



How to Win Friends and Influence People: The Kids' Version

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

If your child has had mixed success with making friends at school, you of course wonder what you can do to help him or her. The idea of a summer camp filled with potential friends and lots to do probably popped into your mind – and you might be headed in the right direction.

Just be sure that's the case, advises Annie Fox, author of *Too Stressed to Think? A*

Teen Guide to Staying Sane When Life Makes You Crazy and online advisor at [\[niefox.com\]\(http://niefox.com\).](http://www.an-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

“Engage your child in the decision,” she says. “If you get an intense reaction of ‘no, I don’t want to go,’ listen carefully.”

Acknowledge that it’s scary for most kids to go off to camp. To ease fears, you can try showing your child a video of the camp and ask him or her to help you with

checking references. You might be lucky enough to find someone near you who is returning to the camp and who might turn into a mentor-friend for your child.

You can also remind your child that most likely no one at camp will know anything about your child – which means they can leave behind any negative stereotypes he encounters at school.

Find out, too, if your child is thinking, “I stink at making friends.”

If that’s the case, first talk to your child about making a good first impression.

“You can teach your child some skills to help,” says Cathi Cohen, a psychotherapist who directs a social skills program called Stepping Stones in Virginia and wrote the book *Raise Your Child’s Social IQ: Stepping Stones to People Skills for Kids*.

She tells children to:

- Go with the flow
- Wait their turn
- Learn the other children’s names as quickly as possible
- Learn to look others straight in the eye
- Ask questions and listen to the response. Everyone likes to talk about themselves.
- Look approachable

“If your child looks sullen, it’ll be hard for other children to approach her,” Cohen says. “She should look open to building a relationship.”

When you see your child exhibiting these positive behaviors, praise him or her.

“Be specific,” says Cohen. “Tell her, ‘I like the way you made eye contact.’ That was great how you were asking questions.”

You should help your child with something of a game plan. Many camps do have a significant number of returnees each year – which is a good sign that the camp is well-run and enjoyable. However, groups have already been formed, and some might not be open to new friends. Let your child know that he or she can look on the periphery.

“There are always new kids,” says

Cohen. “They’re in the same position as your child and can be very open to developing a relationship. Look for a friendly face and someone who has a similar interest. You don’t need to be friends with everyone. One or two friends are all you need.”

If the thought of making even one special friend seems impossible for your child, he or she needs more pointers. Natalie Madorsky Elman, owner of The Summit Center for Learning in New Jersey and co-author of the *The Unwritten Rules of Friendship: Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Make Friends*, works with children who find it hard to buddy up with their peers. She helps them with what she calls “social training.”

One of her first pieces of advice is to back up a bit.

“Some children come into my class and you see that they get right in the other kids’ faces,” she notes. “I tell them to think about a hula hoop being around them and to keep back about that distance.”

Another visual to share with your child is “an arm’s length.” If he or she can stand back that much, the other kids will feel more comfortable.

Elman recalls a study that was done years ago about children who made friends easily at camp. The most successful children gave positive statements without gushing (a simple “I like your drawing,” can do the trick) and mastered what Elman calls “affect matching.”

“If everyone is excited about the color wars coming up (the camp-wide competition where teams are assigned a color), be excited as well. You don’t want to be a downer,” she explains.

Getting in the mix of things is impor-

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tant. She recommends that children simply join in activities and groups, instead of asking permission.

In addition, they should learn about compromise and negotiation.

“Tell your child that everyone should get something,” Elman says. “If the kids are arguing over which game to play, your

child can say ‘How about if we play Candy Land today and tomorrow we play Chutes and Ladders?’ Your child shouldn’t give in all the time, either. If he or she always gives in, the other child isn’t really a friend.”

Hearing all this advice is probably easier than putting it into action, so Elman thinks parents can be most effective through role playing:

“Say ‘Let’s get ready for camp. I’ll be a new person and you be you. It’ll be like a play.’ Your child will be more likely to put what you’ve told her into practice this way.”

Annie Fox says it’s a good idea to switch roles too, letting your child play someone new. In one ‘skit’ your child can be a camp returnee and you can be her. Then your child can be a withdrawn child. Then switch and allow your child to draw out the shy child.

“Take breaks and talk about what your child might do differently. Say ‘rewind’ and do it again,” suggests Fox.

And finally, remind your camper-to-be that counselors and their supervisors are safe people to talk to and that they can e-mail you or call from camp.

“The child should know that you’re not sending her away because you want to get rid of her so you can go on a vacation,” Fox reminds. “Tell her, ‘I’m going to miss you and I’m going to be fine until I see you. You’re going to be fine, too.’” **cc**