Loves Me, Loves Me Not

Four keys to supporting kids through the ups and downs of friendship without micromanaging their social lives.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke
photos by Lori Lewis Photography & Design

Kids' friendships seem to have more ups and downs than a theme-park rollercoaster. Today, they're best friends. Tomorrow, mortal enemies. Then—don't blink—they're friends again.

Driving home, you ask your kids what happened at school. Your son mumbles, "Nothing," in his casual, I-dare-you-to-ask-for-more-information kind of way. Before you can follow up, your daughter spouts, "I hate Maddie. She told Sarah she thinks my hair is ugly, and now Sarah won't let me sit with them at lunch. So they're not my friends anymore. I hate them both."

Hot potatoes

Whew! When you asked about her day, you were hoping to hear she'd learned why tigers have stripes or that she had aced her spelling test. Instead, you're sitting in the driver's seat with a hot potato in your lap: an emotional hot potato, that is.

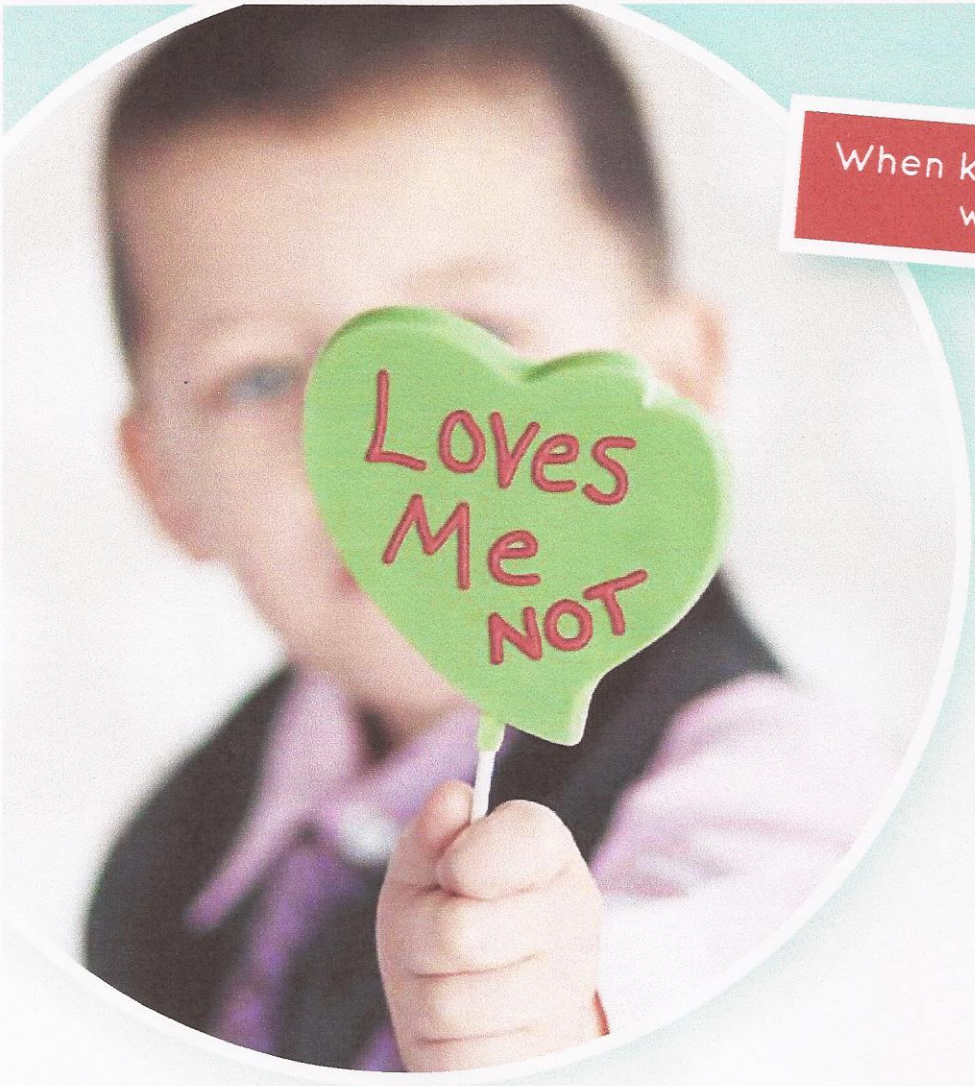
When kids are overwhelmed by their feelings and don't know how to handle them, they pass them on, says Lawrence Cohen, psychologist and author of "Playful Parenting" (Ballantine, 2001). Eliminating bad feelings—by passing them to parents or other trusted adults—frees kids to explore and experience what is happening around them without getting stuck on issues they can't solve. You, left holding the hot potato, are not so lucky.

When kids share their troubles, we feel their pain. And as parents, we feel a responsibility to comfort them and help them repair broken relationships. As we consider how to respond, we revisit our own childhood turmoil, says Cohen. Grappling with our own feelings, we may ask probing questions that unintentionally dig at kids' wounds: "Why didn't Sarah stick up for you?" "Did something else happen between you three?"

Michael Thompson, clinical psychologist and co-author of "Best Friends, Worst Enemies" (Ballantine, 2001) calls this "interviewing for pain." And, he says, this approach can backfire; instead of improving the situation, it can cause kids to relive and inflate their hurts. Although kids' clashes are uncomfortable for parents, it's best if parents support without intruding. Conflict is a crucible for social development.

Why conflict occurs & what kids learn

Psychologists recognize a number of universal human needs. First, we all want to feel a sense of connection to others. Kids seek relationships that make them feel special and spend a great deal of time playing and sharing personal information with their friends.



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In addition, we want to be recognized as competent, powerful individuals. Your child's desire to make the dance team, score the winning run, or prevail over siblings and parents on family game night reflects these needs for achievement and status.

The recipe for dissonance goes something like this: Create a close connection between friends, add a spirit of competitiveness and even an ounce of I'm-better-than-you-are, and voilà, you've got conflict. Winning friends and earning Guitar Hero rock-star status aren't incompatible goals in the long term, but on any given afternoon they can cause friction. While it's tempting to wish for perpetual harmony, a reasonable amount of conflict is good for kids. "There's no doubt that some of the most important lessons our kids will learn don't happen in the classroom, but with a friend or two" during playtime, says Michelle Borba, author of "Nobody Likes Me, Everybody Hates Me" (Jossey-Bass, 2005). A child's sense of personal identity develops as he sees himself through the eyes of his friends.

When disagreements arise, kids learn to negotiate, to stand up for themselves, and to communicate their values. And when they mess up, they learn to take responsibility and make apologies, says Borba. These social skills stick with kids into adulthood and are critical to school and career success. While parents can help kids learn from their experiences, we can't learn these lessons for them.

How to support kids' friendship-building skills

Getting involved in kids' social lives can feel like stepping into a minefield—you don't know where hot issues are buried and missteps can cause emotional explosions. Use these strategies to support your kids through the trying times in social development.

1. Create opportunities.

Kids don't want parents to manage their social lives—that just isn't cool. To help kids make friends, parents have to be stealthy. Invite another family over for dinner and let the kids entertain themselves while the grown-ups talk. They may groan initially, but they'll rise to the occasion. Step back and let kids get acquainted through play. Share family activities often if the kids hit it off.

2. Put problems in perspective.

Though it's easy to dismiss kids' social woes as insignificant, research conducted at University of California Los Angeles shows social rejection activates the same brain areas responsible for physical pain: Being left out really does hurt. But don't overreact—it's likely your child will get over the hurt, reconcile with her friend, or find a new one.

3. Check your expectations.

Kids vary widely in how many friends they have and the depth of their relationships. "How many friends our kids have isn't the issue," says Borba. What matters most are your child's feelings about himself and his relationships with peers. Friendship should be a (mostly) positive experience.

4. Be a sounding board.

When kids share their struggles, it's tempting to step in and solve the problem. Resist the urge to call the friend's parent or tell your child what to say or do. Instead, support your child by listening to what happened and absorbing the weight of her worries. With your emotional support, your child will find her own way to mend the rift.

Quarrels and breakups happen, and kids' hurt feelings run deep. Often, though not always—after some time or a shift in activities—kids find a way to make up.

Whether friends come or go, parents can offer a listening ear, a silly smile, and a shoulder to cry on. But we can't make them empathize, sort out their feelings, force an apology, or fix their friendships.

Some lessons only friends can teach.

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