



The Importance of Social Connections



**May
2021**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Students' emotional health is getting attention. Many schools have Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to help students learn skills to manage their feelings. This can help improve academics and behaviors.

“Social and emotional learning (SEL) is important because it provides a foundation in areas such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and decision making. Students learn positive strategies that enable them to better succeed in school, and later in their careers and life in general.”
(<https://blog.teachersherpa.com/2017/01/03/social-emotional-learning>)

Many schools started SEL lessons before the pandemic. Now, students who are learning remotely or in a hybrid format have an even greater need for emotional support because of isolation and loneliness that leads to anxiety and depression.

Loneliness

Teens and young adults are feeling greater effects of the pandemic than other age groups. An article in the Harvard Gazette states that the downward spiral of isolation hit this demographic hard, with 61 percent of survey respondents age 18-25 reporting feeling lonely frequently or almost all the time. <https://bit.ly/2PesGJb>

Building connections

Connections are essential for a sense of belonging and identity for teens and young adults. According to a study cited by the Michigan State University Extension Service, “29 percent of a teen's waking time was spent with friends and 23 percent of their time was spent with classmates and peers of the same age, but not necessarily friends. Less than five percent of time was spent alone with parents. Another study found that only 31 percent of children have best friends who serve as a positive peer influence.” <https://bit.ly/3lWAAmw>

It is essential to build and maintain strong social ties and connections to others. This sounds simple, but it's not easy for some people, especially now. If it were easy, nobody would feel lonely. Successful friendships require having, at a minimum, the following social and emotional skills:

- Regulation of our own negative emotions;
- An understanding of other people's emotions and perspectives;
- Sympathy and support for friends in need;
- Feelings of security and trust toward other people;
- The ability to handle introductions and participate in conversations;

- The ability to cooperate, negotiate and compromise;
- An understanding of how and when to apologize; and
- A willingness to understand and forgive other people's mistakes.

<https://www.parentingscience.com/kids-make-friends.html>

Maintaining friendships and connections

Children begin to build relationship skills when they are young, generally with support from parents through playdates and school experiences. By the time they are in their teens or young adulthood, people should have many years of friendship experience under their belts, but most of us could use improvement tips from time to time. Here are a few from Psychology Today that may help older kids:

- 1. Be honest.** Superficial relationships don't last. Solid friendships are based on honesty and feedback from someone you trust and respect.
- 2. Repair misattunements.** Sometimes we mess up. Good friends know how to build up and tear down their friends. Be careful with what you say, even when you are upset, in order to maintain trust and protect the friendship. When you make mistakes, apologize.
- 3. Make time and show appreciation.** Don't take friendships for granted. Show gratitude for them, make time to connect and check in, show interest and try to understand the issues they are focused on.
- 4. Alter your expectations and don't make assumptions.** Our friends are only human. Adjust your expectations to avoid disappointment. Don't assume to know what they are thinking and understand that they may not reciprocate friendship exactly as you do. If you show appreciation through gifts, they may not reciprocate, but it doesn't necessarily mean they do not value the friendship.
- 5. Choose compassion over cynicism.** Compassion helps us focus on treating others kindly. We know our friends well enough to understand their worst traits. Remember kindness and compassion rather than cynicism and negative personality traits.

Resources

The Science of Making Friends: Helping Socially Challenged Teens and Adults

UCLA Peers Clinic: <https://bit.ly/3dhPccq>

How to Help Girls Cope with Friendship Conflicts and Bullying

Huffington Post: <https://bit.ly/2PDUwPa>

Social Media and Friendships

Pew Research Center: <https://pewrsr.ch/2PACkpy>

6 Ways to Help Your Child Develop Better Friendships

Psychology Today: <https://bit.ly/2PbccSd>

How to Help Your Child Make Friends

WebMD: <https://wb.md/2NZsLjx>

Teen Friendship Workbook

Whole Person Associates: <https://wholeperson.com/pdf/TeenFriendshipWorkbook.pdf>