



Parent Guide

An approach to help teenagers aged 8
to 18 navigate the choppy waters
of friendship problems



Teenagers are no problem, no problem at all...

On the whole, adolescents are good and want to obey the rules, get on with everyone and be happy. However, they sometimes find that the search for trusting and reliable friendships is hard and that without such friendships they feel very unhappy. Their unhappiness is often displayed through tearfulness and even depression. Adults can help in only very limited ways because the problems within friendship groups are very fluid and difficult to express precisely.

“Early adolescence appears to be especially stressful on friendships and peer relations, signified by a sharp increase in indirect relational aggression. More typical of girls

and more distressful to girls than to boys, relational aggression, characterised by such behaviours as spreading rumours or threatening withdrawal of affiliation, appears to emerge as they attempt to negotiate current power relations and affirm or resist conventional constructions of femininity.”

(The American Psychological Society)

However, we can use a **model** and a **common language** to aid communication and give insight. That’s where the Get on Board approach comes in...

The Model



"The classic girl clique is like a life raft for teenagers at school. Imagine you and your child are on a cruise ship. Then teenagers start telling each other that the ship is stupid and boring and it's time to get off. As you watch helplessly, they leave behind everything that is safe and secure, gets into a life raft with people who have little in common with her except their age, and drifts away.

Once they're on the raft, they're too far away from you and realises their survival depends on bonding with the other teenagers in the raft. They're desperately afraid of being cast out. We can see now how teenagers feel forced to act a certain way to be accepted by their peers."

(Rosalind Wiseman 'Queen Bees and Wannabes')

Adolescents feel a need to be on a raft with at least one other peer – a need so strong that it feels like they are drowning if they don't achieve this.

We call this the 'Existential Imperative'.



The Vocabulary

Words are important – they help us communicate across the void of generational and emotional disconnection that is common between adolescents and their parents. The **Get on Board** approach creates a new and shared vocabulary which enables adolescents and adults to communicate accurately and with insight. The terms you see listed here refer to types of behaviour, not types of teenagers.

Membership Students

Membership Student is an ordinary adolescent who is a member of a raft with at least one other peer (friend) on board.

Person-in-the-water

Person-in-the-water is someone who has no raft to be on either because they are:

New – new to their school and so has no friends. Or

a:

Casualty Student – someone who has been removed from their raft and has no apparent friendship group.

The Lonely Person

The Lonely Person is someone who, for various reasons, seems unable to become a Membership Student. Sometimes it is because they have not properly separated from their parents yet and don't feel the Existential Imperative as keenly as others; by the time they do feel the Imperative it can be too late to successfully negotiate onto a raft. A Lonely Person can sometimes appear to be happy and be friends with lots of people/groups, but fails to achieve 'full' membership of any group and is always an 'invitee' rather than a 'de facto' member. Friendship is based on **shared experience**, and it is therefore important for them to find things they have in common, or even create shared experiences by, say, going out to the cinema together. Adults can help the Lonely Person by offering strategies but not by becoming directly involved.

Leaders

There are **True Leaders** who seem to have natural charisma and leadership comes to them often without seeking the role for themselves. And there are **Would-be Leaders** who try to assert themselves over other people in order to try to gain control. If they can control the group then they need not fear ending up in the water – without friends. Some Would-be Leaders (and others) seek a Best Friend Forever – a single person with whom they can form an unbreakable bond and therefore protect themselves from ever being friendless. But sometimes, in their efforts to bond with someone else, they show desperation which is an unattractive and needy characteristic which ironically leads them to fail in their quest.

The Peacemaker

The Peacemaker is someone who just wants everyone to get on and is therefore happy to agree with whomever they are talking to. This can lead to some awkward situations when there is disagreement amongst their friends, but a Peacemaker is usually very adept at navigating a smooth passage between warring factions without losing face or damaging her integrity. A Peacemaker is often very popular and much sought after as a Best Friend because she is easy going and does not cause conflict.

The Hopper

The Hopper is the person every parent would want their child to be! They are legitimate members of many rafts and can ‘hop’ from one to another without causing upset or jealousy.

The Messenger

The Messenger is someone who cleverly relays secrets between groups in order to strengthen the trust between themselves and others and therefore make her a more secure membership person. This strategy can be successful in the short term but goes badly wrong when others find out their ‘private’ conversations have been leaked to others.



The Singleton

The Singleton is someone for whom the whole idea of the Existential Imperative does not seem to matter. They are happy and content in their own company, though will often have friends too. If their friends show relational aggression towards them, they just ignore it. It is important to understand, however, that a Singleton is born, not made.

This is not a category that parents can guide their child towards – unlike being a Hopper. The Singleton just seems to possess the ability to remain slightly disconnected from all the teenagers around her; this is both a strength and a burden since what they gain in avoiding relational aggression and not being prey to the Existential Imperative they lose in the absolute closeness of membership rafts. Singletons are rare.

The Queen Bee

The Queen Bee is someone whose behaviour seems to exert power over others which is not always wanted or appropriate. They may form very close bonds with someone for a week or two and then equally as suddenly pull away and move on to someone else.

They manipulate teenagers and adults around them to ensure their friendships never fail; they like to stay in complete control. Queen Bees behave like this because, like everyone else, they are insecure. In the case of the Queen Bee, they are particularly insecure and it helps us understand their challenging behaviour to remember that.

The Bully

The Bully is a rare thing but they do exist. Often driven by deep-seated jealousy and insecurity the Bully stands accused of relational aggression that ‘crosses the line’. By this we mean that adult observers can clearly identify forms of behaviour that fulfil the criteria of bullying – a sustained attempt to make one child feel put down and uncomfortable. Using the ‘Get on Board’ model can be a very effective way of getting such people to self-correct and tone down their behaviour. No one wants to be a bully and when they are shown the effect of their behaviour on others they make the necessary adjustments. These adjustments come about partly because they are driven by adult authority which carries the threat of sanctions, but also because the Bully will quickly realise that once she is exposed as a Bully they will lose friends and therefore the Existential Imperative kicks in. In her book *‘Queen Bees and Wannabes’* Rosalind Wiseman points to ‘learned behaviours’ from home and urges parents to model generosity of spirit and kindness towards humanity when talking in front of their child.

Group / Raft Sizes

It is common for teenagers groups to be configured in pairs, threes, fours and sometimes more than four.



Pairs

Pros: stability lies in co-dependency. 'Don't reject me because without me you would be alone too.'

Cons: Pairs appear strong and generate envy. Someone with weak membership of another group may attack to try to replace a pair member. A bigger group may worry that the pair is attracting members from its group and might suddenly turn into a three or four thus leave some as Casualty Girls. The bigger group may then campaign generally to make the pair look socially outside the norm so that no one is tempted to join them. Relational aggression shown

to a pair is proportionate to the strength of its bonds – the stronger the friendship the more they are attacked.

Pairs often offer temporary membership to Person-in-the-Water as a safe haven. This may appear altruistic but actually it allows them to create allies and also appear less stable than they really are and therefore attract less aggression.

The fallout from strong pairs splitting can be significant and it is one of the few areas where the adults can offer guidance. Precepts of tolerance, forgiveness and understanding, as handed down by adults, can help to heal wounds and soften the



blow of ruptures in a strong pair. This is the exception to the rule forbidding micro-management and is allowable because the rupturing pair usually is experiencing turbulence because of emotions that are associated with the wider human experience and not just the Existential Imperative.

Some teenagers crave being in a pair beyond what is reasonable and will feel insecure despite being in a relatively stable group of three or more. Their desire to have a BFF will create instability in a group of three or more as they constantly try to create a pair between themselves and one other and dislodge others as a

consequence. Such a person is often too insecure to form a strong pair because they lack the maturity to create a trusting friendship.

Threes

Pros: with the right personalities threes can be stable and strong. The number is not so large as to create natural splits and the girls can often negotiate their friendships successfully.

Cons: threes can be tense and stressful because the possibility of being excluded is always present. Desks and buses have seats in pairs! Each person in the three can feel the other two are closer to each other.



Fours

Pros: can split into two pairs easily.

Desks and buses have two chairs.

Threes are less stable and so there is a self-serving need to maintain the status quo of a group of four.

Cons: tend not to entertain Person-in-the-Water and so can be inflexible.

Fours can be quite large and therefore a bit unwieldy from the point of view of organising themselves. If one person can't make it, do the other three go to the cinema?

Fours can stifle individuality as norms are hard to agree on with so many others.

Teenagers feel a strong need to 'blend' at this age and blending with three others can be tricky.

More than Four

Groups of more than four spring up from time to time and are common in big schools. They are often characterised by the fluid arrangements by which smaller groups can exist within the bigger whole.



Strategies

**Things that can help now,
and for the future.**

In school:

Share the model with the students

Simply sharing the model with students in school is effective at both preventing problems occurring and also helping to solve issues between students and friendship groups where problems have arisen.

Role-play with the students

Simple, short role-play scenarios are very powerful in coaching students how to negotiate power relationships. They instantly recognise the issues presented in a role-play, and the exercise allows them to create a dialogue and debate about fairness, inclusion, empathy and bullying.

For example: take a simple scenario of three students in a friendship group getting onto the school minibus and realising straight away that there will be one of them sitting on their own. By acting out this scene the girls can be guided towards effective ways to include each other, offering mutual re-assurance and support. Role-play reveals the important subtext of every potentially conflictual situation and shows the students how to negotiate with each other without the need for relational aggression.

At home:

Don't try to micro-manage unless bullying is REALLY happening

If things are not going well, making that all-important judgement about the stories your child is telling is hard: is this bullying or not? First of all, you have to ask yourself whether the relational aggression apparently being shown towards her is a) real b) just part of a 'conflict' and friendship turbulence.

Remember:

You can always come and share your concerns with teachers without necessarily asking for action or intervention. Once the school is aware of what might be happening we can make gentle and discrete enquiries and try to get to the bottom of things to prevent bullying. But remember on the whole, bullying is rare.

Model good relational attitudes to fellow human beings in front of your child. As mentioned above, it is a good idea to check the way in which you, as parents, talk about other people. Is the language you use and the attitude you project what you would want your daughter to replicate?



Acknowledge that your child is changing

She is likely to be as driven, as any other teenage is, by the Existential Imperative and so don't be naïve about what they might be doing to protect their friendships. It can be hard to acknowledge – but teenagers do lie, and parents and teachers are often used as pawns in the game. Although it is true that they're telling you things that are going on in their life, don't assume they're telling you everything.

Stay connected but don't push it, don't pump for information

Your child is growing up and learning to separate herself from you in preparation for adulthood. For a teenager and their parents this can be both exciting as well as painful. They are still your child and you are still their parents, responsible for their emotional and physical well-being. But give them SPACE, allow them to make mistakes, to try on 'different hats', to come at issues from different angles. If they are experiencing relational aggression the more you try to get information out of them, the more likely they are to find herself distorting the truth in her favour. Friendship groups are fluid and complex and parents should not try to micro-manage them from home.

Above all, your child will naturally be reluctant to tell you the whole truth if they are going to be told off by you for the behaviours they got wrong.

Be there for them; listen and comfort but try hard NOT to offer solutions

Let them try out their anger with you, listen to them railing but don't amplify it.

“Don't tell them what to do,” Wiseman writes in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, “Instead, describe the behaviour you respect. Work with them as they come up with a plan that describes specifically what they want to happen differently, and how they can make that happen.”

Monitor social media, internet activity, mobile phone messages

The big difference between now and 20 years ago is that the issues of friendships get picked up out of school far more readily than they used to. Texting, and social networks allow adolescents to continue to 'discuss' their issues at all times of the day and night. It is very common for teenagers to confront each other via text: e.g. “What have you been saying about me?”

FOMO – 'Fear of Missing Out'

If you can, come to an agreement with the families of your child's friends that phones and devices will be switched off at a certain moment in the evening during the school week. That way nobody feels they are missing out.

The school's best advice is:

Make sure you have the password to all your child's social media accounts (they may have more than one). Shut down the internet at home at night by simply unplugging the Wifi. It is important to allow them some privacy but a good idea to check text messaging if they are behaving strangely and won't tell you why. Take your child's mobile phone away at night; if they object to their phone being taken away at night - ask them why.

They'll get through this – just sit with them, and hang on!

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of the school and you, as parents, things won't seem to be improving with your child's friendships. But remember that things WILL get better – you just need to hang on. Support them, love them, listen to them and they will find their own way.



Parenting types

Queen Bees and Wannabes by Rosalind Wiseman is highly recommended and this guide finishes with her 'take' on parenting styles. The titles she gives these styles speak for themselves; she endorses only one style; all the others are problematic. They are:

The Lock-Her-In-A-Closet Parent

The Best-Friend Parent

The Hip Parent

The Believe-Everything-She-Says Parent The "You Mess With My Kid, You Mess With Me" Parent

The "Let's Let Them Work It Out" Parent

The Pushover Parent

The Benign Neglect Parent

The No-Excuses Parent

The Private Parent

The No-Privacy Parent

The Don't-Ask, Don't-Tell Parent

The Overbearing Parent

The Helicopter Parent

The 'You MUST tell me' Parent

The only style she endorses is called:

The Tough-love Parent





GIRLSONBOARD.CO.UK
info@girlsonboard.co.uk

 @GirlsonBoardnet