

Friendships



Practical tips for practitioners

Friendships are an essential aspect of secondary school. However, with social media and phones, friendships have taken on new forms. It's important to remember that not all young people will thrive with friendships. Some may require additional support for meeting new people and making friends. Navigating friendships can be tricky. A young person might not want to go to school if they are having a hard time with their friends.

How might friendships be affecting a young person's relationship with school and their education?

When a young person is struggling with friendship issues, they may be avoiding school because they:

- May have experienced a falling out with friends.
- May feel as though they do not belong in any group.
- Feel isolated from their peers and are reluctant to attend school due to fear of social exclusion/loneliness.
- May be experiencing bullying at school or online.

The anxious energy the young person might have may lead to struggles with sleep and setting a routine. This can lead to poor concentration in class due to tiredness or worry.



What can you do as a practitioner?

Tune in

- Before opening up a conversation about school attendance, it is a good idea to allow the young person to express how they feel about their friendships. They may be feeling, fear, anxiety and/or sadness amongst other emotions. The young person may need significant time to explore these difficult feelings. Actively listening without judgement and responding with empathy can help them feel more comfortable sharing.
- The young person may be very resistant to attending school and respond defensively or angrily when you begin to explore the issue. It is important to remember that anxiety can often present as anger in young people and to use this opportunity to validate and empathise with what the young person is feeling and tune into the feelings that may live under surface emotions.
- Although it might not seem like it, friendships made by young people might not last forever. Friends and relationships fall out all the time. Friendships can end due to natural growing apart, emotional fights, betrayal, or a transition such as moving school. It's normal for the young person to feel down, anxious or upset if they've had an argument with their friend. However, if friendships are causing the young person to feel down or anxious more often than they cause happiness, or if they make them not want to go to school, it might be time to move on.

Communication

Once the young person has confided in you about their friendship issues, you can help them to plan what is going to happen next. Together, you and the young person can tune in to the friendship and decide if you want to mend the friendship or if it's time to move on.

Although they might be feeling scared that they will be all alone or that their friends will hate them, it is important that they put their happiness first and find real friends that care about them.

Communication

Worksheet: You and school (barriers)

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 7.
- This worksheet can be used to explore the practical and emotional barriers to attending school the young person may be facing.
- Throughout the discussion, encourage the young person to record any key barriers they identify.
- Finally, explore potential solutions to the barriers facing the young person.

Worksheet: You and school (positives)

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 8.
- Use this worksheet to explore what may entice or encourage the young person to attend school. This information can be useful when creating a return to school or school attendance plan.

You can say, "Look at all the wonderful things about you: you're kind, caring, funny. These are the things people will love about you and why they'll want to be your friend."

Worksheet: Barnardo's back to school pack – Star qualities

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 14.
- This worksheet can be used to explore characteristics of friends that a young person needs, to help them identify positive friendships and eliminate toxic friendships.
- This can also be used to build a young person's self-esteem by identifying their own qualities which make people want to be their friend.

Remember: Some of what they say may seem minor or unimportant in their current context, but it is very important to listen to the young person and not to dismiss anything they are saying. You can show you care and are really listening by validating their feelings and experiences.

It's important to empathise with the young person. Try and see things from their point of view. Acknowledge what they are experiencing or feeling and let them know it's ok.

You can say, "I hear you. It can be difficult to go to school if you're fighting with your friends."

You can say, "I can understand that. It can be scary meeting new people and making friends."

What can you do as a practitioner?

Communication

Remind the young person of their strengths. Show them all the ways they have been resilient so far and explain that this identity crisis is just another one of those steps. Pointing out their strengths might show a young person certain aspects of themselves that they didn't recognise.



Practical tips for practitioners

- If possible and with consent, link in with the school to see what supports can be put in place. Are there bullying workshops/team bonding activities that could be run? Do they have a friend in another class that they could be switched to?
- Where possible, work collaboratively with the young person, school and family to create a school attendance plan.
- Work on developing a daily routine and a sleep routine with the young person if necessary.
- Ask the young person questions about themselves and their interests. A positive attitude may provide the young person with the support they need. Speak positively about school and celebrate successes, talents and good work.
- Try to encourage participation in extra-curricular activities to meet new friends.
- Try to encourage parental involvement in meetings by remaining mindful of scheduling of meetings, locations, travel cost etc.

You can find information about relevant services and how to access them here:

- <https://goshh.ie/> (For gender/sexual identity-based bullying)
- https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/friendship-guide-for-adults_0.pdf
- <https://parenthubdonegal.ie/blog/helping-your-young-person-with-friendship-problems/>



Practical tips for young people

Some tips for making friends at school

- First work on your own confidence; liking yourself is an important step before building healthy friendships.
- Be kind to everyone. People are often going through hard times in their own lives and your kindness might go a long way. If others see you as a kind, caring person, they are more likely to want to be your friend.
- Get involved in clubs and youth groups. Whether it's in your school, or in your local youth club, see if there's a group you're interested in where you could meet new people such as a football club, a cookery club, and dance class.
- When talking to someone new, ask questions about themselves and listen sincerely.
- Show you're open to new friendships with your body language – maintain eye contact, smile, try to avoid shrinking into yourself, create open body stances.
- Make an effort with others – don't wait around for people to organise something. Take charge, organise meeting them and agree activities you can do together.
- Make sure you use 'good friend' traits – act the way you want your friends to be - trustworthy, kind, supportive.



Leaving a toxic friendship

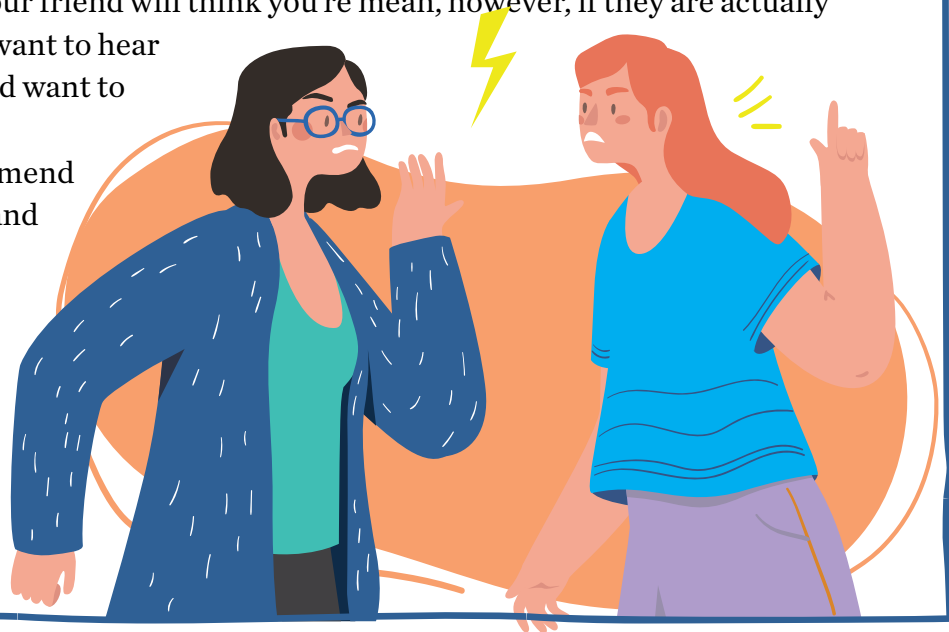
If you've decided it's time to move on from the friendship, there are ways to make this transition easier for everyone involved.

- Make yourself unavailable to the friends – declining invitations is the easiest 'no-drama' way to begin to exit a friendship.
- However, try to avoid complex stories or lies about why you can't hang out. Keep it simple – "I've too much homework" or "My mum wants me to do something with her today".
- Avoid posting indirect digs or nasty things on social media. If you need to/want to say anything to your friends, do so face-to-face.
- Just because you've ended a friendship doesn't mean you can't ever speak to them again. It's important to be kind to your peers so be civil. Smile, say hello as you pass them at school. You don't have to be their best friend, but you don't have to be enemies either.
- Ask your older sisters, brothers, cousins, mum, dad, teachers for advice. They have plenty of years of experiencing friendships and can provide good advice for you.
- It's important not to view your friendship breakup as a failure, but an opportunity to develop and grow. You've learned a lot about how to be a good friend and will be able to use these skills in your future friendships.

Mending friendships after a fight

If you decide to try and mend the friendship, here are some tips for doing so:

- It's important to use "I" statements when talking things over with a friend. For example, instead of "you never include me" try "I feel left out, I wish we could hang out more". An honest conversation like this makes it easier for your friend to listen because they're not automatically on the defensive.
- Speaking up about your feelings in a friendship isn't always easy, so practice what you want to say beforehand. Make a list of the 3 main things you want to say and try to find calm, kind ways to say them to avoid a big confrontation.
- When talking with your friend, try and stick to the facts – avoid any "well he said.../she said.../they said..."
- You might be afraid your friend will think you're mean, however, if they are actually your friend, they will want to hear about your feelings and want to help you to feel better.
- If you're struggling to mend a friendship breakup and it's causing you severe stress, your school guidance counsellor can help. They can sit everyone involved down and help you all talk things out in a structured way.



Worksheet 7:

You and school (barriers)

When you think about school, what are the things that make you not want to go? Look at the list of words below and explore what memories, feelings and words come to mind. You can add your own words and ideas if you like. As you discuss, write the main things that make you not want to go to school (barriers) in the spaces provided below.

Friendships	Value of Education	Effort	Transport		
SNAs	Lonely	Teachers	Embarrassment	Lunch/food	
PE/Sports	Tiredness	Safety	Anxious	Rules	Yard
Homework	Trips	Exams	Students	Strict	Unfair

Barriers

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What do you do to manage these problems at the moment?

Who can you talk to or ask for help from when you experience these barriers?

Worksheet 8:

You and school (positives)

Think of a great day in school. What did that look like? What makes you want to go to school? Look at the list of words below and explore what memories, feelings and words come to mind. You can add your own words and ideas if you like. As you discuss, write the main things that make you want to go to school (positives) in the spaces provided below.

Friendships	Value of Education		Future Career		
Transport	SNAs	Fun	Teachers	Achievement	
Lunch/food	PE/Sports		Relaxing/Rest	Safety	
Joking	Rules	Yard	Homework	Trips	Exams
Students	Interesting	Fair			

Positives

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What can be done to make school a more positive place?

If you were principal, what would you change?

Worksheet 14:

Star qualities



Think of someone you trust. It could be the same person you drew in your frame. What qualities do they have?

Are they kind, helpful or friendly? What makes them special to you?

Write these qualities in each star below. Once you have filled the stars,

be sure to think about what qualities you have that make you special too!

