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## Family Focus

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and we spend much time rebuilding her shattered self-confidence and self-esteem. We look at how the fact that Lila is making different choices doesn't mean there is something wrong or missing in Ava. Lila, Ava, and their classmates are in the developmental phase of discovering and forming their identities. This process often means trying on various relationships to see which seem to be a good fit at certain times. If Lila wants to be more popular, she may gravitate to a certain group. If she wants to identify as more artistic, she may turn to a different group.

Sometimes some members of the most popular groups in elementary and middle schools behave meanly to those outside their circle. If your child tries to be a part of such a group and opens up to you about his or her struggles, help them examine their thinking. She or he may want to feel more popular or avoid being a target, so they want to align themselves with those in power. Encourage them to think about how it is important for them to like, respect and trust their friends. As the saying goes, we're known by the company we keep, so ask if they really want to endorse the way the popular group treats others.

It is important to identify what constitutes abusive behavior with your child. Some think this term only describes physical mistreatment or verbally volatile behavior. But definitions include, "to treat in a harmful, injurious or offensive way," and "to speak insultingly, harshly and unjustly to or about; to revile; to malign." When you help your children recognize the signs of abusive behavior, they will be better able to make decisions about their relationships.

As your child's role model, if you are able to assess your own friendships that don't seem to be working well, you will be better able to help him or her pay attention to their feelings. If your child has negative feelings about a friend, she or he has choices. Your child can make peace with the friend's limitations, can try to directly address any problems, or can reduce the amount of contact your child has with the friend. The child doesn't need to disengage completely - or "ghost" a former friend - unless the relationship becomes abusive. It is always preferable to remain polite and cordial to people, but this doesn't mean your child needs to maintain an unhealthy friendship. Show him or her and tell your child how there are many other people to get to know and to befriend.

Often boys (and some girls) guard their feelings and don't share them easily, so it is especially important to look for signs that your child may be experiencing difficulty with peer relationships. When a child wants to maintain his or her privacy and independence regarding friendships, and perhaps other matters as well, it is more difficult for parents to chime in. As many parents who have tried to steer their child know, the more you try to advise, the more resistance you will get. The best approach is a supportive one (even if you have to stifle yourself), where you let your child know that you trust his or her judgment and you're available if

By the time they are in third or fourth grade, many children are already discerning in their selection of friends. Your child may pick someone to be a friend based on interests or personality or popularity or a variety of other criteria. Sometimes it's simply a matter of another child reaching out to your child in friendship. Friendships can be quite uncomplicated at this stage - until they're not.

What gets in the way for some elementary through middle school children is when someone they thought was a good friend either begins ignoring them to be with others or even worse, disparages them behind their backs. Occasionally the so-called friend says hurtful comments directly, but typically there are passive-aggressive displays of withdrawal that are difficult to decipher.

For example, Lila and Ava were good friends beginning in second grade. Now, in seventh grade, Lila is hanging out more and more with a new group of friends. Ava makes efforts to restore their close relationship, and frequently asks Lila if she's mad at her and to tell her if she's done anything wrong. Lila says everything is fine and she's not mad, but she continues to pursue other friendships while giving little attention to Ava.

No matter how a person chooses to de-escalate a friendship, the result is painful for the one who feels abandoned. I currently see Ava in my therapy practice,

your child ever wants to talk. Think long-term instead of short-term. You want to pave the way for your child to eventually feel comfortable in sharing with you.

However, if you see your child showing signs of distress, such as withdrawing from family and friends, cutting, substance use, extreme mood instability, psychosomatic complaints or failure to engage in schoolwork, it is important to be proactive and not wait for him or her to come to you. You need to point out the signs you see, reassure your child that he or she is loved and accepted, and ask to please let you know what your child is experiencing. If your child is reluctant to talk with you or another trusted family member or friend, ask if they would be willing to talk to a therapist. You may need to insist that he or she be evaluated for depression. Too often, and sometimes tragically, when children keep painful feelings to themselves and don't express them verbally, they may act them out in a physical manner.

For parents with a child who doesn't share easily or welcome input, it can help to occasionally mention your own experiences - casually, so that it doesn't seem like you're trying to make a point. The goal is for your child not to feel that your attention is on him or her; rather that you are just trying to share some aspects of yourself with no reciprocity in mind. Over time, if you continue to respect your child's boundaries, most children and young adults will appreciate your efforts and be willing to be more communicative with you.

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