



FCS-2427

# Help Kids Make Friends: Use Emotion Coaching

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## Purpose

This fact sheet has three purposes:

- To increase parents' awareness of research showing why children's friendships matter.
- To share the research on benefits of emotion coaching for children's friendships.
- To guide parents in how to increase emotion coaching and decrease emotion dismissing.

## Why are children's friendships important?

Children's friendships are related to their positive mental health, engagement with school, social acceptance and school success. Examples of positive mental health linked to children's friendships include lower levels of depression and less loneliness. This link between children's and teens' friendships and positive mental health endures over time. For example, friendships in adolescence are associated with those teens' mental health many years later as they become young adults. This means the benefits of friendships outlast experiences at home with their parents and set the stage for an emotionally healthy adult life.

## How are children's friendships important?

Positive friendships feature emotional support, companionship, validation and/or help. Such friendships are also called "high-quality friendships." Often, these friendships are reciprocated. Both friends report not only companionship and help, but also security and closeness in their relationship with each other. In contrast, negative friendships usually feature disagreements, criticism and/or conflict. Positive friendships are associated with better mental health. Negative friendships are not. One kind of negative friendship is particularly responsible for its negative long-term effects; friendships featuring approval of problem behavior are linked with later deviant behavior, including drug use.

## What is emotion coaching?

Emotion coaching refers to behaviors that are supportive of children's emotions. These include helping children understand how emotions work, teaching children skills for coping with emotions, accepting children's feelings, and helping children learn constructive words and behaviors to express intense emotions. Emotion coaching also can refer to specific behaviors that emotion-coaching parents use. These can include parents' specific words to label children's feelings and questions parents ask that promote children's reflections about feelings.

## What are the benefits of emotion coaching?

Emotion coaching by parents is associated with their children's positive social and emotional skills. Children of emotion-coaching parents are more empathetic, cooperative and better able to regulate their emotions. Children also get along better with other children. This means that they are better at making and keeping friends. They also have better physical and emotional health. The most recent research shows that training parents in emotion coaching improves their children's behavior problems and increases children's emotion knowledge and emotion regulation. All of these have been linked to children's abilities to make and keep friends.

## What can parents say and do to use emotion coaching?

Research reveals helpful words and behaviors parents use that validate children's emotions. Emotion validation refers to different ways by which parents support children's emotional expression. But there are several first steps before parents can validate children's emotions:

1. Encourage a child to express their feelings.
2. Listen carefully.
3. Repeat or rephrase the child's words to make sure the parent has understood the child.

After these first steps, then parents can validate a child's feelings by:

- Using words to label the emotions;
- Using affectionate words and behaviors (hugs, gentle touches) to accept both negative and positive emotions;
- Using questions to encourage deeper reflection about what the child is feeling;
- Using questions to discuss causes and consequences of emotions;
- Using questions to discuss alternative ways of emotion expression;
- Responding with empathy and kindness to emotional outbursts;
- Encouraging soothing and calming routines that will foster emotional self-regulation.

Examples of what parents can say are in the table below. Parents may prefer different words to accomplish emotion coaching and validation based on their varied experiences due to race, culture, community, family history and children's life events.

**Table 1.** Emotion coaching: toddler to kindergarten.

What to Do	What to Say
Listen and accept	<i>"Your voice sounds really sad. Are you feeling sad? It is okay to feel sad."</i>
Label and confirm	<i>"You cried when Susan took your ball. Were you feeling sad? Were you feeling angry?"</i>
Encourage limits and alternatives	<i>"You seem angry. But, you can't hit. Can you use your words? Can you tell Susan you would like to play with the group?"</i>
Encourage calming	<i>"Take a deep breath. Can you count to four while you do that? Do you need to walk while you take your deep breaths?"</i>

**Table 2.** Emotion coaching: elementary to pre-teen.

What to Do	What to Say
Listen and accept	<i>"I understand moving to a new school is hard for you. It would make sense if you were worried. It is okay to be worried about new things."</i>
Label and confirm	<i>"It sounds as if you felt confused about whether you were sad or angry. Do you think maybe you were feeling sad but it was coming out as mad?"</i>
Encourage limits and alternatives	<i>"You seem very upset. But you may not hurt others. What could you do instead when friends won't let you participate?"</i>
Encourage calming	<i>"It seems like this really hurt your feelings and has you upset. What can you do to think about the situation differently?"</i>

## What happens when parents discourage children's emotions?

Some parents are uncomfortable with children's emotions. They dismiss their children's emotions by ignoring, criticizing or punishing them. Or they give in to their children's emotions, doing things like bribing them to stop expressing their emotions. Children whose feelings are punished, dismissed or not allowed will not learn how to express them. Instead they will learn emotions are bad. Or they will learn that emotions are to be suppressed. They won't learn that expressing emotions constructively is healthy. This can result in problems at school and interfere with successful transitions to adolescence and adulthood.

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