

# Understanding Elementary School Friendships



The social and power struggles that began in preschool get more dramatic, more important and more complicated as girls go into elementary school. Now girls are moving away from their parents and creating independent relationships on their own.

In elementary school, friends often become inseparable. Here's how one ten-year-old describes the process: "A best friend is like you love her; she's like your sister or something. I think the difference between best friends and friends is that with best friends you hold their hands, you laugh a lot, and you feel more close than just friends. You always invite her first. You feel like she's part of your heart."

## **Girl friendships are spectacular and all-encompassing.**

Overall, friendships for girls in elementary school can be deeply fulfilling. "At their best, girl friends are trusting, loving and supportive at this age," says Catherine Steiner-Adair, Ed.D, co-author of *Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health and Leadership*. "In these instances, parents can butt out — just be there to help your daughter make play dates and get to them."

## **The nature of girls' play evolves in elementary school.**

Girls between the ages of seven and ten can play together for hours. They love to engage in fantasy play with dolls, puppets, and other objects that they turn into whatever they want them to be. They are also taking on physical activities like soccer and gymnastics, and they are forming friendships based on what they love to do.

While these close relationships can bring joy to a child's life, there are plenty of tricky situations to navigate as well.

## **Some girls at this age start competing and rejecting.**

The struggle over who is best friends with whom begins during elementary school and never really ends. By the time girls are in third or fourth grade, “constant conversation about other kids (otherwise known as gossip) becomes the glue of many friendships and can become a real problem. Girls know that they are being talked about by other girls and it worries them,” says Michael Thompson, “but it can become a real problem when it gets mean. At this age, girls also can get competitive about sports, academics, and popularity.”

### **Cliques form and reform during this time.**

In elementary school, girls form groups to explore common interests and out of a need to be included and, sometimes, to be in control. These groups can become a problem when they get mean, exclusionary and gossipy. But the fact that they form is normal. Experts recommend that you become a role model for good social behavior, help your daughter name her thoughts and feelings, and act as a sounding board to help her talk about issues with cliques and friendships.

### **Best friends become a kind of currency.**

In elementary school, many girls feel it's essential to have a best friend. “Best friends become a sort of currency,” says Lawrence Cohen. “The words, ‘I’ll be your best friend’ also mean, ‘I have power over you, because I could take my friendship away.’” Rachel Simmons notes, “That particular threat is a prime example of relational aggression. The prevalence — and normalization — of bullying within girls’ friendships can make it difficult for some girls to call a friend out on bullying behavior, because she is a friend.” Lyn Mikel Brown adds, “It’s important that we tell girls that they don’t have to be friends with everyone, especially people who don’t treat them well.”

### **Relational aggression heightens in elementary school.**

“Relational aggression is the use of friendship as a weapon,” says Simmons. Girls can gain power by forming close friendships that exclude other girls, although the act of forming a close friendship is not by nature exclusive. “Girls are entitled to their social groups,” notes Simmons. “But it’s what they do within those friendships and with them that can become aggressive — by gossiping, by sharing secrets, even just by giving dirty looks to girls not considered cool.” Jealousy can also be one of the causes of bullying. “A lot of times, girls bully each other because they feel jealous,” adds Catherine Steiner-Adair. “Girls behave this way because they are supposed to be nice and don’t know how to express their anger except through indirect means. This doesn’t make the behavior OK, but it’s important to understand when you talk to your daughter about it.”

It is important to keep in mind that there are no social rules that apply to all girls. Some girls have the same friends for years, while others break up and reform friendships often. Here are a couple factors to consider:

### **Some girls may need help with social skills.**

Some girls are shy — and do need help asserting themselves and getting to know other kids. Socializing is sometimes best achieved informally. If they are able to hang out in the playground, kids “find” each

other. “Some girls are temperamentally more introverted,” says Michael Thompson, “but it’s only a small percentage of these girls that we need to worry about. If your daughter has some friends and is liked by kids, she might need some encouragement and some help arranging play dates, but she doesn’t need to be worried about.”

**The media can influence how girls relate to their friends.**

Lyn Mikel Brown notes that the media play a big role in influencing girls’ actions at this age. According to Brown, behavior that we label “gossipy” can in part be considered learned behavior, from TV and movies that celebrate stereotypical girl relationships. “Parental influence plays an important role in girls’ socialization; and cultural norms, values, and even interaction styles differ along race and class lines,” states Brown. “At the same time, media have a big impact on girls’ relationships, selling them messages about how girls are supposed to look and behave. A recent study finds that female aggression on TV is now so common it has reached the status of a female character trait, and that girls watching are socialized into relational aggression.”