrictive, developing rules as to who can and cannot be a part of their group, our society defines this as a “clique.”

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Special points of interest:

- ♦ *Flourishing despite clique pressure.*
- ♦ *Reaching out to others at lunch time.*
- ♦ *Harry Potter’s friends.*
- ♦ *The critical role of a school’s culture.*
- ♦ *How to help students recognize negative friendships.*
- ♦ *What’s great about finding and keeping friends.*

Valentine’s Day Pressure

The month of February has traditionally focused on Valentine’s Day and parties to celebrate love and friendship. While Valentine’s Day cards are often delivered to the entire group of classmates celebrating in the early elementary grades, what happens with the upper elementary and junior high students?

Some students may be with a group of friends and would like to leave the unhealthy clique they’ve found themselves in, while others are on the outside wishing they belonged. For students, Valentine’s Day can be a day of uncertainty, ridicule and sense of not belonging. The card and gift giving day can illumi-

nate the less popular students, heightening the awareness of feeling left out and not accepted. “Whether you’re on the inside or the outside, cliques can make your life tough” because both have their own pressures (KidsHealth, 2009).

Flourishing Friendships

It's important for students to flourish in an environment that may include cliques which they are bound to encounter at one time or another. Here are some teaching tips for students:

1. You must know yourself. "Now is a time for getting in touch with your values, interests, and beliefs" (KidsHealth, 2009).
2. Find activities that you enjoy. Don't be pressured to do something you don't want to



"Help put rejection in perspective and shed some light on social dynamics."

(KidsHealth, 2009)

do and don't give up something that makes you happy.

3. Don't put limits on friends and friendships. Don't miss out on possible friendships due to a clique's pointless restrictions.
4. Say something. Learn to stand up for yourself and for others. Remember: Students that belong to cliques may be insecure. Keep this in mind and you will feel confident in doing the right thing.

5. Express your ideas. True friends want to hear your thoughts and opinions.

To be a friend, you must treat others in a manner that is "respectful, fair, interested, trustworthy, honest, caring, and kind" (KidsHealth, 2009). In other words, be the kind of friend you would like to hang out with. "Many books, TV shows, and movies portray outsiders triumphing in the face of rejection and send strong messages about the importance of being true to your own nature and the value of being a good friend, even in the face of difficult social situations" (KidsHealth, 2009).

Mix It Up Lunch

Lunch time is an opportunity to be with friends and is often filled with laughter; for others, it may be a time of loneliness and feeling less than wanted. "It's this practice of self-segregation and categorizing peers in rigid social boxes that makes the lunch hour the most dreaded time of day for many kids" (Teaching Tolerance, 2009). Last year a group, known as *Teaching Tolerance*, challenged schools to

"Educators make a difference every single day when they provide students with a model for how to live with respect, compassion, and joy."
(SAVE, 2009)

participate in a program titled Mix It Up Lunch. The goal was to have students meet new people by asking them to socialize outside their normal boundaries by sitting some-

where new at lunch and with someone they did not know. The challenge did not stop with the lunch room. Many schools extended the practice beyond the cafeteria, "wielding its power at pep rallies, sporting events, school dances and anywhere else kids socialize"

(Teaching Tolerance, 2009). By offering students a challenge, many participated in the gesture of tolerance and acceptance of others.

Positive Peers

While peer pressure may have a negative effect, students need to also understand the "benefits to belonging to a peer group"

(KidsHealth, 2009). Peers offer "friendship and acceptance, and share experiences that can build lasting bonds" (KidsHealth, 2009). A student who watches a peer succeed in sports or achieve academically is more likely to remain committed, encouraged and inspired. As

students develop ideas, explore beliefs, and discuss problems, peer groups are there to listen and provide feedback (KidsHealth, 2009). Socialization allows students to build relationships while working out differences. A student's world "will be far less



Encourage students to remain "open-minded and not to discriminate against others just because they look or act differently."
(Family Education, 2009)

rich without peers to encourage or offer moral support"

(KidsHealth, 2009). It's always more rewarding to experience life with friends, even through challenges and embarrassments.

School Culture

A school's culture is often influenced by the administration and teachers without conscious intent. Behavioral and attitudinal examples may create an unhealthy culture that is fueled by negativity. SAVE, a non-profit organization, has listed signals that could indicate a negative school culture:

*A few students tend to control "virtually all student leadership positions" (SAVE, 2009).

*There's a history of violence and



"All Educators have an amazing power to influence."
(SAVE, 2009)

intimidation; cliques are viewed as inevitable.

*"Little or no social interaction exists among students across racial, ethnic, or socio-economic class lines" (SAVE, 2009).

*The formation of gangs. Signals are overlooked such as jargon or clothing.

*Authority figures use demeaning terms. "A coach who motivates adolescent male players to run faster by chiding that they are running like "girls" or "pansies" is a coach who, intentionally or not, is encouraging his players in chau-

vinistic and homophobic attitudes" (SAVE, 2009).

A respectful school culture sets up activities and organizations "that appeal to a wide array of student interests" (SAVE, 2009). Students and staff feel secure in reporting problems or concerns as there's a network of trust established. "Students from different backgrounds and sexualities regularly interact outside the classroom"

(SAVE, 2009). Staff is committed to having a respectful, nurturing environment where students are provided with "realistic, yet authentic challenges" (SAVE, 2009).

A Closer Examination

Some students may not realize when a clique they belong to has become unhealthy. The requests and demands may be subtle and gradually lead to pernicious behaviors. How can we help students recognize an unhealthy group of friends? Here are a few questions for students to ask themselves as provided by KidsHealth:

1) Do you ever feel bad about the way you're acting or treating others?

2) Do you conform to rules based on appearance, disabilities, race or ethnicity?

3) Do you feel your friends will reject you if you don't do what they say?

Members of cliques usually follow a leader, often the most popular student in their clique. Cliques usually involve rules, spoken and unspoken, and pressure to conform. Students belonging to a clique may feel frightened to leave or to speak up.

"Do you feel like you're auditioning for the sequel to 'Mean Girls'?"

(KidsHealth, 2009)

Students must understand that a "normal" friend base allows you "to socialize and hang out with others outside the group without worrying about being cast out" (KidsHealth, 2009). More importantly, healthy friendships allow you to be yourself!

Harry Potter & His Friends

Harry Potter is world renowned but it's "not only because he's a powerful wizard but also because he's loyal to his friends" (Teaching Tolerance, 2009). Harry and his friends have something students do not have: the power of magic. They can use magic as a means to influence the way others are treated. However, there are principles that may offer the same advantages to those without the power of magic.

Confidence, conflict resolution and speaking skills enable people to get along better and can affect people's attitudes and feelings similar to potions and spells sometimes portrayed in the fantasy novels students enjoy (Teaching Tolerance, 2009).



Are there things we may do that seem "magical" to others?

Ask students how their time at school may impact others and how it affects who they are and what they'll become. Illustrate that no one can prevent knowledge acquisition or the ability to positively affect others.

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Daphne Morris, M.Ed., met Trevor Romain in 1992 when he visited a school as a guest speaker. Impressed by Trevor's profound and meaningful impact on students, Daphne joined The Trevor Romain Company in 2006. A former elementary school principal, Daphne holds two Master's degrees in education.

February Q&A

Q: Some students want to change in order to be more well liked and to fit in with "popular" students. How can educators encourage healthy self-concepts?

For many students, friends become the most critical relationship in upper elementary and junior high, equaling or surpassing even those in their family. "Friendships are a part of normal adolescent development, and can help a child to develop a sense of belonging" (Family Education, 2009). Some students feel they need to change themselves in order to be accepted by the "popular" crowd. While some changes are worthy, others can be unhealthy. As you're aware, the "popular" students offer leadership, a boost in self-confidence for students desiring their friendship, and make others feel wanted. While leadership is admirable, the "power" of attracting others can often lead to clique behaviors (backstabbing, taunting, etc.). "It is essential to educate children on the importance of accepting others" (Family Education, 2009). A clique does not have to be a negative force. Educators can help students understand that there are healthy ways to connect with friends while still maintaining a truth to self.

Resources:

Family Education. "Your Child and Cliques." <http://school.familyeducation.com/education-and-issues/schools/58337.html> (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Coping With Cliques." http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/problems/cliques.html (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Helping Kids Cope With Cliques." <http://kidshealth.org/parents/positive/talk/cliques.html> (accessed February, 2009).

KidsHealth. "Peer Pressure." http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/problems/peer_pressure.html (accessed February, 2009).

SAVE (Students Against Violence Everywhere). "Just For Educators." <http://nationalsave.org/main/justforeducators.php> (accessed February, 2009).

Teaching Tolerance. "Harry Potter." <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=621> (accessed February, 2009).

Teaching Tolerance. "The School Cafeteria." <http://www.tolerance.org/parents/kidsarticle.jsp?p=O&ar=16>

