



## ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Nurture and Challenge Academically Capable Students

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**Is it Monday, Yet?** is my once monthly attempt to address developmental and topical issues we confront as we “challenge and nurture” our children. The topics I cover will be drawn from developmental and cognitive psychology, current research, and my own parenting and school administrator experience, and could just as easily be a response to local, national, or world events that have parenting implications. Keep your eyes on this spot in the final Compass of each month, and if you have any great ideas about future topics, please shoot me an email or text me... or, better yet, kick it old school and give me a call.

### Is it Monday Yet? #3, 10/29



#### **Friendship: it's Complicated!**

Relationships can be complicated, especially if you are building them as you are learning HOW to build them: it's a bit like changing the tires on a car as it's rolling down the road! For our young students, this process can be a wonderful journey of discovery and emotional growth, but it can also be one fraught with opportunities for disappointment and heartbreak, which are tough for any of us to witness.

I recall when my oldest child started school at the institution where I worked as an administrator. Against my better judgement, and contrary to every piece of advice I have ever given any other parent, I found myself making an excuse to wander past the playground *at the exact moment* I knew her class would be there. Like a person watching a horror movie who puts his hand over his eyes, but still wants to know what is happening, I peered through gapped fingers hoping I would see her playing with someone, anyone... just so long as she was not alone. Thankfully, there were two students in close enough proximity that I could convince myself that she had friends and was not doomed to a life of loneliness and owning 100 cats. At that age, it's all parallel play anyway, but I could fool myself into thinking these were her new BFFs, college roomies, and likely bridesmaids.

As ridiculous as I was as a father of a certain age, with all of the experience I had accumulated in the relationship building arena, I was not immune to defining friendship in terms that left no room for the nuances we all know are a definitive part of human nature: I was in full-on “all or nothing” mode, and when I confessed the experience to Eileen, I was duly chided... but I didn't care... Molly had two BFFs, and that's all that mattered.

Fast forward through over 20 years of flawed parenthood and my ongoing training in human nature and relationship building, and I am happy to say that my three children are socially well adjusted and seem to have survived my attempts to inflict upon them my wrongheaded parental definition of friendship. In fact, over the course of raising them, and thousands of children belonging to other wrongheaded parents, I have actually learned a great deal about friendship development and how parents can help children cultivate healthy friendships. Aside from developing a loving and respectful relationship with your child, and being a great role model for the friendship behaviors you would like to see in them,

- 1) provide your child with opportunities to spend time with other children. This can be both face to face and through a variety of social media (depending upon your child's age), though defining balance points and boundaries when connecting via electronic devices, grounded in your family values, is key.
- 2) friendship is neither binary nor fixed. Students who make friends at a young age may not realize that these relationships exist on a spectrum and can be fluid. As a result, ANY friend is a BFF, and any person who is not a friend is an enemy. When a child encounters a situation where someone they defined as a BFF does or says something that seems to violate that contract (hanging out with someone else, accepting an invitation to a party from an unknown other, not accepting a playdate, not liking them on social media), they may react with anger, sadness, or accusations of betrayal. At this point, it is important for parents to share stories about their own friendships (best if these friendships are with people the child knows), describing the full range of friendships they represent, from BFF to casual acquaintances, and how these relationships wax and wane over time.
- 3) help your child to know the rules to common games and sports. This is different from seeking coaching and tutoring to make sure that your child is a four-square Olympian. Knowing the rules of games others are playing, even if your child is not great at it, and having at least rudimentary skills, makes it easier for children to join in the fun, and makes disputes about the rules less likely.
- 4) set clear expectations for appropriate behavior. The social rules that a child knows are actually family rules transferred from home into scenarios involving peer relationships. Family rules that are consistently applied, especially those that your child had a hand in creating, are one of the best ways you can prepare your child for engaging with others and making friends.
- 5) explicitly instruct your child in how to handle specific social situations. One way Eileen and I used to do this was to bring up fictitious social situations "that happened at work," in a sort of case study fashion, asking each other for advice, and allowing our kids to chime in with their thoughts. When performed at the dinner table or in the car on a trip, Molly, Zach, and Ethan could not help but overhear us and offer their opinions, and suddenly we had a conversation going (which may not have happened had we been didactic about it)!!
- 6) volunteer to carpool once in a while. It is still amazing to me how invisible I became as the driver of a van full of kids. Within minutes of wheels-up, they talk to each other as if I were not even there, often talking ABOUT me and other parents. This sort of eavesdropping was always a bit of a revelation into the friendship lives of my children. On the way to the movies, a play date, or a lacrosse practice, I became a sort of ethnographer, gaining backstage access to their culture, their language, and their rituals, contributing to a reservoir of "friendship facts" I could draw on in future conversations. As a bonus, my children were often amazed to learn that I knew so much, which added to the mystique of being omniscient, a charade that came in very handy through the years.

- 7) help your child to appreciate the perspectives of others. By the time they get to first or second grade, children are developing the capacity to be empathetic and understand the feelings and points of views of others. Help your child hone these skills by talking about the feelings of others. For example, when reading with them, stop every once in a while and ask your child what they think a character is thinking about or what emotion the character is likely feeling. When your child tells you about a situation at school, ask them to speculate about why those involved behaved in the way they did and to think about the emotions the players were feeling.
  
- 8) help your child to manage negative feelings and to problem solve. When your child talks with you, listen carefully to what they are saying, make eye contact, and reflect back to them what you heard. For example, “it sounds as if you are sad about what Stephen said to you,” or “I think you are saying that you are disappointed that Betty did not share her snack with you.” Talk about the various solutions your child comes up with, suggesting some alternatives when appropriate, and encourage them to select one. Teaching them some “pre fabricated” responses or language they can use “in the moment” is also helpful to them as they navigate their social world in real time.
  
- 9) embrace the wisdom of the 24 Hour Rule. In my home, Eileen and I would do our best to do all of the above, but would not get more deeply involved (reaching out to a teacher or the parents of a friend, or probing for more information), unless the issue was still in play after 24 hours. Most often, peer friction had a shelf life of less than a day, and if we dared to be more involved sooner than this, we often paid the price by accusations of meddling, micromanaging, or being nose. If you determine that the issue has not evaporated after 24 hours (signalled by changes in your child’s behavior, communication from the school or another parent, or because they have broached the topic again), probing for more information is a good next step.

Starting and maintaining friendships takes effort, no matter what age you are, and watching our own children fumble through this process can be hard: we want to remove all pain and struggle from their lives, but these are also the growth edges that make them stronger. If you worry that your children do not have enough friends, consider the fact that their style of friendship may be different from your own: maybe they are OK with a few closer friends rather than having many friends, which is part of the “friendship identity” they are developing. The important thing is that they are happy and feeling fulfilled with the friends they have made.

If you need another perspective on your child’s development in the friendship arena, consider asking a classroom teacher. Approach these conversations as you would any other conversation about things your children are learning, and you will find an invaluable resource in this perspective.

Some resources you might find helpful:

