

RAISING KIDS

Why Your Teen's BFF Might Keep Them Happy for Years to Come

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Teenagers spend a ton of time focused on what their friends are thinking and doing. This period can be filled with struggles due to puberty, school pressures, bullying, and popularity contests. And of course, teens drive their parents crazy with all this incessant drama.

It turns out that some of this drama is a worthwhile investment for their future emotional and mental health. According to a recent study at the University of Virginia published in the journal *Child Development*, bonds that children form during adolescence might have a positive role in their mental health for years to come.

Researchers followed 169 individuals for 10 years, starting when they were 15 years old. The participants were racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. The process began when the participants brought in their closest friends for one-on-one interviews. Then they were assessed annually and asked questions about their closest friends: how much trust there was, how good communication was, and how alienated they felt in the relationship. Additionally, they were given questionnaires to evaluate levels of anxiety, depression, social acceptance, and self-worth.

The strong friendships were evident in the interview videos. These teens asked their best friends for advice or support and talked through any disagreement. They were open with one another about difficult topics and overall quite connected. The study found that those who had close, emotional links with friends showed less anxiety and depression yet higher self-worth. In fact, their

emotional state improved from age 15 to 25 at the times they were evaluated by researchers. On the other hand, those who did not have the same bonds with friends in their teen years did not show much change in symptoms of depression and anxiety or in their sense of self-worth throughout the study's 10 years.

The scientists think that friendships provide critical support during the challenging adolescent years and also help guide emotional development. Positive experiences with friends help boost positive feelings about oneself during this stage when personal identity is being formed. For example, learning how to resolve conflicts with a buddy provides beneficial life-long social and emotional skills. Also, being able to make and keep solid friendships shows that they can trust another person in both good and tough times. This is a huge step in maturity, and an attribute necessary for success in life, whether it be at a job or in marriage.

The study's coauthor Joseph Allen, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, points out that the study confirms the importance of forming strong close friendships during the teen years because these experiences stay with our kids and influence their level of happiness in the future. He warns that we must be careful with technology as it could hamper the ability for teens to build these close ties with their peers.

Here are a few ways we can encourage our teens to form strong friendships:

- Talk about what makes a healthy, positive relationship: caring for one another, understanding, respect, ability to solve problems together, open and honest communication, similar goals and values.
- Provide avenues for your teen to meet new people, such as joining extracurricular clubs and teams, attending camp, or getting a part-time job.
- Teach them how to communicate kindly and effectively (without always relying on technology!).
- Be careful not to judge their choices in friends too quickly. Of course, if you see a pattern of negative behavior, then it's okay to step in and have a calm discussion with them about your concerns.
- Support them in their requests to spend time with friends. Work together to set reasonable guidelines such a curfew and who they can get in a car with.



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**Nena** • 5 months ago

This is so true, Sandi. I'm still BFFs with my high school buddies. Some of them already emigrated but when they're in the country visiting, we make time to see each other. We've kept in touch over the years. When we talked about why we "click", we thought it was because it's in high school that we start to discover ourselves—our strengths and weaknesses, our dreams and fears, our "first loves" and dates. And with this every "first" that we experienced, we had our friends to share this with. And that's what sealed the bond.

Same with my daughter who's now in her 20s. Their high school group still go out regularly. That's why I tell my teen son to be careful in choosing friends. Be friends with people who'll make you feel comfortable being you and not with people who you desperately want to please.

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