

You've got a friend

Márianna Csóti's practical exercises are designed to help young people explore the concept of friendship

In, *Every Child Matters*, the Government recognises the importance of young people developing positive relationships – this helps them find other people rewarding, get on with people and work as a team. Teaching friendship skills in a formal way can especially help young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder since these conditions cause deficits in social functioning.

Either follow the exercises with young people as one large group – or ask them to work in small groups and discuss their answers at the end. Suggested answers are given to help you prompt in times of need.

What are Friends?

Joining her friends in the common room before class, Conchita made her face look sad and disappointed. Immediately, Rachel and Mandy went up to her and said, 'You didn't get it, did you?' Rachel put her arm around Conchita and said, 'I'm really sorry. If anyone deserved it, you did.'

Conchita could hide her smile no longer. Then she laughed with joy.

'You really got us going there!' Mandy said with a sigh of relief mingled with envy. She wished she could be talented like Conchita.

Conchita hugged them both. 'I'm so happy. Art school! It's all I wanted. Let's celebrate tonight.'

Task 1

Think of Conchita's friends and your own and talk about:

1. What are friends?

A friend is someone with whom we share affection and regard, usually outside sexual and family bonds. A friend is someone we like, or love, and respect and they us. A friend is someone we enjoy being with.

2. What are friends for?

- For support, for doing things together - such as sport - and for companionship.
- For sharing good and bad news. For celebrating and commiserating. (Conchita's friends were ready to give their support when they thought Conchita had bad news and when they knew it was good news.)
- For putting your friend's feelings before your own sometimes. (Like Mandy did - even though she was envious, she was happy for Conchita.)
- For recognising when someone needs help.
- For warmth and comfort. (Conchita's friends were physically close - they hugged.)
- For joking and teasing. (At first Conchita pretended she had bad news.)

3. What qualities do you think a friend should have?

Friends should be: loyal, faithful, reliable, sympathetic, trustworthy, helpful, understanding, honest, intimate – and fun!

4. Is it important to have things in common with friends? Why?

Yes. To have a sense of belonging, to share experiences, to talk about things that won't bore the other person.

Relationships in adolescents are built on having similar social power, interests, abilities and life experiences. These similarities help to form a close-knit social network offering much support and understanding.

Josh arrived just before class, walking past Conchita and her friends who were huddled in a group. Those three were never far away from each other. Discussing boyfriends, make-up and diets, no doubt, Josh thought.

When he walked into his first lesson, Josh saw Nick and Dave sitting on the desks. 'All right?' Josh said as he threw his bag on the floor beside them, not bothering to watch as it slid into place beneath the desks.

'Done the essay?' Nick asked. He'd tried but had given up.

'Of sorts. The football was more interesting,' Josh replied. He'd had a hell of a weekend with his parents rowing and then turning on him. He hadn't been able to concentrate. The rows always upset him.

'Who's for a knockabout at lunch time?' Dave asked, kicking his foot in the air.

Nick and Josh said, 'Yeah, OK.' It was better than sitting around.

Task 2

Please note that Task 2 makes generalisations which cannot be applied to all boys or all girls.

Think about Josh's friends, Conchita's friends and your friends to talk about:

1. What do girl friends talk about?

Girls are more likely to exchange confidences and discuss: personal problems, relationships, their feelings about things that have happened, their feelings about other people, periods, clothes, fashion, make-up, body-size, diets and celebrities.

2. What do boy friends talk about?

Boys are more likely to talk about sport, what they've done, hobbies and films.

3. What do girl friends do when they are together?

Much of girls' time is likely to be spent talking. They might go shopping together, go to each other's houses, see a film.

4. What do boy friends do when they are together?

Male friendships are mostly based on action - boys get together to do things such as play or watch sport or take part in other leisure activities.

5. What is the difference in closeness between Conchita's friendship group and Josh's friendship group?

Conchita shows her feelings and shares the good and the bad times with her friends. Josh does not have any intimacy with his friends. He does not tell them what goes on at home.

Boys don't tend to discuss personal problems or emotional issues.

Task 3

Talk about:

1. How close (intimate) are your friends to you?
(Do you talk about personal things and give each other support or do you only talk about practical things like homework?)
2. What makes some friends close and others less close?
It depends on how people respond to what we say and how we behave - and whether they seem genuinely interested in us or spend all their time talking about themselves. Others may not be able to keep confidences.
3. Often girl friendships are closer than boy friendships. Why is this?
Girls tend to value: warmth, sympathy, kindness, gentleness, cheerfulness.
Boys tend to value: assertion, leadership, independence, self-reliance.
 - People use their parents as role models. If a father doesn't have close friends or show qualities often attributed to women, their sons are not likely to either.
 - Men may spend more time competing at sports and at work which develops skills that are contrary to cooperation and support.
 - Boys may fear homosexuality. They may want the macho image of being a strong, independent man who needs no emotional support and hides weaknesses such as depression and stress.

Task 4

Talk about:

- What sort of (social) support do we get from friends? What do we get out of these relationships?
- Intimacy - a close and caring relationship that develops trust and a feeling of understanding (empathy) between our friend and ourselves.
 - Confidant - we can tell a friend our problems and expect a sympathetic ear.
 - Confidence - friends encourage us and tell us when we are doing the right thing which increases our feeling of self-worth. It helps us cope with difficult things.
 - Practical help - help in everyday activities such as with homework, choosing the right clothes for an interview, lending clothes for a special occasion.
 - Informational help - finding things out for us, telling us things we need to know.
 - Being part of a social group (social integration) - being accepted by a group of friends and taking part in social activities such as outings, dancing, going to the pub, clubbing, swimming, playing squash etc.

Making New Friends

The development of a friendship can be divided into three steps. Talk about what happens at each step as a class or in groups.

Step 1: The first meeting

Gareth meets Daniel at a football match – they happen to sit next to each other. Gareth would like to make friends with Daniel.

1. What should Gareth do to get to know Daniel?
He should smile, say hello, introduce himself, discuss the match and, once the match is over, suggest they meet up the following weekend.

2. What could go wrong?
Daniel might not want to meet up or he might live too far away or he might be too shy to take up Gareth's offer.

Step 2: The next meeting

Daniel and Gareth live in easy travelling distance of a town between their homes and they agree to meet there the following weekend in a pub.

3. What does Gareth need to do to make a good impression?

- He must arrive on time, smile and look pleased to see Daniel.
- He must listen to what Daniel has to say and be interested in him.
- He needs to balance what Daniel tells him with information about himself.

4. What does Daniel need to do to make a good impression?

All of the above.

5. What could go wrong?

- They could say something to put the other off or show off putting behaviour.
- They could find that they have nothing in common apart from supporting the same football team or that they are very different in a major way that they personally cannot overcome – for example, through religion, race, political beliefs, upbringing, wealth, sexuality.
- They might not be able to think of anything to talk about or talk too much, boring the other person.

Step 3: Becoming Intimate

Gareth and Daniel get on well and like each other. But Daniel hasn't quite been honest with Gareth. He has been hiding the fact that his dad and older brother are in prison. Daniel confides this now.

6. How might this secret affect Gareth?

Gareth knows that his mum would not approve of him mixing with someone whose family has been involved in crime. He might be tempted to break off the relationship. But perhaps he too has a secret and he feels that sharing the problems in their lives brings them closer and they find that experience extremely rewarding.

Filtering out of friendship can occur at any of these three stages but if Gareth and Daniel survive the stages they may end up with a close and precious friendship.

Keeping Friends

There are rules friends have to follow and if they break them they risk ending the relationship. So although some young people are good at making friends they can't necessarily keep them.

Task 1

What do you think friendship rules should include?

Friends:

- Respect the other's privacy.
- Trust and confide in each other.
- Show emotional support.
- Look the other in the eye during conversation.
- Strive to make the other happy.
- Share news of success.
- Ask for personal advice.
- Joke with, or tease, the other person.
- Seek to repay debts, favours and compliments.
- Disclose personal problems and feelings to the other person.

Task 2

What do you think are the most important reasons for friendship break-ups?

- Being jealous or critical of the person's other relationships.
- Discussing with others what had been told in confidence.
- Not volunteering help in time of need.
- Not trusting or confiding.
- Criticising the person in public.
- Not showing positive regard for the person.
- Not standing up for you in your absence.
- Not being tolerant of the person's other friends.
- Not showing emotional support.
- Nagging.

Honesty and openness

If friends are not open and honest, the relationship may fail or not develop. Ideally, we want a deep understanding of one another so that we can become close. Saying, 'I'm fine, so just leave me alone' lacks honesty. Saying, 'Yes, I'm fed up, but I don't want to talk about it' lacks openness.

Task 1

How Honest Are You?

1. Your friend has passed her driving test first time. Yours is tomorrow but you haven't told anyone because you don't feel confident about passing. Do you:
 - a. Congratulate her and say you've got yours in the morning but feel really nervous about it.
 - b. Congratulate her but decide only to tell her about the test if you pass.
2. You walk off in a huff because your friends are making fun of the team you support. When they question you the next day about it, you...
 - a. Say that they were making fun of your favourite team and felt they were making fun of you too for liking that team.
 - b. Say nothing was wrong, you just had to go or you'd have missed your bus.

3. Your friend is always smartly dressed when you go out and is adventurous with colour and style. You have no idea about dress sense and often try to copy what your friend wears. Do you:

- a. Continue to copy your friend, pretending that your new clothes had been bought some time ago – before your friend bought hers.
- b. Admit to trying to copy, saying you realise it probably irritates her. Ask if she could help you choose clothes to suit your own colouring and personality as you so much admire her dress sense.

Task 2

How open are you?

1. A letter arrived addressed to you while you are at college. When you get home you find your mum has opened it and this upsets you. Do you:
 - a. Snatch the letter from her and go away and sulk.
 - b. Say you want to open your own mail in future and that your mum would have been angry if you'd opened one of her letters.
2. Your friend makes an unkind comment on some aspect of your appearance over which you have no control. Do you:
 - a. Say that you feel hurt by the comment and wonder why it was said at all.
 - b. Shrug, feel resentful and become moody for the rest of the day.
3. Your friend forgets your birthday. Do you:
 - a. Become moody, feeling miserable about being forgotten but do not say why.
 - b. Say jokingly that he forgot your birthday and hope that if you ever forget his, he'll forgive you too.

Task 1 The more honest answers are: 1a, 2a, 3b.

Task 2 The more open answers are: 1b, 2a, 3b.

Young people may expect friendships to materialise without their having to work at it – or they may think that they have an inherent fault that makes them unworthy or incapable of having friends. None of these things are true.

It is inevitable that gaffes will be made – even as adults we make blunders with our relationships – but we can apologise and learn from our mistakes. With sufficient motivation we can ensure that we don't make the same slip up twice and can become increasingly skilled at getting on with people – while enjoying it!

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