CHILDREN AND FRIENDS.

SOCIAL ISSUES: WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

While you can't live your child's social life for her, there are some things you can do to help — or help yourself stay out of the way.

- **Trust the power of friendship.** Most kids figure out how to handle their close friendships and circles of friends quite well. Most will get through some rejection and even betrayals without long-term scars, particularly when they have parents who are good listeners, but not fixers. "Luckily our children will grow up, mature, and develop the skills to make good friendships possible," "Even when kids go through serious social upsets, and they heal from them, and will find new opportunities for friendship, love, and group acceptance."

- **Meet the parents of your child's friends.** Whether you have primary scholars or high scholars, get to know the parents of your children's friends. "Be a good host and invite them over! Make friends with the parents of your children's friends (and of kids they don't like too). If you're shy about meeting new people, your child may be shy too,"
- **Have reasonable expectations about your child's social skills.** Children develop the ability to become more mutual, reciprocal and empathic over time. Most two-year-olds will not share easily. Many preschoolers (and school age kids) don't play well in groups, but do well in pairs. Most kids will be rejected by a few kids and be the rejecter.
- **Value friendships over popularity.** You cannot make your child become a popular kid. But you can make sure your child has friends by inviting them over. "Try not to get pulled into the popularity wars," "Focus on nurturing friendships

instead, and remember that a crisis over not being in 'cool group' will usually subside over time."

- **Interview for coping, instead of pain.** When children experience social rejection, we often experience it with them. But it doesn't help when you dwell on it by asking excessive questions, or trying to figure it out for them. Instead of "interviewing for pain," ask what they've done to solve the situation, compliment their efforts, and let your child know you are there. Keep in mind that best friends will get along, fight bitterly, and make up faster than adults. They are simply more flexible and resilient.

- **Ask your child empowering questions.** Encourage your child to solve social problems himself by asking instead of telling him what to do. "If your child complains about an incident at school or a problem with a friend, ask 'What do you do (or try)?' 'How did that work?' 'What else can you try?'"

- **Only help when your child truly needs or asks for help.** When this happens, you might simply ask "What would you like me to do to help?" (Or make a direct suggestion to a younger child, like "Would you like to talk to Billy with me?") Try to help your child figure out his own solution. If your child has trouble verbalizing his feelings, you might help by putting words to them, like "You seem like you feel left out" without imposing your feelings on the situation.

- **Dissect the power struggles.** If your child gets teased, bullied, or rejected, try to help your child find perspective on the behavior. Instead of saying, "That kid is so mean," or getting into the details of who did what, you might say, "How does this person get so much power?" or "What gives her the power to do that?" In this way you are naming the behavior, raising awareness of it, and helping your child disengage from the struggle,"

- **Consider both sides of a story.** As much as you love and trust your child, you should listen to both versions of a conflict if it's one that needs your intervention or assessment.

- **Separate your childhood from your child's.** Your child's social life is not likely to be the same as yours. "We often use our own experiences as children as a vehicle to understand our child's social interactions," "This doesn't take into account the fact that our children's experiences can often be very different than our own. So try to think about what the social relationships mean from your child's point of view."

- **Talk with a professional.** If a school conflict is really big, encourage your child to talk with a school guidance counselor about it. And talk with the school or a professional yourself.

- **Figure out if your child is at risk.** If you have a child who is an extreme loner, a bully or someone who gets frequently bullied, you should talk to your child's teacher and a guidance counselor. Describe what you observe, find out what they see, and get some advice on how to help. Ask the teacher to be direct if she perceives there is a problem. If this is a group teasing issue, ask the school about group actions. If warranted, consider some therapy for your child and yourself.

"Teaching our children to live a quiet, sane, and balanced life is one of the most important parental tasks of our day."
Brent L. Top

THE LAWS OF FRIENDSHIP.

As kids grow, the ground rules of friendships develop and change. Learning these "laws" can help us understand and support our children's social lives so we can be there when they need us.

Friendship begins at babyhood. A child's first best friends are usually his parents. By the time kids can crawl, they start meeting other kids. Early play remains parallel. Around age three, children become able to play with each other and form deeper friendships, although parallel play still continues. By age eight, friends take up a lot of children's interests and energy. It doesn't mean your children don't love you, but it does mean you have diminished in your stature as top friend.

Friendship is the gold of childhood. Kids discover it themselves, and it's incredibly precious. Other things in life are imposed — school, bedtime, what's for dinner — but friends are something kids choose for themselves.

Children maintain limited numbers of friends. Kids generally have from one – ten "important" friends at a time, with an average of about five. And not all of these friendships will last, even when the parents are best friends.

Each child has his own friendship temperament. Your child may be naturally shy, naturally outgoing, or even naturally bossy. Your child may like trios, large groups or being one-on-one. And your child may have a very different friendship temperament than you. While you can't necessarily change your child, you can encourage him to stretch — a bit.

Conflicts with close friends are inevitable. Tensions arise at every age and stage, but the ability to resolve conflicts independently develops as kids get older. “Kids actually experience more conflicts with close friends than with acquaintances,” “At first that might seem weird, but if you think about it, you can get over what an acquaintance says, but what a friend says and does really matters. And because you are friends, you are motivated to work it through.”

Trios can truly be trying. It is a big developmental step to move from playing with one friend to playing with two friends at the same time. Often, there’s an odd person out, so like the uneven legs of a stool, a trio sometimes tips over into conflict and disappointment. Therefore, some kids do very well in trios, but others prefer to be one-on-one or in larger groups.

Most children prefer to play with kids of the same gender in school. While babies and toddlers don’t generally discriminate over the sex of their playmate, once kids enter preschool, many prefer friends of the same sex. However, outside of school, many kids maintain opposite sex friendships. “It’s important to encourage friendships with kids of the opposite sex. This is something to be nurtured and your child will value and enjoy it, particularly because she may not do this at school,” notes Diane Levin, Ph.D., Professor of Education at Wheelock College.

By age ten or eleven, boys and girls become interested in each other. As kids begin puberty, platonic boy-girl friendships begin to form. Socializing often occurs in groups rather than one-on-one. Girls often spend time talking about boys, who are generally a little more awkward and wonder how to relate to girls. Many schools will start sex education at this age and recommend parents begin discussing sex with their children in appropriate ways at home. “As kids approach puberty, parents should talk about sex and set up the right kinds of guidelines for social interaction.

Many children experiment with social power. By the time kids are four or five years

old, many discover that excluding or teasing someone makes them feel powerful and they find this exciting. Kids also test their powers to see how effective they are. A four-year-old might invite a group to go to the swings and wait to see how many follow. A six-year-old might start the "I hate Josh club," or tell other kids "not to talk to Marion today." At ten, power plays occur over who has the most friends, or by "stealing" friends.

Children care about being popular, but friendship rules. "From about age 10 through high school, being popular become important to many children. But friendship is the thing that endures," "A friend wants you to be yourself and likes you for who you are. While not being in the "in crowd" might seem devastating, encourage your child to simply make good friends. Help him nurture those friendships and the crisis over not being in the cool group should subside.

HELPING YOUR CHILD MAKE NEW GOOD FRIENDS.

Most child development milestones are monitored closely by parents from a very young age: Can my child walk? Check! Use a cup to drink? Check! Jump on one foot? Recite the ABCs? Check and check! Then there are child development "soft skills"—social and emotional skills that can be harder to judge and even more challenging to teach. Skills like sharing, empathy and respect aren't instantly obtained, but developed. Perhaps the most basic social-emotional skill children must develop is making friends, especially when they begin attending school.

Friendships are very important when it comes to emotional health. To a child, even having just one good friend can make a huge difference. While some children make friends with ease, others may need encouragement. "Some people tend to think it just comes naturally, and for some children it does, but for many, it doesn't.

If your child is shy or has struggled with making friends in the past, there are many things you can do to help. Here are some ways you can help your child make lasting

friendships without putting too much pressure on them:

1. Talk about it; Talk about or brainstorm a list of "friend good qualities" with your child. I suggest using concepts such as: being friendly, being honest, laughing and having fun, willingness to share, being kind, and learning how to place others' needs ahead of their own. Once your child understands what sorts of qualities make a good friend, you can then discuss, observe other children or even role play these qualities.

2. Connecting through conversations; since being able to share thoughts and ideas is so important to any friendship, you can help your child understand how to build and maintain a conversation. Remind kids to look for connections between what was just said and what they will say next. Encourage kids to think of conversation as being like a tall tower: in order for a conversation to keep going and growing, the various pieces must connect and fit together tightly. If they don't, the tower will fall and the conversation will collapse."

Also remember to acknowledge past success as a way to open the door to discussion of new social skills. "Parents can say, 'You are such a good talker, but I've noticed it seems hard for you to think of things to say when you are with your friends. Do you feel that way?' Focusing on previous successes, no matter how small, helps build confidence," "Give constructive feedback—always start by telling your child what he or she is doing right. Remember to teach, not criticize." Acknowledge social success through positive reinforcement, for example, "It was great to see you and Eric share how you're both learning to write your first name if has just entered school!"

3. Organize play dates or activities; If a child continues to struggle or feel less than confident in their friend-making skills, be proactive in organizing play dates for kids. "After-school play dates can support socialization in many ways, by allowing social practice in an environment that may feel more forgiving than school. Socializing can be

much easier in one-on-one situations and the greatest potential benefit is the creation of a shared experience, a bond that the two children can then build on at school."

Likewise, a shared bond between your child and another child can be formed through choosing enjoyable after-school and extra-curricular activities. Choosing activities that your child finds fun will most likely create new friendship opportunities, as there is already a shared interest between the participants.

4. Be Realistic. At the same time; be sure to not have unrealistic expectations of your shy or socially reserved child. "Some children are more outgoing than others. It's just their personality. Comparing siblings or other children to yours can be dangerous and skew your perspective,"

With just a little gentle parental support and guidance, most children develop the social skills necessary to make friends. Still, "Be available to listen to your child's tales of woe from school," "Navigating them successfully is the challenging work of childhood. Support your child by debriefing difficult situations together. Then, rather than just giving your child solutions or new strategies, guide him or her to be the problem solver."

Lastly, remember to be patient. Teaching friendship skills will never be as easy as it sounds, and we are all at different levels of learning."

In the end, children will continue to grow socially as they progress through school. With the support of parental love and coaching, children will better enjoy the journey toward meaningful friendship.