

'Did You Make Any Friends Today?'

By Karen Gauvreau

Our 9-year-old son, Rylan, is outgoing and usually makes friends easily. This year, however, he had a completely new group of classmates. When he expressed concerns about the new class starting, I reassured him he would make friends quickly. But at the end of the first day of school, with shoulders slumped, he said, "I was there for seven whole hours and didn't make one friend."

In my attempts to be reassuring, I had raised his expectations. Soon after, a family friend offered greater wisdom. She encouraged my son to be patient, spending time to observe other children to decide which friendships he really wanted to pursue.

It's easy to forget that even the most outgoing tweens can have apprehensions when facing new social situations. How can we help our children become comfortable socially?

Acknowledge their challenge

Tweens need reassurance that feeling anxious or awkward is common. Reinforce this by sharing examples of surprisingly awkward people. For instance, when strangers recognized Albert Einstein, he would often say, "Oh yes, people do tell me I look like him," and then he'd rush away. Also be willing to share your own stories about handling uncomfortable moments, especially humorous ones.

As a family, try discussing these questions together:

- What makes it difficult to talk to new people?
- When have you felt nervous about a situation?
- How did you get over it enough to eventually feel comfortable in that situation?
- What experiences would you have missed if you hadn't taken a risk?

Talking about anxieties in a relaxed, open way invites further discussion. It is also a first step toward making progress in these areas.

Create a plan

Initiating conversation is challenging with any new situation. If your tween is willing, role-play a few scenarios she will likely encounter. Practice safe questions to kick-start a conversation, such as, "Which sports do you like?" or "What's your favorite movie?"

Even the most reluctant tween comes to life when he talks about a topic that interests him. Brainstorm together a few "hooks" that suit his interests and personality. These could include sharing jokes or performing a simple magic trick. Also encourage him to look for opportunities to help others, such as by holding open a door or lending supplies. Friendships can definitely be launched over silly jokes, disappearing coins and borrowed pens.

Lunch hours and recess, with wide-open schoolyards and a sea of new faces, are especially intimidating. Encourage your tween to invite others to join an activity as a low-key way to connect. Have her pack a few items in advance — a soccer ball, long skipping rope or card game — to make her feel more prepared and calm.

Growth opportunities

If your tween feels quite uncomfortable in new situations, be intentional about providing growth opportunities. Nudge her to explore areas she is interested in. Perhaps a photography club, working with animals or volunteering at the library. Support new endeavors by researching opportunities, purchasing supplies and chauffeuring.

Make your home a welcoming place where other children enjoy spending time. Prepare for friends' visits with activities that will help everyone relax, such as baking together or having a game already set up.

My friend Sarah was a proactive mom who helped her daughter handle significant social anxiety. She regularly invited our family to their house, where her daughter felt most comfortable. As moms, Sarah and I initially facilitated activities and conversation, and over time we became much less involved in planning the time together. These visits became highlights for all of us, and our children gradually became close, comfortable friends.

Expand their perspective

Being convinced that everyone is watching can make kids feel awkward and uncomfortable. Reassure your child that most tweens are so focused on themselves that they aren't even paying attention to what others are doing or not doing. This can help alleviate the feeling that he or she is in the spotlight.

Also, help your tween shift his focus to others and watch his empathy and social confidence improve. A few years ago I wanted to help my boys be considerate of children who struggle socially. I encouraged them to invite someone who was often left out to visit our home. My most tentative son, Liam, surprised me by taking up this challenge. We practiced how to extend an invitation over the phone, and the two had a nice time together. By stepping out of his comfort zone, Liam grew deeper in his friendship with this boy, while honing his own social skills and confidence.

Tackle technology

My eldest son recently said he wanted to talk to his friend before going to bed, so I passed him the phone. Looking perplexed, he reached for his iPad and said, "Mom, I didn't mean I wanted to talk with my *mouth*."

These moments remind me of technology's role in our tweens' connections. This generation may debate that they are socially savvy because of their number of tweets, hits and likes. Yet interacting online is not the same as socializing in person. In their book [*The Digital Invasion*](#), Dr. Archibald Hart and Dr. Sylvia Hart Frejd caution that "the more we come to depend on the social connectedness offered by our digital world, the more intentional we must be in creating and sustaining *real* connectedness."

To this end, whenever my tweens invite friends over, I ask everyone to park his or her devices so they can spend quality time together. Although this may receive protests at first, it is a boundary worth enforcing. Otherwise it's too easy to default to staring at screens. Taking a pause from technology — phones, screen time, gaming — allows tweens to make eye contact, carry on conversations and negotiate what to do next, all of which are critical skills when developing socially.