



BFF Forever: When friendships go sour

by Jenny Brockis

Emotional intelligence remains a work in progress throughout our lives. Dr Jenny Brockis offers parents tips to help children deal with emotional pain.

The four girls, or the 'Four Musketeers' as they called themselves, had been really close friends since Primary School. They did everything together. They shared the good times and the bad; they slept over at each other's houses (frequently at ours), and seemed really happy.

Then one day it all fell apart.

Noticing our daughter seemed unusually quiet I asked, "Is everything OK, you seem a little down?" Then it all came tumbling out.

One of the four had decided it was time to say goodbye. She didn't want to be part of that friendship group anymore and had already made overtures to another group that she wanted to be best friends with instead.

But rather than explaining her decision, she chose to break all contact with her former best friends and spread rumours that they had been mean to her and it was they who had outed her from the group. Bewildered and hurt the three girls attempted to rebut the accusations, to no avail. Their frustration led to resentment and anger along with grief that the happy band of four was no more.

Helping our kids deal with relationship issues is an important part of growing up; at any age. As adults we have our previous experience, logic, and reasoning which helps us to keep things in perspective, without resorting to catastrophising or experiencing those intense emotions that can be difficult to contain. That's because the fully mature adult brain uses the pre-frontal cortex (PFC), the thinking part of our brain to help regulate emotion and behaviour.

But a child does not attain full brain maturity until approximately the age of 24 when cognitive development is complete (boys can be a bit later!). This means our kids see their world through a predominantly emotional lens, they feel emotions more intensely than we do and they react more strongly to those emotions because they lack the regulatory mechanisms of a fully developed PFC.

Helping a child through a difficult time helps them develop a higher level of emotional intelligence (EQ), which helps them to handle those more complex interpersonal relationships as they get older.

It's hard seeing your child in pain, whether emotional or physical, and it's natural as a parent to want to fix it. What matters though is to not intervene with all guns blazing, as this can make matters worse and doesn't teach our children how to work through a tough time and find their own solutions. It's difficult too if we have a pre-

existing relationship with the other parents involved, because the fallout from our children's friendship issues impacts everyone.

Helping your child deal with emotional pain

Allow them to grieve

Pain hurts and that's normal. Social pain hurts as much as physical pain because they share common neural pathways. Share with your child that you're sorry they are hurting to help them learn that emotions are normal, and that it's normal too to feel that their whole world has temporarily turned upside down.

Encourage them to step away from the situation

When up close it can get *very* personal. Encourage your child to look at the situation from the other person's perspective to ease their pain; even though they may not fully understand why the other person acted in the way they did or said those horrid things. This helps them to reframe what happened, elevates empathy and builds resilience to future hurts. What doesn't work is returning fire with fire or blocking communication routes. A nasty comment on Facebook is best not responded to. However, telling your child to not use social media or to ban access to Facebook or their phone isolates them further and means they can't reach out to their other friends for support.

Offer time and an open ear

Sometimes what helps the most is to just be there. Offering support so they know you care with a kiss or a cuddle and encouragement to do some 'normal' things is what counts, as well as being available to just listen when required. It's about understanding, not interrogation. They don't necessarily want our advice!

Move forward with respect and dignity

A great friendship is a thing of joy, but many will wax and wane for a variety of reasons. Helping your child to celebrate what makes them feel good about any relationship leads to greater acceptance and tolerance of difference.

Emotional intelligence remains a work in progress throughout our lives. It's something that can always be built on and added to. Helping our children develop their EQ equips them to know they will survive when a relationship goes pear shaped, and increase resilience to life's knocks. This has to be one of the greatest gifts as parents we can give to our kids.



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