



SANTA MARIA
COLLEGE



Friendships

Santa Maria College is nestled in picturesque gardens overlooking the Swan River in Attadale, Western Australia. It is a Years 5 - 12 Catholic school for girls, both day and boarding with 1300 students including 152 boarders. Santa Maria offers a quality education inspired by Jesus Christ and the vision of Catherine McAuley.

This eBook is a compilation of blogs on Friendships from our *Knowing Girls Blog*. Our *Knowing Girls Blog* is a fortnightly blog that provides parents with useful information about raising girls.

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5 TRUTHS ABOUT

FrIEnDShIp

THAT WILL SAVE YOUR
KIDS A LOT OF PAIN

The new school year is all about change. New teachers, new classes, new expectations and new routines. For many kids, it means a new school. It's natural that these times of transitions cause excitement as well as a few nerves.

What worries kids most is, “Will I have friends?” It worries parents too. Nobody wants to imagine their child sitting alone at lunch time feeling awkward and wishing they were at home.

Friendship isn't something we usually teach kids. Most kids just learn the social norms and muddle through. That's the way we did it when we were kids. However, we can teach kids that friendship is a skill set and we can create realistic expectations that might reduce future heartache.

So, what are some of the things tweens and teens need to know about friendship?

① Friends serve a purpose

Because we romanticise friendship, we don't like to think about it as functional. The School of Life argues that this is a mistake. They say that we actually enhance our friendships when we understand that they do serve a function. These are some of the functions friends serve:

- Having someone to share your vulnerability with. These people help us recognise that our weaknesses and quirks are human. We are normal. These are the people we take a risk with and share our secrets. They do the same in return and together we realise how special and loveable we actually are.
- Having someone to have fun with. We all need an outlet from being serious. We need people who share our interests and hobbies. Our fun friends might also make us laugh and relax. They allow us to be a different version of ourselves.

- Having someone to think with. We think more effectively about serious issues when we can think aloud with someone else. Sharing and growing ideas about the world and who we are is an important aspect of friendship and being human.

Explaining the purposes of different friendships will help your child realise that having one BFF (Best friend forever) isn't practical. You need lots of friends from both school and outside of school. The best thing about being clear on the purpose different friends serve is that kids can then also identify which friends serve no positive purpose. Which friendships have become toxic and which friendships should be let go.

② Having friends is different to being popular

Early adolescence is the time when kids move away from looking towards their parents for guidance and approval. They start to look towards their peers. Peers become the compass determining what's cool and what's not, what matters and what doesn't, and most importantly...who matters and who doesn't.

Being popular is about being accepted by a lot of people. The problem is that being accepted sometimes comes at the cost of personal values and integrity. As a result, even great kids will sometimes make poor decisions. We need to guide kids towards authenticity. Authenticity is the point of difference between friendship and popularity. With friends, we can be ourselves. When kids are trying to be popular they will be what is required.

Friendship involves taking off your masks and being yourself. That's what builds connection with other people. Popularity is about putting on a mask to fit in.

③ Your friendships are only as good as your boundaries

Good boundaries make good friends. Our boundaries are our lines in the sand. Our 'What I will and won't accept', our 'What I will and won't do' and our essential, 'Who I am and who I am not'. They are decisions we make with thought, not on the fly.

Setting personal boundaries is hard at the best of times. It's made much more difficult for our kids in their online world. They have grown up in the era of the 'overshare'. They share what they feel, how they look, who they love and

even what they eat with hundreds of people daily. Of course their boundaries are unclear!

Friendship is special. Not everyone should have access to all the intimate details of our lives. Kids forget that because they feel so connected online. Adults also encourage that attitude when we say to young kids, "Play nicely, we're all friends here". No, we're not. But we do have to be kind and show respect to everyone.

④ Conflict in friendships is normal

Normal friendships encounter conflict. You'd never know that looking at Facebook or Instagram. Those platforms are like friendship nirvanas. People post odes to their friends. It's all, "I love you to the moon and back." To the moon and back is about 480,000 miles. My dad has an old 1961 valiant with that much on the clock. Just as I expect the valiant to break down and need some care and maintenance, I expect that from friendship too. If we are honest and we manage our boundaries, there will be blow-ups. It's important that we normalise that for kids. Otherwise they see every argument as a crisis.

⑤ Most friendships don't last forever

When a friendship ends it can feel like the end of the world for a child. However, friendships ending is inevitable. We evolve. Our tastes, interests, values and stage of life change. We can't take everyone with us on that journey. We need to make room and time for all the new people who enter our life. This is born out in research. [A study](#) by researchers at Florida Atlantic University found that only 1% of friendships that started in seventh grade, lasted for the full five-year period of the study.

In fact, 76% of Year 7 friendships didn't last a year. That doesn't mean all friendships ended badly. Often, they just drift apart. I think if we told kids that changes in friendship are normal and okay, we'd have a lot less angst and upset. Of course, there may still be some sadness and disappointment. We shouldn't shield kids from feeling bad, it's normal and it gives us the opportunity to teach them how to name feelings, acknowledge them and self soothe.

Kids are growing and changing. Their friends will change too. And that's just fine.

Finally

Talking to kids about friendship is important. We need to do it a little bit at a time and consistently. It's also important that we have these conversations when things are going well, not just when there is a problem. Good friends are one of the most awesome parts of life.

May our kids come to understand that like all good relationships, they take thought, work and respect.



THE QUESTION THAT WILL
HELP TEENAGERS FIND THEIR

TRiBe

The most fundamental desire of a human being is to be loved and to belong. We want connection. For our children, friendship is everything. It is also the thing they worry about most. They want to fit in, but sometimes that need to fit in leads them to ignore the most important question they should be asking themselves about their friends.

Adolescent friendships are complicated

For our tweens and early teens, friendship is especially important. They are starting to distinguish themselves as more autonomous and separate from their parents. However, they don't really know who they are yet. They have bodies that are awkward and constantly changing. They are also developing more abstract thought, so they are questioning life, the universe and their place in it. Everything is changing. It's natural that they strongly gravitate to their peers who are sharing these experiences.

It would be good if this process was all about mutual respect and support but it's not. Competition is born. For some kids, knocking someone else off balance makes them feel more balanced themselves. Frenemies and bullies come to the fore.

This is the time in life when kids also start to create social hierarchy. It is fascinating to speak to a young teen about where they fit in the hierarchy. I mentor a 14-year old who told me, "My group is second from the top and about equal with the sporty kids." When I asked about the 'top' group, she said, "The top group all wear their skirts really short and have boyfriends and they drink". This perceived sophistication is what creates status.

All of these concerns interfere with the process of finding friendships that are authentic and nurturing and fun. Kids get so caught up in asking themselves, "Who likes me? Where do I belong in the hierarchy? Who is having more fun than me?" that they don't ask themselves the most important question.

“People who allow us to be relaxed and confident and open enough to express the version of ourselves that we like best. Those friends allow us to like ourselves.”

Encourage kids to find their tribe

One of the most upsetting things to see at school is a child who is clearly hanging out with the wrong crowd. The wrong crowd doesn't necessarily mean bad kids, it's just kids who aren't a natural fit. There are no shared interests or values, no real connection and no sense of being comfortable. *They are in the wrong tribe.*

We need to talk to kids about choosing the friends who will add to their life rather than making it more challenging. Girls tend to be initially attracted to those girls who seem sophisticated and outgoing. Boys are drawn to alpha males. They are usually extroverts. Our society values extroversion so it's easy to see how this happens. However, often it isn't the right mix and kids know it.

Being part of the 'popular crowd' is depleting. Those groups are often full of very big personalities, competition and drama. There is also a sense of having to keep up. To maintain popularity means to curry favour with a lot of people. To do that you have to wear a mask for a lot of the time. The essence of friendship should be the ability to take off the masks and relate authentically.

What is the question?

So, what is the question we should be asking? Traditionally we ask, "Who do you like being around?" But that's the wrong question. The right question is:

Who do you like yourself around?

Ultimately, that's what we all need to find. People who allow us to be relaxed and confident and open enough to express the version of ourselves that we like best. Those friends allow us to like ourselves.

To find out the answers to this question, you need to ask kids other questions like:

- Who were the people you have felt good around in the past?
- Who were you able to relax and be yourself with?
- What did those people have in common?

Then draw the link for them... "Maybe they are the sorts of people you should be befriending now."

Obviously, your child won't instantly go out searching for those sorts of kids, but it will plant a seed and move them one step closer to finding a tribe where they really achieve connection and belonging.

Schools group kids according to chronological age. That doesn't work for all kids socially. So, fortunately, school is not the only place to make friends. Sports teams, hobbies, co-curricular and service programs are all good places where children might find the right tribe.



When kids have lots of friends in different groups and environments it takes the pressure off their relationships. Having a Best Friend Forever (BFF) is great, but it can be difficult if all your emotional eggs are invested in one basket...or person.

Finally

Ultimately, the best friendships are the ones that enable us to be someone we really like. Hopefully, all kids eventually find that. And once they do, we need to encourage them to invest heavily in those relationships. Like all good relationships, friendships demand our respect, our time and our vulnerability.



GIRLS AND THEIR

EReNiMIES

In schools we talk constantly about protecting girls from harm. We teach them about paedophiles, online grooming, sexting, and the harm caused by drug and alcohol use.

In reality, the more likely destructive influence on an adolescent girl's day to day life is the damage they do to one another in their friendship groups... *Relational aggression.*

Relational aggression is the psychologist's name for what the rest of us call 'mean girls' behaviour, or straight up 'bitchiness'. It is a pattern of behaviour typically played out by school-aged girls, but it is not exclusive to them. In fact, where do they learn it if not from their adult role models? Adults are just more subtle about it.

Chances are, you've experienced relational aggression. You know it when it happens to you. It's an emotional slap in the face and you often feel a sense of shame and confusion. What distinguishes relational aggression from just being mean, is that it focuses on damaging a person's sense of social place. I see it as using relationships as weapons.

Another feature of this form of aggression is that most kids get a turn. You can be in the inner circle one day and then for no apparent

reason, on the outer the next. Groups also work in formation with one another. If a child has been frozen out of one social group, they are unlikely to be accepted by another. It's like watching a sick game of pinball with a confused hurt child being bounced from one group to another, deflected at every turn until it is their turn to be re-embraced by the 'friendship group'.

Santa Maria College psychologist, Jane Carmignani, says that kids often know that what is happening is wrong, but they don't have the language and confidence to stop it, even when they are the one being the mean girl. She says that in her office, girls will tell her about their mean behaviour and show remorse for it. So why do they keep going? The need to be mean comes from a place of fear, fear of not belonging or not being good enough.

This is not to say that girls don't have genuine friendships, they do. Some kids are lucky enough and emotionally literate enough to enjoy relationships with genuine understanding, and empathy. They support one another and spend time sharing common interests. In my experience these kids are usually involved in a lot of sport, have varied interests and are exposed to a lot of different people of varying ages. The focus is on participating and being involved. However, even these kids come face to face with relational aggression from time to time.



“Girls learn from a very young age that when you create exclusion you create inclusion.”

How is this managed?

Relational aggression is incredibly difficult to manage in a school. It is hard to see, it's covert, often innocuous looking, and kids will deny it. It is very frustrating when a girl is being charming to you and you know that she is deeply upsetting another child. Sometimes she will lie to your face so often that she starts to believe the lie herself. A simple example is a girl posting an embarrassing photo of a 'friend' on Instagram or Snapchat. When confronted about it she will say, "But I thought she looked pretty". Where do you go with that?

Relational aggression may include:

- Exclusion
- Gossip
- The silent treatment
- Belittling (Often hidden behind the expression 'just joking')
- Conditional friendship

The first four are self-explanatory, but 'conditional friendship' is more difficult. The child knows there are unspoken rules about behaviour and 'going along' with the group. It is why many lovely girls behave very poorly. Inclusion is incredibly important to their developing psyche and they will do anything to remain within the inner circle. Relational aggression is about power and exclusion and it can be very destructive. It has nothing to do with friendship, yet many people see it as a normal aspect of young girls' relationships. It has become normalised and it shouldn't be. The terminology around it is often softened. It is referred to in schools as 'friendship issues', and in society we say things like, "That's just girls".

Why does this happen?

Part of being an adolescent is finding your place in social networks. Your peers become incredibly important and there is less focus on parents and significant adults. As a result, impressing and belonging become very important. Traditionally boys have achieved this pecking order with physical strength and humour. Girls use their communication and interpersonal skills.

Girls learn from a very young age that when you create exclusion you create inclusion. And if you can knock someone else off balance emotionally, it defines you as balanced. It is an interesting, if not disturbing, phenomena to watch in a school yard. From the cliques of socially elite 'it' girls to the mixed mob of outsiders, there is a power dynamic constantly at play. None of this has anything to do with friendship. Hence the creation of the term 'frenemies'.

Making girls feel personally responsible is about the most effective technique that is used in schools. If the girls can sit with a psychologist or suitably equipped adult, as a group, and discuss what is happening and how it is making each person feel there is a chance that it can be resolved. If not the cycle just keeps on going.

How can parents help?

It isn't all hopeless. This is learned behaviour and learned behaviour can often be unlearned. But there are commitments that need to be made by parents.

We need to:

① **Make friendship cool.**

Modelling by adults is the most powerful way of doing that. Talk about the great qualities of your friends to your kids. Too often we niggle at our friends' weaknesses instead of verbally celebrating their greatness.

② **Explicitly teach kindness, compassion and empathy.**

We know kids have the capacity for these qualities. They are often evident at home or with people of different ages, but they are not being engaged in their relationships with peers.

③ **Explicitly teach emotional intelligence.**

Help kids recognise who is loyal and who is safe. Talk to them about relational aggression. They should be able to recognise it and name it.

④ **Teach kids to be:**

a. Upstanders – These are people who stand up for victims. It's been proven that if you can stand up to a bully for 8 seconds, they are likely to back down. Some kids are stronger than others. We need to make it cool to be strong and able to defend others.

b. Distracters – It is important that kids be able to recognise when a mean moment is coming and distract participants away from it. It's a skill that adults eventually learn themselves, but if kids are given instruction on how to do this it can be learnt more quickly.

c. Supporters – Kids can be encouraged to do something as small as make eye contact with a victim while aggression is happening. That shows the victim that the behaviour is seen and acknowledged. It makes the victim seen and acknowledged. They aren't alone.

⑤ **Carefully manage online activity.**

A lot of relational aggression happens out of school hours, in cyberspace. Kids need a break from their friendship groups.

⑥ **Create opportunities for children to meet lots of new people outside of school and get to know them well.** I love sport for this reason and many more. Team mates are people you have to understand and communicate with. Assumptions about people get tested.

⑦ **Please.... Never say, "That's just girls", or "boys will be boys" for that matter.** We can be better than that. Or at least we can try.



A photograph of two young women, one with blonde hair and glasses, the other with dark hair, smiling and looking at a laptop screen. The woman on the left is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater, and the woman on the right is wearing a striped t-shirt with yellow trim. The background is a brick wall with a window. The text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

HOW TO

ReSpOnD

TO YOUR CHILD'S
FRIENDSHIP ISSUES

Your daughter comes home from school and her heart is broken. Her best friends have told her they don't want her to come to the sleep over they have planned for the weekend. Or your son sees on Snapchat that all his mates are at the skate park without him. To your child, time has stopped and the colour has seeped out of the world. They feel physically sick.

For an adolescent, friendships are incredibly important, often akin to love affairs. In them they find identity and a place in their newly-emerging, social network. Often they share their deepest secrets and their greatest joys.

Every emotion is magnified. Naturally, when something goes wrong it can feel devastating. So what do you do and say when your child comes to you broken hearted and feeling as though their world is crumbling?

① Listen without judging or fixing

The first thing you need to do is remove yourself from any distractions, sit with your child and give them your complete attention. Don't interrupt, or cluck or cry or give agitated body language. Just listen quietly until they have told you the whole story, from beginning to end. Listen without judgment and without trying to fix it.

Comfort your child and validate their feelings, "You were the only one not invited, no wonder you're upset". There is nothing wrong with crying so don't feel as though you have to toughen them up. Crying is an effective and healthy way of regulating emotions. Make sure you have a complete understanding of their perception of what happened. Remember that it is perception. When we recount events we always filter the story with our own emphasis. I'm not saying your child is lying but there is what happens and what we make it mean. There is their side of the story and the other sides.

② Empower instead of catastrophising

How you respond at this point is important. If you react strongly you make the incident into a catastrophe. You may feel like wringing someone's neck, but you can't say that. Don't vilify the other party, they are likely to end up friends again, plus....don't vilify people, your child is learning from you. You may want to wrap your child in your arms and sob, you can't do that either. When you overreact you create fear in your child. They start to question their self worth and your faith in them.

Your child will be looking very carefully for your reaction, so show them that you believe in them. Send the message that you think they can handle this. Bad things have happened before and 100% of the time they have survived. Let them know how loved they are and that fact will never change.

3 Distract

Now is the time to distract, not with light, colour and action, but with the comfortable and familiar routines of home. Don't let them dwell. Home is a sanctuary, let it be that way. Kids draw energy and power from the familiar and from safety. They need you to act normally. Don't pretend that nothing has happened, but stay on track. Don't loosen boundaries to compensate for what is happening at school. For example, don't encourage your child to sleep with you or avoid sporting commitments. Normality is important. If everything is good and normal at home, the rest of the world can be conquered.

4 Press Pause

The temptation now is to call the parents of the other children or rush down to the school. You feel distressed and you think that taking action will make that feeling go away. That's normal and understandable, but don't. Wait. Stop and sleep on it. You're right, it may help you escape your negative feelings, but it won't necessarily help your child.

When you rush out and try to solve the problem for your child two things definitely happen: You disempower your child. They already feel their social power has been taken. You can't now take away their individual power. You take away their opportunity to grow.

Hurts like this one will happen countless times in their life, help them to be prepared. Kids who are supported in resolving their own conflicts develop a sense of their own competence in this area. They believe they are capable. Sometimes making those calls or going up to school will make things worse.

So just take a breath.

5 Problem solve together when everyone is calm

When your child is calm and has had plenty of time to move out of their big emotions, then it's time to talk. As tempting as it will be to tell your child how to handle the situation, try not to. If you want them to grow into an adult who can make good decisions and act instead of purely reacting, you have to allow them to practise. So guide, but don't take over. Obviously, the younger the child, the more guiding you will have to do. Be aware, there is no instant fix, but you can help your child navigate the drama.

Well known Australian Psychologist Andrew Fuller says that first your child needs to decide whether they want to fix the friendship or not. It's a valid point, unhealthy, unhappy friendships shouldn't be maintained. Maybe new friends is the answer.



What if it doesn't blow over?

Friendship at this age is intense and sometimes fiery, but conflict tends to be short lived. In most cases these upsetting incidents will be resolved fairly quickly by themselves. That said, if the incident is not short lived, or constitutes bullying, then you do need to work in partnership with the school.

Finally

Talking to your kids about friendship is really important, not just when things are going badly. Teach kids to recognise what makes a good friend. When things are going well ask them what they like about their friends and what they like about themselves when they are around those people. Expose them to a large variety of potential friends in lots of different contexts. And encourage them to have a lot of different friends for all the different aspects of their lives. Adolescents change a lot and so do their friends. Emotional literacy in this hugely impacting sphere of their lives is essential.



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