

TRICKY FRIENDSHIP DAYS

Relatively small issues, like not being invited to a party, can arouse big, intense feelings in our kids. Because belonging is at stake, friendship challenges will always feel like a life-threatening experience – so be assured that most parents find themselves dealing with powerful tears and shattering disappointments after tricky friendship days.

It is easy for both parents and teachers to fall into the trap of trying to “dial down the drama” when our kids feel overwhelmed. However, minimising or dismissing strong feelings will only tend to ramp them up, because our tween’s brains seek to be heard and understood in the process of regulating. I’d also like to suggest that it denies our children the opportunity to master these big feelings. Our kids need to feel to practise the emotional regulation strategies they need to navigate life well.

I want to share three practical strategies that parents can do to support their tweens during these moments. Friendship challenges are an incredibly rich platform to help kids learn emotional regulation strategies, as well as social skills, and we want to capitalise on both as we coach them forward.

Strategy 1: Let’s not fight the intensity

The more I learn about emotions the more I am in awe of our body’s way of coming up with solutions to discomfort, anguish and pain we experience. It doesn’t make any sense to judge that process but rather appreciate it. That’s why we want tweens to know there are no bad or good emotions. There are only healthy emotions, and each one of them is an acceptable and necessary part of being human. Ideally, we want tweens to feel safe to feel, without shame or guilt. This means accepting emotions within our home, in the same way we accept anything else about ourselves (or our experiences) that we cannot change – our age, our height, freckles or ears.

Strategy 2: Ask questions that empower

Although it’s tempting (and much quicker) to offer children prescription answers to friendship problems, it won’t help them in the long term. The problem with childhood conflict always being followed by adult intervention, is that kids can get into the habit of projecting their wishful thinking onto someone else who they perceive as being more powerful than they are.

If our children focus their energy on recruiting support rather than problem-solving, they miss vital learning opportunities. We are best to ask questions that express a sense of curiosity and empower them to take ownership.

Strategy 3: Find a positive expression

Whereas there are times that we suppress our painful emotions for our own survival, emotions are far better off moving through our kids rather than festering inside them.