

Changing interests can put an end to 'F/F'

By Kellie B. Gormly
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When adults look back through their childhood yearbooks, they probably look wistfully at dedications signed "F/F" -- friends forever.

No, not quite.

Chances are, few of those friendships lasted to adulthood -- and many of them probably dissolved sometime during childhood. Whether by a dramatic blow-up or a gradual drifting apart, friendship breakups are as intrinsic to childhood as skinned knees and outgrown clothes, and they usually happen long before the inaugural romantic heartbreak.

In fact, research suggests that from the beginning to the end of one school year in late childhood and early adolescence, about one-third of children's friendships disappear, says Kenneth Rubin, Ph.D., director of the Center for Children, Relationships and Culture and professor in the Department of Human Development at the University of Maryland in College Park. Over the course of several years, he says, only about 40 percent of friendships likely remain intact.

"Most children are going to come home at some point in time and say, 'So and so is no longer my best friend,'" says Rubin, co-author of "The Friendship Factor: Helping Our Children Navigate Their Social World and Why It Matters for Their Success and Happiness."

"That could be a good thing, and that could be a bad thing," he says.

Particularly during the late elementary and early junior high school years, friends break up more because of changing interests than from conflicts and fights, Rubin says. The rift is a natural result of one person moving in a different direction than a friend. For instance, one might want to succeed in school while the other is a poor student. One might become interested in the opposite sex and dating before the other friend does.

In these situations, Rubin says, one person often does the growing, while the other stays the same and feels abandoned. Girls especially are likely to feel the loss deeply, since they tend to have emotionally deeper friendships than boys do, he says.

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Dr. John Carosso, a Greensburg psychologist who specializes in children and adolescents, says kids typically are not only more emotional than adults, but they also tend to lack the social skills that lead to effective conflict-solving.

"Those two things combined don't always bode well for friendships," Carosso says. He adds that when friendships go awry, "usually one person is taking it harder than the other."

Friendship breakups can be especially common in junior high school, when kids have an irresistible urge to separate from adults and bond with the right friends, says Judy LaValley, a guidance counselor at Dorseyville Middle School in the Fox Chapel Area School District. The intense need for peer acceptance can lead some kids to dump their old friends in order to fit in with a new crowd.

"Kids feel a tremendous urge to exert power in adolescence, and part of that is who you exclude and include," LaValley says. "There's a pressing, overwhelming need to belong."

"If I have to give you up because someone else invited me in, I will do that," she says, describing the thoughts of kids. "I have a new friend who's not necessarily cooler, but says I shouldn't like you, and I'm pressed into a decision."

Friendship breakups with teens can be especially dramatic, with the nasty confrontation often occurring in front of an audience. Plus, friends often come in a package deal with cliques: Breaking up with one friend can put someone on the outs with an entire group, and clique members feel compelled to take sides, says author Courtney Macavinta of San Jose, Calif.

"The reality is, often kids are friends in packs," says Macavinta, co-author of "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Our Line is Crossed,"

Yet kids facing a failing friendship can avoid some of the pack wrath by privately and respectfully discussing issues in private with their friend. Don't let anger build up; otherwise you risk blowing up at your friend, and getting the whole group in a fight, Macavinta says. You also can stay in a group of friends, but lower your emotional investment in the particular friend with whom you have the problem.

In Jasmine Cox's case, the 13-year-old from the Hill District remained friendly with her ex-friend, who believed a false rumor that someone had spread about Jasmine. The two, however, are not nearly as close, she says.

Katie Linkhauer, 16, of the North Side, says she has some on-again, off-again friends who have made her angry but have their good qualities.

"You get mad, but later you realize absence makes the heart grow fonder," Katie says. "But it's better to have constant friends."

Breaking up with a friend is both healthy and necessary in many cases, Macavinta says. If a friend regularly pressures you to do things you don't want

to do, disrespects you in any way or is simply incompatible, either fade out or make a clean break.

"You are who you run with; you marinate in the people you hang around with," Macavinta says. "Take an inventory of your friends ... and decide if the people you're hanging around are who you want to be."

HOW TO COPE

When your children break up with friends -- whether they are the breakup-ers or breakup-ees -- there is bound to be some discomfort. Here are some suggestions from experts on how parents can help their kids cope:

- Have a heart-to-heart talk with your child about what happened, ask open-ended questions, listen with compassion, and offer comfort.
- Try to find out the truth of what happened, encourage introspection, and suggest resolutions. There are two sides to every story, and if your child did anything to contribute to the downfall of a friendship, urge her to make it right and apologize.
- If the breakup happens because your children's friends simply have grown away, reassure them that it is an inevitable part of life, and help connect them to new friends whose interests are more compatible.
- Try not to intervene too much in the spat, judge your children's friends or dictate actions. Don't forbid your kids from reconciling a friendship -- except in cases, for instance, when a friend is involved in destructive or illegal activities.
- If safety is a concern -- for instance, if fighting becomes severe and groups of friends start ganging up on each other -- talk to your child's school. Often, school counselors can help mediate these situations.

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