

# **“You’re Not My Friend Anymore!”**

By Karen Jacobson and Lauren Bondy

Your child is playing nicely with friends, when suddenly you hear one child say, “You are not my friend anymore”, or “Me and Suzie do not like you.” or “You can’t play with us!” When a child’s feelings are hurt, parents feel devastated and wonder how to help.

It is helpful to know that comments like these are common among young children and fall under the category of “normal, social pain.” Most children will experience friendship problems sometime in their lives. Typically, this does not lead to emotional scars. And yet, for many parents it is difficult to watch their child struggle socially. They are pained when their child is excluded or hurt by another’s words or actions.

Parents cannot protect their children from friendship struggles. Every child will both exhibit and experience unkind behavior at times. They will make poor choices as they learn, grow and develop. Despite the occasional discomforts of friendship, it is through peers that children learn to navigate conflicts, problem solve and develop social skills. Conflict nurtures coping skills and develops resiliency.

***What do I do when my child says, “Julie said she’s not my friend anymore!” (or is upset about a peer conflict)?***

## **Step 1: Remain Calm**

Remind yourself that this is normal and does not mean the end of a friendship. Manage your own anxiety and fear. Often children say mean things when they are angry. Often they do not mean what they say. Children tend to focus on the part of the school day or play date that did not go well and “forget” about the enjoyable parts.

## **Step 2: Listen and Empathize**

Children **MUST** feel heard and accepted before they can calm down or listen to any other helpful suggestions from you. Say, “Ohm, it sounds like it really hurt your feelings when Julie said that.”

## **Step 3: Ask open-ended questions and then listen**

Show your child that you are interested in them and how they feel. By asking open ended questions you will gain a better sense of what happened. Resist being a detective but rather help your child think about how to solve the problem. The following questions may be helpful:

- How did you handle it? (this lets kids know that they did handle it – they made it through the situation)
- What was happening when she said that?
- What happened next?
- Has it happened before or to anymore else?
- Do you think she will be your friend when she feels better?

- Do you like playing with her?
- Would you like to be her friend?

**Step 4:** Brainstorm ways to problem-solve

Help your child explore their options. Allow time for them to think and offer some ideas of your own with their permission. You might say, “Let’s talk about your choices. What ideas do you have?” Write down ALL ideas; if your child comes up with an idea you disapprove of, “say that’s an idea” and put it on the list without judgment. The list might look something like:

1. I could just play with someone else
2. I could talk to her and say “I feel bad when you say that, I want to be your friend”
3. I could say “I want to be your friend when you are ready”
4. I could go talk to my teacher or parent if I feel sad
5. I could just wait because I know that she gets mad a lot and then always comes to play with me again

**Step 5:** Evaluate the ideas together

Help your child think through each idea and weigh the pros and cons. Then, allow your child to choose the solution that feels best. Remember, it may not be the choice you would make.

Just because your child is struggling with friendship issues, doesn’t mean that you need to struggle too. Parent coaching can get you and your child back on track and leave both of you feeling more confident. Call us today for an appointment in person or by phone.