
Social Nervousness and The New School Year: *Familiarity and The Three Keys to Friendship Can Help Your Child Relax*

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September marks the beginning of a new school year. For many children, it will be the first time seeing old friends since the end of last school year. For others, it may be the first time attending a new school. In which case, they will need to make new friends. Either situation can prove stressful.

As a psychologist, I am often approached by parents who wish to calm their child's anxiety regarding meeting new friends or reacquainting themselves with friends from the prior year. Childhood nervousness regarding these social issues is very common in the month of September. When these issues present themselves in my practice, I use a two-pronged approach which focuses on establishing a sense of *familiarity* and *control*.

Establishing a sense of **familiarity** is a great way to decrease your child's anxiety. This process involves setting up playdates, or plans, with the children that will be attending your child's school. The idea here is that *if* your child can become acquainted with new or old friends before the school year begins, *then* they will not fear being alone on the first day of school. Many children in my practice wonder, "Who will I hang out with?" or "What if my friend wants to hang out with someone else this year?" Allowing your child to gain a sense of familiarity with the children at school before the school year begins is a great way to calm the nerves of your child. Parents who do this will also find that, "*the children who play together outside of school usually spend more time together in school.*" This allows parents to have some influence over the children with whom their child will play.

If your child is attending a new school, it is advisable to contact the school and attempt to get the names and contact information of "*welcome buddies*" or other families whose children will be in the same class as your child. Calling these parents and arranging a one-on-one 'meet and greet' will really help your child to gain a sense of familiarity in a school which he/she has never attended.

Any anxious person will tell you, "*comfort comes with control.*" Walking into a new school environment and having no control over the choices and behavior of other children can be a very scary experience for your child. Therefore, it makes sense that providing your child with a sense of **control** over making and keeping friends would decrease this type of anxiety.

In my practice, I address the issue of control by teaching children what I refer to as “The Three Keys of Friendship.” These social rules are simple and they will allow your child to feel confident in knowing the steps required to make and keep new friends. They are as follows:

- 1) Share
- 2) Be Nice
- 3) Don't Tease

Although *sharing* seems pretty straight forward, it involves more than just sharing our possessions. It also involves sharing our time and agenda – Also referred to as ‘being flexible.’ Simply put, it means that we avoid having to be the boss. Being perceived as ‘bossy’ pushes other children away. However, being flexible allows for other children to better enjoy the time they spend with your child and leaves them wanting more.

Being nice is also of crucial importance. Your child should understand that being nice to everyone is the mark of a good friend. Many children are turned off by peers who are mean even if they, themselves, are not the target. Being mean just doesn't feel good inside to most children. Best of all, being nice allows your child to be perceived by other children as more approachable. This will improve the chance that he/she will be approached by another child looking for a friend.

Lastly, teach your child to *avoid teasing*. Even if their peers are teasing, your child should understand that it is better to avoid being a part of it. Kids who tease may be looked at as a bully. And bullies have a difficult time making friends who really like and trust them. Teasing makes other children very uncomfortable. In the worst case scenario, word of your child's teasing may even get back to teachers or parents which can have a negative impact on your child's reputation.

The Three Keys of Friendship should be practiced before the school year begins. Siblings, parents and even friends who live nearby are all good people with whom to practice. Gaining these tools will allow your child to feel a stronger sense of control when it comes to making and keeping friends at school. When paired with a better sense of familiarity, these interventions will greatly help your child to reduce feelings of anxiety regarding the new school year.
