

**Q & A**  
**West Vancouver Schools & Diana Divecha, Ph.D.**  
**03/18/24**

I'll start here with a few general thoughts to consider when helping your child to problem-solve peer and friendship issues. (What follows should not be taken as clinical advice since I don't know your individual child or their circumstances. These are just general suggestions drawn from what is known in the field of developmental science.)

- Lives are always co-constructed in part by the historical period in which they are lived. Our kids, and we, have just lived through a pandemic that marked many of us. One effect that many teachers and therapists have observed is that most children appear “behind” in their typical emotional and social development by around two years. We all have some catching up to do. It's just the way it is, we didn't have control over that. But we can help, now.
- When we have conversations with our children or their teachers (or anyone, for that matter) about difficult or scary topics, the first step is to get ourselves into “the green quadrant,” that is, a calm state of mind with a calm and even tone of voice. Children are “emotional Geiger counters” for other people's emotions, and we can help them regulate by staying regulated ourselves. It will also help us to listen better and to access our own wisest mind, thoughts, and intuition in order to bring our best guidance to children.
- When kids are stressed, it is helpful to have a three-part response. First, we need to help them re-regulate, get to a calm place themselves. Maybe a snack, a walk, a drink of water, sitting outside together in the sun, a long hug, a basketball game, whatever it takes. Then there's the information-gathering phase: What's the story? This is an information dump, where you're just eliciting all the details, trying to understand what is going on, and what their feelings are. Finally, once you think you've heard all the details, then you can shift to the third part which is the problem-solving together phase. Enlist kids' ideas about what could be helpful, first, before offering your own suggestions. Then make a plan together, and then possibly a backup plan. Be sure to check in at times to see what's happening and how feelings are evolving.

- And finally, there is not one single path to a happy and successful life. Children’s lives and paths can be quite diverse. They come into the world with different kinds of temperaments, so each child may need a different recipe of support. Also, there are many different kinds of friendship patterns that can work just fine – small, large, tight, loose, deep, light, etc. What matters is how your child feels.
  - And finally, be proactive about forming good relationships with the other adults in your child’s life – teachers, coaches, friends’ parents. Your “village” can never be too big, and these folks can be helpful resources in times of need.
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**My daughter is 7 and has identified a child as rude or a bully. How do we ensure that we are defining that behaviour correctly and what would you do if they are insistent on being around that person? I’m unsure if the reaction is based on sensitivity and just a misunderstanding as I am not there to understand the context.**

You are right to be concerned. You might wonder if your daughter is being harmed by this person, or if she is stuck in a dysfunctional relationship, or if she is participating in, or witnessing, harm to others. We need to understand more of what’s going on in this dynamic.

The first phase is to gather information.

What does she mean by “rude, or bully”? Try to elicit the story of what happens when she’s with that child by asking open-ended, not leading, questions, e.g., “What did you do when you were together today?” You can use the phrase, “and then what happened?” often, to draw out the story. Phrases like, “Are you both having fun, or is one person getting hurt? What do you think/feel about that? How did you feel when that happened?”

Check in with the teacher, too, or other adult in the supervisory capacity. You can let them know your concerns and ask what they observe. See if they can participate in solving the issue in their venue, if they can be an ally. Both parties – your child, and the child who is behaving rudely—need help.

Then guide your child toward problem solving. Here are some suggestions:

If the other child is being mean to her, you could clarify the difference between feeling good with someone, and feeling bad with someone. It's normal for feelings to get hurt once in a while even in good friendships, but it's not okay to continually be with someone who repeatedly hurts you. Depending on what exactly is going on, you could ask her if she has any ideas for not letting that happen. You could coach her to use language something like, "Hey I don't like that," or "It's not okay to x, let's do y." Or, maybe to walk away, or if she can't resolve it, ask the adult in the situation for help.

Consider encouraging access/invitations to other children with whom she could form friendships that are more fun, pleasurable, and healthy.

Sometimes kids are intrigued by, or attracted to, other kids' displays of power, even if it's dysfunctional. In that case, problem-solving could focus on empathy for the target of the mean behavior, or on what healthy empowerment looks like.

And finally, if the other person is seriously or repeatedly mean, that person needs help/intervention, and the other responsible adults need to be enlisted. The end goal should be that your child is protected, other children are protected, and the mean child is no longer mean to others.

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**What are some things I can do to help my shy Grade 1 daughter connect with peers at school? She tells me she often feels lonely and no one wants to play with her, but when I ask her if there is anyone that she would like to play with, or she wants me to set up a playdate with, the answer is again, "nobody."**

I am concerned that she feels lonely and perhaps marginalized by her peers (feels that "no one wants to play with her"). Even if a child *prefers* to be alone or have only one or two good friends, we want them to be *able* to function reasonably well with other peers.

First, I would check out how accurate her perception is. If you have a chance to observe her with other children, see what the circumstances are at the point at which she opts out of playing with others—it can give you a clue as to what skills to work on. Let the teacher know your concern and see if the teacher can offer guidance or help in the classroom or share suggestions based on what they know of your daughter.

It's possible that your daughter may just lacks either some confidence or some skills.

Confidence can be built at home, in your relationships, through your warmth, love, acceptance, and guidance. Be curious and respectful about her perspective, and desires. Allow/encourage her to speak for herself with you and with others (even the grocery store clerk) and try not to speak over or for her.

Confidence in friendships could come from low-stakes exposure to other potential playmates. For example, you and another parent can take the children to do some activity that you know your child would like. Or you can create some fun playdates at your house, maybe on a regular basis. At this age, some of the play may just be parallel, where the kids appear to be playing separately in the same space, or it may be interactive. Afterwards, try to process a little bit with your child, to see what she liked, what she didn't like, etc.

The goal is to try to attract her into wanting to hang out with other children and discovering that it can be pleasurable and fun, while not turning this into pressure. Part of your challenge here will also be to help her find a good match with other children in terms of similar temperaments or interests, etc. The match has to fit for your child while still stretching her a bit to explore possibilities. Help her express her opinions about what she likes and what she might need help with.

The second aspect to consider is that she may need some specific skills, like phrases for how to enter a group, or how to invite someone else to play; i.e., words to use.

And for such a young age, I'd suggest story books about friendships and all the different ways kids can be friends. Librarians are great resources for this!

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**My child has only one best friend from G1-G5, however, her best friend is planning to move to another school from G6. What can I do to help my kid to prepare for this situation as she needs to find new friendships from September?**

You can think about this in two ways.

The first goal is to support her to stay as connected as possible to this friend who is moving away. It's not clear if the friend is staying in the same town (just different school) or moving far away. Either way, there are numerous possible strategies to stay connected, and you can gently invite her (or both of the kids) to brainstorm some ideas for ways they want to stay connected.

The second goal is to prepare her to be open / add to her friendship circles. Depending on her reaction to her friend's departure, she may need time and space just to process any feelings of loss or grief she might have. Try to not skip over that, but acknowledge it, give words to it (*if* it is present; you don't want to suggest something that she is *not* feeling).

Summer is a good time to explore new peer opportunities, new venues or activities to meet other kids. It might be helpful to give words to these normal transitions, e.g., opening herself to a new chapter of friendships; special people can come into our lives in unexpected ways; good things will still happen and it may just take some time, etc. It can be hard to be open, but it's a good muscle to flex.

**My child's best friend diagnosed with anxiety one year ago, and my child just diagnosed also with anxiety recently, and she doesn't want to have 1 to 1 counselling. What can I do for this?**

It sounds like this may take some convincing, but it's worth trying.

First, I would attempt to normalize therapy. I often say, if you've got a problem with the electricity, you call an electrician; trouble with the plumbing see a plumber. Similarly, if we have a problem with feelings and moods, we consult a therapist. Then it can be helpful to demystify the process to her, and explain how it works.

It can be upsetting to young teens to feel like their autonomy is threatened, so you might pre-select three therapists for her to interview for one session, then she can choose which person feels right and trustworthy to her.

And, I wouldn't rely on therapy alone. Consider reducing social media (it is known/designed to increase girls' anxiety), and/or joining a [girls' group](#) of some kind. Look for other mentors a little older than herself, too. Of course, check that body budget foundations like sleep, nutrition, exercise, time outside, free time, etc. are being met.

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**My daughter's background is, mother (myself) is from Japan and father (my husband) is from Australia so it's a mixed culture. I was raised from a very traditional and strict family and Japanese culture, so often I have a dilemma from the education the local school teaches, and the influence from my daughter's friends to mine.**

**I don't want to be too strict for manner and politeness etc for my daughter's friends otherwise my daughter may have hard time with them, but it is hard for me to accept when they come to ours for playdate I see how they are, and I don't want my daughter to think it is OK to be like that at her friend's (even though their parents may not care) and would like her to learn how to speak to elderly in manner.**

**I understand it is cultural difference and probably generation difference, too, but how far do I teach my daughter, in order for her friends to understand where we are coming from?**

**Sorry if it is too precise question but if you can talk about the healthy friendship in different cultures it would be amazing.**

Research shows that it is wonderful, beneficial, an asset for a child to be able to draw from multiple cultures, so celebrate that.

It's helpful first if you and your husband are clear on what you like and want to keep from each of your cultures, and what you'd like to change and do differently. Once your values are clear, you can more clearly and rationally communicate them to your children. It can be helpful to reinforce your values by retaining access to your respective cultures – spending time with extended family, participating in the different cultural activities, seeing photos of ancestors on both sides of the family, etc.

Then it's helpful to articulate the differences between your family values and what your children might experience outside, in their friends' families. "In our family we think it's important to ....." "Other families may do things differently, but we ....." The goal is to be clear, conscious, and articulate about the different

systems, the different patterns of how life can be organized by different cultures in different families. Then your child can more easily “code switch” between the two systems with more skill and less judgement. They will ultimately be empowered by being able to code-switch. At the same time, they may need extra boundaries while switching between cultures (for example, declining nonconsensual hugging and kissing, or tolerating certain kinds of comments).

With your children’s friends and peers, be sure to be warm and inviting and inclusive. Kids can be scared by what’s “different” just because they don’t understand it. So it can take a little extra effort to reach across to families of different cultures to create a warm feeling. How we help people feel has a huge impact. And, often when children’s friends are invited into another culture, they end up loving and appreciating the experiences and opportunities.

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**The question I would like to submit to Dr. Diana is how to support students in grades 11-12. Especially for boys, the corresponding attention at the university level.**

Older teens at this age are well on their way to exploring autonomy and psychological independence though they are still a long way from achieving it. They want to know how the world really works, they are exploring what it is to have meaningful relationships, they are exploring/experimenting with who they can be in the world. They are fiercely authentic, and they hate hypocrisy. They are very creative and care deeply for other people.

Here are some ways to support them:

1. Cultivate concrete life skills. Imagine what their next step in life is and all the concrete skills they will need: laundry, cleaning, cooking, budgeting, self-management, car maintenance, project management, etc.
2. Scaffold independence. Sometimes kids need a little nudge to function more independently. Are they having a problem at school? Instead of doing an end run to solve it for them, talk through how they can go about solving it themselves.
3. With all freedoms comes responsibility, and they need help in defining what a concomitant responsibility is for each of the freedoms they ask for.
4. Encourage them to find mentors who can be helpful to them, too. Sometimes they don’t know that they can and should reach out to a favorite teacher, or

coach, or university professor, or tutor, or that it's okay to form relationships with the adults they admire and may want to emulate.

5. Support bids for connection. Kids at this age need new levels of autonomy but don't make the mistake of thinking they want to give up their connections/relationship to you. Most young people are desperately trying to figure out how to be psychologically independent (find their own voice, their own way) while staying connected to the people they care about. Always support and respond to their bids for connection.

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**How to communicate with a teen who constantly shuts people down and wants to parade his knowledge, abilities, superiority? This is the case at home with younger siblings; he often tells them they're wrong and finds small flaws and mistakes in what they do and what they say. But he diminishes any mistakes he makes or blames others for them. I know he is a kind person. He is helpful too. He always feels very guilty after he makes one of his siblings cry. Is this coming from a place of low self-confidence? How can parents communicate effectively without constantly lecturing or criticizing?**

You are right to be concerned about his behavior. From the description, I have two concerns: his own mental health, and the wellbeing and safety of his younger siblings.

I'm curious about the criticism and blaming. These can be telltale symptoms of a number of things. Sometimes there is shame or the feeling of not measuring up underneath this behavior. Or the behaviors can be masking depression/anxiety. He might benefit from a little therapy to explore what's going on.

Or it could be that he just needs better, more specific skills, along with clear limits about what's not okay. Give him some examples of how to talk to siblings in way that's okay, that will be helpful to the siblings, and that can teach and guide them without harming them. Then be very clear about the kinds of language that are *not* okay. And if he continues to speak in a way that's harmful, there should be consequences.

I would also check the language and communication styles of the people around him. Is he learning this from other people? If so, this warrants a discussion, and



possibly action. Be sure you're modeling healthy communication patterns in the home.

You also have a duty to protect the younger siblings from emotional abuse. The conversation with them can focus on how they are feeling. Help them identify what feels okay to them and what does not, and say explicitly that it is not okay for anyone to bully them. You'll have to come up with specific, concrete ways they can get out of the situation if the older sibling does it again.

Occasional sibling teasing, taunting, tussling, and even fighting can be okay, if it's a give-and-take, or two-way. But bullying is absolutely off limits as it is too harmful.

If you feel like you're lecturing and criticizing and not getting anywhere, sometimes it means too many words have been spent, and the child has not registered or accepted the limits and consequences you've laid out. As a parent, you want to be loving and warm, but you should not be afraid to exert your authority when necessary, to set boundaries and limits on what is okay and what is not. Kids need those guard rails, they feel more secure and confident when boundaries are clear to them. They will absolutely drive a train through your ambiguity, so you need to first be very clear, yourself, on where the line of acceptability is and what the consequences are for crossing that line.

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**My child experiences some anxiety. He dislikes unknowns and has low tolerance for unexpected behavior. I believe this is due to control issues which stems from his anxiety. This tendency is causing challenges in forming lasting friendships, as he tends to end friendships as soon as he experiences any misbehavior in his peers. How can I help him build friendships?**

Keep teaching him about the nature of friendships, how friendships work, how we approach them in life. Here are some examples: People are messy and make mistakes (including ourselves), and we forgive those mistakes when we like the other parts of the friends enough. Rarely does one friend satisfy all your needs, but we like different friends for different reasons. We keep cultivating a garden of friendships, sowing seeds for new friendships, enjoying the beautiful flowers, and weeding every so often.

That said, is it possible that he's not finding a good match? Kids form friendships based on similarities of some kind – of temperament, activities, interests, etc. Maybe more exploration would be helpful. You may have to do a little more scaffolding in this area.

It also may be helpful for him to have language for what to do when he experiences issues. What can he do when someone surprises him, how can he expand his tolerance? (e.g., breathe, wait, take a meta-moment). What can he do or say when someone does something he doesn't like? Language and strategies are empowering and help lower social anxiety.

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**I am interested in learning more about how to support my 10 year old with her friendships. How can we as parents have influence or encourage and foster more healthy relationships with a broader group of friends when your child is very attached/fixated to one person and that friendship appears to have some unhealthy traits. It seems as though my child believes they only need one good friend. I also am interested in learning more about how our children's relationships have changed or been challenged from our collective experience with the pandemic and social isolation.**

Some children suffered more in the pandemic because of their isolation, their family stress, the lack of access to other adults (teachers, coaches) who sustained them, and disrupted routines. However, a small number of children did better in the pandemic because they were relieved of the social stresses of school. Overall, teachers and therapists estimate that children are about two years behind in the development of their emotion and social skills due to the pandemic.

Children can be just fine with one friend, but not if it creates an unhealthy dynamic. If that person is directly harming your daughter, it is appropriate to help her end the relationship. But short of that, you may want to engage in an education campaign with her about the difference between feeling good in a relationship and feeling bad in a relationship.

Accommodating to a bad relationship so early in life does not bode well for future relationships. If the harm is minimal and it's too traumatic for her to end the relationship, try to woo her out of it by enticing her to engage with other kids. I've sprinkled many suggestions throughout this document and you might find some suggestions that are possible for you to try.

Do support her in any small or large attempts to make new friends—it might mean driving somewhere, or having a new friend over, or taking time on a day off to do something with another parent and child. It's a worthy investment.

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**My daughter is in Grade 10, and she has just 1 friend at school... it seems that she doesn't like most of her classmates, and she's very passive and hold back on building connections. What can parents do to help her change?**

Does *she* want to change? Does she have one friend because she's very content/happy that way? Many kids did better in the pandemic because they were relieved of the social stresses from school. Perhaps she's introverted and finds dealing with other people exhausting.

Or does she wish she had more friends but doesn't know how to expand her groups?

I don't have enough information here to give a good direction. But I'd check her wellbeing: Is she generally a reasonably happy or content person? Does she have interests that she pursues on her own or is she engaged in her school work? How are her relationships with family, family friends, her close friend? If all of these are pretty positive, I wouldn't worry too much. People differ in what kinds of social networks sustain them, and we want to be careful to not shame them or make them feel worse because we're projecting our own anxiety or expectations. Appreciate the gifts that can come from the quiet, gentle friendships, too.

But if you have the sense that she's struggling and unhappy, it might be a good idea to check in with a teacher who knows her well to get another opinion. Or you can consult a therapist yourself to see if therapy might be appropriate for her.

Short of that, what can you do as a parent to encourage her to expand? Relationships should naturally expand and deepen a bit more in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but you can nudge that a little by leading with her interests—where would she be introduced to other kids who like what she likes? You can encourage her to seek out those experiences and she may find other friends naturally there. And always keep building specific social skills in general.

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**In the class, it's very common that students with same backgrounds will easily become friends so that there are many "groups"... This makes the students be divided or isolated, should teachers and schools do something about it, to create more opportunities to break the invisible "walls" between groups?**

Humans have an evolutionary bias for orienting toward their own groups and keeping outsiders out. We see signs of this early in infancy so we know that this is a human predisposition. However, research also shows that *how* this bias plays out depends very much on how inclusion/exclusion are handled in the child's upbringing and environment. It is softened and reduced when children are exposed to other kind of people outside their own group (however that is defined).

However, kids also tend to form friendships with people who are "like" them, on any number of dimensions.

So yes, there is a tendency to form groups, which is natural. But yes, we adults should be architecting kids' environments to help keep them stay open—and more importantly, kind—to other children and people unlike themselves. Who knows what gems or adventures or love lay beyond? And that kindness creates a greater social good that benefits everyone. But it has to be consciously tended and the adults need to take the lead.

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**A boy, in grade 11, likes to play with a fixed group of 1-3 friends. This small group has been around for 3-4 years. I appreciate how they help each other. But my child is completely unwilling to try to interact with other peers. For example, once he wanted to go running, which required several people to sign up together, but his friends were unwilling to go, and he was also unwilling to go with other people of the same age. My question is how can we help the teen be willing to socialize with peers outside their small group?**

The good news is that he has a friend group that works for him!

However, he has a year and a half until he will be thrust out into the world, into college or the work world, where he will need more flexible social skills. He doesn't necessarily need to have more close friends (unless he wants more), but he certainly will need more people skills in order to be successful.

I can't tell where his resistance comes from, whether he lacks confidence in himself, or he doesn't know how to—or know the value of—engaging with new people. For these kids, it can be helpful to densely scaffold some new social abilities. If the thought of going to a new activity where he knows no one is too overwhelming, then back up and help him take smaller steps. He could practice going to a new situation with one known person. Or if there's an event he wants to participate in, break down the scenario ahead of time and talk about what might happen and the uncomfortable feelings that might arise (they're normal) and how to tolerate them for a bit. Talk about what words to say to someone new, how to gauge a green light from another person, and how to pick up on reciprocal feedback. Or conversely how to wait or pivot from an encounter that feels uncertain. Share how you've felt and dealt with similar situations. After all, other people are potential resources, great fun, and I'm sure there's romance awaiting him out there somewhere, too.

If he doesn't make progress by the end of this year, a short therapy stint in his senior year would be an excellent investment in his future. This issue is easily dealt with, and it's better to fix it now while he's under your roof. He'll be much more prepared to launch.

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### **How can parents and schools with neurodiverse teenagers help foster peer relationships within the school?**

First, look for niches, people, activities, organizations, events that are harmonious with your teen and their interests and ability levels. They're more likely to find companions who are doing things that they like to do. Sometimes offering a smorgasbord of opportunities allows them more choices, and you can see where they want to go back for more. Could be in theater, chess, fishing and the outdoors, music/concerts, etc.

Second, as in all of these answers, try to see if there are particular areas where they need some help in their peer relationships. Are they having trouble entering a relationship, or maintaining it, or do they get into conflict? Do they have misunderstandings, do they need some conversational skills, etc?

Help them find a mentor or two in an area of interest to them.

And finally, likewise, is there a school personnel who is interested in your teen and can give you their additional perspective and suggestions?