

Friendship is a Skill

By Dr Justin Coulson

Speak to any school leader, psychologist, teacher, or person involved with children in a kindergarten or school and ask them what the most common challenge they confront is when dealing with students - and the answer will almost always be the same:

Friendships.

Friendships are at the very heart of our wellbeing - or our distress. The quality of our relationships is core to our happiness. Researchers have found that “[school belonging](#)” is a predictor of everything from grades to life satisfaction - [even a decade after school has ended](#). Academic achievement, self-concept, behaviour, and thinking all improve when kids feel they “belong”. And they’re less likely to drop out of school (or have sick days). Friendships are core to that sense of belonging.

If friendship and belonging matter so much, why are they such ongoing sources of challenge for children and the adults who try to support them?

During the 1980s, influential British social psychologist Michael Argyle, and his collaborator, Monika Henderson, conducted a [series of studies](#) on what makes a friendship flourish or fail. They identified six rules essential for maintaining a stable relationship. These were:

1. Standing up for the friend in their absence

Loyalty is a powerful relationship builder. We teach this (at any age, including for those of us over 18) by explaining that it means not laughing along when someone makes fun of your mate, and not staying silent when gossip is spreading.

A child who says “Actually, that's not fair, she wasn't even there” is being a friend - and the courage and loyalty it requires is what builds a strong friendship. Teach kids that real friendship happens when the person isn't in the room.

2. Sharing important news with the friend

Friends keep each other in the loop. If your child hears that the whole group is going to the movies and someone is being left out, they'll stand up for their friend, encourage others to include them, and make sure they include them in things.

Good friends share. They don't share everything, but they do share the things that matter. And they also know what *not* to share. (Like: “everyone was talking about you at lunch today and said you have stinky breath.”) Encourage your child to think: *Would I want to know this if the roles were reversed?*

3. Providing emotional support when it's needed

This doesn't require a twelve-year-old to become a therapist. It mostly just means showing up. Providing emotional support isn't knowing how to "emotion coach". It's sitting with a friend who's had a rough day, texting to check in after something hard happened, and not brushing it off with "you'll be fine" or changing the subject to talk about "me".

Kids who learn to notice when someone's not okay - and know how to say something caring and kind - are building friendships that last.

4. Trusting and confiding in each other

Friendship deepens when people share something real about themselves. That feels risky, and for a lot of kids it is. Vulnerability leaves you open to being hurt, but it's also the key that unlocks deeper commitment and relationship.

If your child tells you a friend shared something personal, help them understand that holding that confidence is one of the most important things a friend can do. Breaking it is one of the fastest ways to destroy a friendship.

5. Volunteering help when it's required

The key word here is *volunteering* rather than waiting to be asked. A good friend notices when someone is struggling and offers before being prompted. A child who sees a classmate trying to carry too many things and just picks some up, or who asks "do you want help with that?" without being told to, is practising one of friendship's core skills.

6. Making an effort to make the other person happy

This is about small, intentional kindness. Remembering a friend's birthday. Saving them a seat. Saying "I thought of you when I saw this." Children who grow up understanding that friendships require active maintenance are far better equipped to keep them.

None of this is complicated, but none of it is automatic either. Children don't arrive knowing how to be good friends. They learn it, mostly by watching the adults around them, and occasionally by being taught directly.

The good news is that the rules Argyle and Henderson identified forty years ago are still the right ones. They haven't been disrupted by social media or complicated by AI or made obsolete by any generational shift. Loyalty, support, trust, and kindness are still what friendship runs on.

If your child is struggling socially, ask which of these six they're finding hardest and start there. Friendship is a skill. And like every other skill, it improves with practice and a little guidance from someone who cares.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. Justin travels all around the country, speaking at schools to students, educators and parents about wellbeing and relationships. He is also the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. Justin has written 11 books about families and parenting - with the latest about [raising boys](#) out now! For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.