



February Counsellor's Corner

Tara Ryan, B.Ed. M.Ed. (and Sam)
District Outreach Counsellor



February's Topic: BFFs and the Dating World

There's nothing like that feeling for a young girl who has found her "Best Friend Forever". They go shopping and get matching necklaces, each with half a heart lining up together to declare, "BFF"! Fast-forward to high school and the premise doesn't really change (except the matching necklaces turn into matching tattoos). Teens declare their exclusive true love by announcing their new partner's name on the bio line on their Instagram profile. All friendships and relationships are entered with a giddiness and assumption that it will last forever.

Bottom line: regardless of our age, we all want to belong to something bigger than ourselves. Life is just easier when we are not walking through it alone. As adults, we typically have various social groups that we are part of, so if something goes awry with one group, we can still maintain our "belonging" with another. In elementary and high school, having a conflict with a BFF can seem like the end of the world.

Children and teens often invest in friendships truly believing that they will be forever, oblivious to the fact that all relationships change over time and some need to come to an end when they are no longer healthy. Lifetime friendships are certainly a precious thing; however, we also need to encourage our children to recognize what impact a friendship has on their well-being and determine whether that relationship is worth hanging on to.

We need to encourage our children to examine and recognize when friendships change and are no longer healthy.

A common lament I often hear in grade 4 and 5 children is, "Our friendship was so terrific for the first three years of school! I just want it to be back the way it used to be!" The reality is that people change and don't always mature at the same rate or in the same direction. It is true that effective relationships take work, but they also require an equal investment and desire to continue the relationship. We can't move backward and work to have things "the way they once were" – we have to morph and change as we grow. It's hard for children (and adults) to let go of something that was once good if the other person is no longer invested in keeping it that way.

Friendships in childhood and youth are opportunities to practice skills for future adult relationships. What skills and understandings do we want our children to have about relationships when they start dating?

I've often had parents request that I mediate relationships that are no longer working to "help the kids be friends again". This is a worthwhile activity when both friends need assistance with conflict-resolution or moving through hurt feelings. When one party is no longer invested in the relationship, I have found that bringing them together to push a relationship typically causes further hurt feelings. Consider having a 17-year-old son whose girlfriend breaks up with him and makes it clear that she no longer wants to date him. We would want to help that boy work through his feelings and learn to move forward, not chase after a relationship where the other party was no longer invested.

As parents, we can't force a relationship between our children and their friends.

After a successful conflict-resolution session between two grade six girls and their moms, one of the moms suggested, "Let's lock in a get-together for every Friday night for the two girls." I understood her desire to guarantee a friendship for her daughter; however, this is akin to the dangers of the "BFF" idea; giving children the idea that friendships in elementary and high school need to be exclusive and forever. Unfortunately, in this case, the comment scared the other party off and the friendship ended up falling apart.

Jealousy is a normal feeling and children need to be taught to cope with that feeling.

We've all had that feeling at one point or another of feeling left out and not measuring up. On the spectrum of feelings, I think jealousy would be right next door to anger and rage. In friendships and dating relationships, seeing our BFF or boyfriend/girlfriend spending time with someone else can create a lot of hurt feelings and assumptions that don't feel very good. Unfortunately, those feelings often come out as anger and manipulation toward the threat. Children and youth will often try to draw the object of their affection in closer by pushing the threat further away. Bottom line: jealousy can look very unattractive. In elementary and high school-aged children, jealousy can look like gossiping, whispering, posting pictures on social media that purposely make someone feel left out and ostracizing the "threat". In all actuality, the "threat" is typically someone just like your child who is looking to belong. Admitting to jealousy requires vulnerability, which is the last thing any of us want to do when we are already feeling vulnerable in our relationships. We need to teach our children to recognize jealous feelings for what they are: **our insecurities coming to the surface and putting us on high alert to any perceived threat**. By working to strengthen relationships with others and include others, kids often realize that the perceived threat is actually just another vulnerable person looking for friends. If the "object of their affection" really wants to move on to other friendships, then (just like in the dating world), we need to help our child let go of the exclusive friendship and not allow jealousy to turn her into someone she is not.

Navigating the social world is not something that comes naturally to a lot of children. We need to actively teach children and teens how to be a good friend and a good dating partner. Healthy relationships start with both parties agreeing to invest, problem-solve, and work through any bumps in the relationship. When one-half of the two-some is invested more heavily than the other, hurt feelings and insecurities come to the surface and the relationship is no longer healthy. Helping your child to realize when to invest and work on a relationship and when to let go is an investment in healthy relationships in the future.

For more information or assistance, please contact your child's school counsellor or a community counsellor.