

## **The Good (and Bad) News about Friendship Styles**

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Ever wonder why one of your children seems to be out-of-the-loop when it comes to being invited to parties and not quite fitting in with the other kids, but your other child flows easily with the crowd, always having someone to eat lunch with in the school cafeteria, and practically needs an organizer just to keep up with the social schedule? Well, the answer most likely resides in each child's friendship style, which tends to be a combination of innate personality as well as learned behavior.

During the school years, when kids are surrounded by peers and therefore become exquisitely aware of how, when and where they fit in, the type of friend that they are perceived as can bring boundless joy or endless grief, and you, the parent, are sure to find yourself smack-dab in the middle of the scenario. If your child is a comfortable friend to others most likely you're spending lots of time carting the kid to and from the mall, movies, play dates or park. However, if your son or daughter is known more as a fickle, fair-weather or awkward friend, then most likely your duties include playing psychologist to a bored and perhaps lonely child.

Kid friendship styles can take several forms, but the four most common types for school-age children are as follows. Where do your children fit in?

1. **Zealous**—These kids are passionate about one friend, and one friend only. This style works well when it is reciprocated by another child who is also passionate about developing and keeping a friendship with your kid. However, this is the riskiest of all friendship styles since another person maintains so much control over the relationship. Also, keep in mind the rather whimsical nature of kid friendships—they are changeable and easily influenced by peer group pressure.

**The Good News:** Zealous friends can be good, close confidants. You can count on a friend who is always there and interested in hanging around, doing things with, and being supportive.

**The Bad News:** Zealous friends can be jealous friends. With all of their eggs placed in one basket, it's often touch-and-go hanging around with someone who practically smothers you and gets their feelings hurt just because you've invited another kid to sit at the lunch table. Being friends with a zealot can be a high-maintenance proposition, and works well only if both kids are on the same page of the book, and stay there!

How a parent can help: While praising your child's loyalty to his or her friend, communicate how nice it is to have more than one person to count on. Discuss how they may be pressuring their friend in the relationship, and how it's healthier, and more fun, to expand friendship horizons.

2. Affable—These children just want to have friends; the more the merrier! They don't need or depend upon one best friend, and flow easily from group to group. They generally have three or four close friends. At peace with themselves and their popularity, affable-style kids tend to be well-adjusted and well-liked, and the ups and downs of normal friendships are not so intense or frightening.

The Good News: Affable kids are fun—plain and simple. They are not defensive, tend to take criticism well and know how to read others' feelings and emotions. They are naturals when it comes to transitioning between groups, and can take on many activities and deal with many different types of people.

The Bad News: Along with the easy going, involved nature come popularity and attractiveness. But, these children cannot be counted on to dedicate their entire social lives or free time to one other child or to a sole activity, and can unintentionally hurt others' feelings by having such a large friend base to choose from. Also, affable kids may have a tendency to become over-involved in activities, not knowing when it's best to say "no" to friends, teams or clubs, and to focus on the important people and responsibilities in their lives.

How a parent can help: Bring to your child's attention just how many activities, play dates and social groupings he or she is involved with. Help the child to pick the most important, and to wean away from those that are interfering, extraneous, or inconvenient. Teach your child to put themselves in others' shoes and to be careful about inadvertently hurting others' feelings as they move from group to group. Try to make them aware of how easy it is for them to make friends, but how difficult it may be for others to do the same, and encourage their empathy and compassion for children who need social help. Ask them to invite a less popular child to sit at the lunch table or to visit for a play date or sleep over.

3. Shy—Desperately wanting friends, but too afraid to take the necessary social risks (talking at the lunch table, dealing with kids in groups) these children often describe themselves as "invisible". It's not that others make fun of or are mean to them; shy kids are often ignored by others. And, to a kid in school, that's just as dreadful as being rejected, teased, or bullied.

The Good News: Timid children are usually very sensitive to the needs of others and can be extremely giving and accommodating. They are very loyal friends and can be counted upon to be there, to listen to, and to support a buddy in need.

The Bad News: Shy children, although exquisitely sensitive to the needs of others, are often misunderstood by their peers. Their reticent behavior can be misperceived as one of disinterest, and their fear of taking social risk can come across as being emotionally unavailable to others. Shy children are often lonely kids, and at risk for depression.

How a parent can help: First, understand that your child is most likely shy by nature, has always been, and most likely will always be somewhat uncomfortable in new social situations. Help him or her to feel more comfortable by arranging low-risk play dates (with a child that the teacher feels would be a good fit) or involvement in outside clubs or activities. Encourage your child to “keep things in perspective”. Shy children have a tendency to assume that anything that is said about them is either critical or negative. Their outlook often swings from feeling invisible (“No one would even notice if I wasn’t here.”) to the focus of everyone’s attention (“If I say something stupid, the whole class will notice and will laugh at me.”) Last, be especially supportive during the in-between-friendships times, when you may serve as your child’s best friend.

4. Awkward—These kids tend to evidence poor social skills or engage in behaviors that tend to isolate them or set them apart from others. They also have distinct trouble reading social cues, and may be disruptive when they try to join into groups. Some come across as too bossy, or behave in ways that put off or disturb other children.

The Good News: Many awkward kids realize that they have a tough time making it with other children and are motivated to try out new behaviors. They long for good relationships, and tend to benefit from “social coaching.”

The Bad News: Because of their difficulty reading social cues and settings (standing too close to others, repeating the punch line of a joke too many times, laughing too loud) they can quickly become the butt of jokes and teasing. Their reaction (or over-reaction) may serve to provoke further dislike or distrust from the other children.

How a parent can help: Get your kid some social coaching! This may take the form of a socialization group run by the school guidance counselor or by a private therapist. Encourage involvement in “low-impact” groups that are well supervised, such as the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. Discourage high impact, rowdy activities that are not well structured, where your child’s behavior may be upsetting to others, or at the least, misunderstood.