

# Counselor Corner

## Friendships in Middle School



In adolescence the major purpose of friendships is to serve as a new emotional base that permits a gradual separation, and eventual independence, from parents. Young people begin to look to their friends for the understanding, support, and guidance they once sought from their parents. When teenagers complain that their parents "just don't understand them," the implication clearly is that their friends do.

A second function of adolescent friendships is to help young people define their social status. There are usually three or four major social groupings that students use to define themselves. They may see themselves in the "jocks", "brains", "socials", or "trouble-makers".

A third function of adolescent friendships is to prepare them for heterosexual relationships. Early teens form what might be called chumships. These same-sex friendships are often quite intense and involve a great deal of sharing of experiences and confidences. At times the intensity of these relationships can create jealousy and conflict that challenges their ability to work out their differences. Young people who have successfully dealt with the conflicting emotions of chumships are better prepared for later heterosexual relationships.

Teens differ in their social needs. Some seem to need large numbers of friends and an active social calendar to feel happy and fulfilled. Others are content with a few close friends and occasional social outings. There is not right or wrong, good or bad, in these two approaches to friendships.

As parents, you need to be supportive of these new friendships even when they seem to be taking over many of the functions you once served. This does not mean we don't need to intervene if we see the relationship become destructive or an unhealthy one. Parents can best support their teen by accepting whichever social lifestyle has been chosen, be it active and busy or quiet and minimal. Pushing a teenager socially will only cause resentment and rebellion. In the end, a teenager's choice of friends is their individual path to independence, and we help most by respecting the path they have chosen.

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