

# Friendship Speedbumps

## The 10 steps to conflict resolution

Once you've made friends, what should you do when things go wrong? (And things will go wrong at some point – that's just the nature of human relationships.)

**6 Sometimes having so many teenagers come together from different cultures and backgrounds can lead to misunderstandings. Gestures might mean different things, there might be different thoughts on personal space ... Respectful communication and open-mindedness is key. 9**

*Kerrie Alden, Head of Language A:  
English, International School, Rheintal, Switzerland*

Too often, we avoid dealing with conflict in our friendships because we're so determined to be seen as easygoing and not make a scene. But all this repression can allow bad feelings to build up inside you – and, eventually, they can explode and cause even more drama than the original disagreement would have.

News flash: it's normal to have disagreements and to fall out with friends. It doesn't mean you're unloved or not valued. It just means that an issue has come up between you and your friend that needs to be resolved. Learning how to resolve conflict prepares you for coping in the big wide world. If you don't figure out how to negotiate, solve problems and resolve conflict, how will you cope with everyday adult life?

The following 10 steps to conflict resolution will teach you how to deal with conflict respectfully. They're based on the respect rules set out in an excellent book for teenagers, *Respect: A girl's guide to getting respect & dealing when your line is crossed*, by Courtney Macavinta and Andrea Vander Pluym, but they're just as relevant to boys.

- 1. Plan ahead.** If you don't take the time to think about what you want to say to the person who has upset you, you may well say something you'll regret ('Oh, I wish I hadn't said that!') or leave out a point you really wanted to express ('Oh, I should have said that!'). This doesn't mean you need to prepare a whole PowerPoint presentation on what your friend did wrong. Rather, talk through your feelings with someone whose opinion you value – perhaps a parent or guardian, your favourite teacher or sports coach ...



Who can you go to for good advice? List their names and contact details. Hint: include any support staff your school offers, such as psychologists or welfare teachers.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- 2. Don't put on a show.** You may be tempted to get other friends involved when you speak with the person who has upset you, but an audience will only escalate things, as everyone's emotions will be running high. A one-on-one conversation is always preferable. However, if you're really scared about the confrontation, you may take a support person: someone both of you feel comfortable around, who won't interfere and will just act as a friendly observer.
- 3. Home in on how you feel.** Using 'I' language – e.g. 'I felt hurt that you talked about me to the rest of the group' – is less likely to provoke anger than 'you' language – e.g. 'You can't be trusted.' Develop your emotional literacy by building up a vocabulary to help you get in touch with your feelings. For example, ask yourself whether what you're feeling is really anger or betrayal. Are you scared? Threatened? Sad? Brainstorm emotions with someone you trust.

- 4. Admit your mistakes and apologise.** Often all it takes to lighten up the situation is for the other person to hear a simple, 'I was wrong. I am sorry.' Give an apology if you know that you're even partly at fault. A good apology should also include a statement about what you're going to do to make amends or what you will do differently in the future.
- 5. Be specific.** It's tempting to generalise and exaggerate, but it's rare that someone always does something we don't like. Spell out exactly what upset you on this particular occasion and don't dig up old wounds – 'I was annoyed when after the party you told Melissa that I was no longer your friend' works much better than 'You always talk about me and this is just like what you did to me last year.'
- 6. Offer time.** It's wise to offer the other person time to think, so that they don't respond to you impulsively. Try saying something along the lines of 'I'd like to talk to you about what happened at the party as I'm not happy about how it ended. Can we talk after school, when you've had time to think about what happened, too?'
- 7. Be calm.** I know, I know ... easier said than done! Most of us get worked up when talking about friendship tensions. It's a good idea to learn and practise some simple breathing and visualisation activities that can help you to stay chilled out. You can find these at the end of my section. (I've got your back.)
- 8. Assert yourself.** As a teacher, I very quickly learnt the difference between 'assertive' and 'aggressive'. If you get aggressive with someone, they will get defensive, angry and hostile – rightly so! If you want another person to listen to you, you need to be assertive. Speak firmly and clearly,

and show through your tone of voice and body language that you expect attention. Choose your words carefully and be strong in your dialogue. Try not to begin your sentences with unassertive phrases like ‘I may be wrong, but ...’ or use terms that detract from the power of what you’re saying: ‘It’s kind of, like ...’ or ‘When you do that, I get sort of upset and stuff.’ Examples of assertive phrases you can use include: ‘I don’t like it when you say/do that’ and ‘I expect you to treat me with respect.’

*‘assertive’ = bold and confident in speech and action*

- 9. Expect to be heard.** When you approach a friend to discuss something that’s important to you, you have the right to expect that friend to stop what they’re doing and listen. It’s OK for you to ask someone to put down their mobile phone or to stop looking at other things when you’re speaking with them, unless they’re doing something important. If you’ve picked the wrong time to talk, you can just say something like, ‘I know you’re busy now but this is really important to me and I want your full attention. I’m happy to talk later – when suits you?’
- 10. End on a positive.** Drum roll ... you don’t need to be friends with everyone and some friendships come to an end. However, just because a friendship ends, it doesn’t mean that the former friend automatically becomes an enemy. It’s okay to decide that the friendship is over and simply move on – no longer friends, but still friendly. Also, some friendships may just be ‘over’ for that week, or that term, or that year – not forever.

By the way, these 10 steps are worth using in conflicts with your parents, too.

## Set limits while widening your circle

If your friends practise or value behaviour that doesn't make you feel comfortable – like criticising others or drinking too much alcohol – then you should take a stand.

**6 Don't be afraid to stand up to your friends. You soon figure out the real ones from the fake ones – the people who matter and the people who don't. 9**

*Hannah, 16*

Fact: you become like the people you hang around. I'm a great believer in setting boundaries early on, because the standard you walk past is the standard you set. In other words, the first time you see or hear something that doesn't work for you, you need to say so!

Worst-case scenario, your friends will think you have strong values that are different to theirs – which is the truth anyway. Best-case scenario, they'll rethink what they're doing or saying. Either way, at least a few people in the group will respect you for speaking up.

Be open to making more than one close friend. That way, if things turn ugly between you both, or they need to return to their home or change schools, you'll still have other friends to connect with.

Many teens form genuine, mutually fulfilling platonic relationships with those of the opposite sex, so be open to this, too.

*'platonic relationship' = when you are purely friends with someone and there's nothing romantic going on*

**6 One of my closest friends is a guy. I get annoyed when my parents tease me about this or imply there's more going on. There isn't. He is attractive, I guess, but to me he's just my buddy. And he makes me feel understood. Things with him are less complicated than with my girlfriends because there isn't the same sense of competition. 9**

*Kim, 15*

At the same time, you don't have to win a popularity contest. A few good friends may be all you need, so don't be concerned if you don't have loads of them.

## **Learn to tell the difference between a falling-out and bullying**

I know it can feel like the world is against you when you have a temporary falling-out with a friend, but there's a big difference between this and an ongoing campaign of bullying. Even today, some people still think that bullying is just harmless name-calling. We need to get real: bullying is serious. And it takes many forms:

- **Verbal:** name-calling, teasing, verbal abuse, humiliation, sarcasm, insults, threats
- **Physical:** punching, kicking, scratching, tripping, spitting
- **Social:** ignoring, excluding, alienating, making inappropriate gestures
- **Psychological:** spreading rumours; glaring; hiding or damaging possessions; sending malicious texts, emails or social media comments; inappropriately using camera phones

All these forms are very damaging, and bystanders need to do more to stop bullying. Teachers are, of course, responsible for doing everything they can to stop it – but the reality is that in a large majority of cases, bullying takes place when no adults are around. This is why it's so important for bystanders to step up and say, 'It's not on!'

*'ostracise' = to banish or exclude someone from a group*

If you see or hear something that feels like bullying to you, you're probably right – we tend to have good instincts for things like this. Often the bully will try to defend their actions by saying things like, 'I was only joking!' But as a general rule, if the target of the behaviour isn't laughing with the person who did it, then the behaviour was unkind. You can always start by asking the target if they're OK – just knowing that you noticed, and that you care, might make a huge difference to them.

Look out for your own safety before taking further action. For example, if you see someone threatening another student, you don't want to escalate the situation by confronting the aggressor directly, as you may then become a target yourself. Think about how you can keep both yourself and the other person safe; in this scenario, you might wait until the threatening person has left, then go up to their target and check that they're OK – or you might offer to go with them while they speak to a trusted adult who can step in. Alternatively, if you notice that an authority figure like a teacher or security guard is nearby, you can go and tell them so that they can immediately intervene.

As a bystander in a less dangerous situation, you can interrupt ('That's not funny, cut it out'), distract ('Hey, rather than insulting him, let's go get pizza!') or remove the vulnerable target by saying something to them like, 'Hi, would you like to hang out with me and my friends?'



What are some things you could do if you saw someone being bullied by others to show this person that you support them?

---

---

---

---

---

### **Assess your friendships and celebrate good ones**

Are you caught up in any toxic friendships? As in, do you have any friends who belittle you, dismiss you or make you feel left out? Or do you think you might be doing that to others? If so, it's time to free yourself of these patterns and choose healthier friendships. No one needs a frenemy!

For many of you, your friends are some of the most important people in your lives. I find it sad that the media (and some parents) mock your need for connection – especially when you choose to connect online. Every so often, new research is published on how much time teens are spending on the internet and using social media. Eye-catching headlines are designed to shock: 'Teenage "hypertexters" more likely to have sex, drink, use drugs', 'Psychologist warns of Facebook dangers', 'Facebook warning after teen lured to death'. But the adults around you were no different when we were your age: we wanted to hang out with our friends, too! Rachel Hansen, who has worked as Program Manager for Enlighten Education in New Zealand, remembers:

*As a teenager, I spent many hours camped on our family landline. I would farewell my friends at school, and then as soon as I got home I would be on the phone. I have a note in my 1992 diary exclaiming: 'Broke my phone record!!! Six hours non-stop!!! One phone call!!!' (My mind boggles. Did we have toilet breaks? Refreshment pauses?)*

*And when we weren't talking on the phone, we were writing to one another. Pages and pages and pages. My friends and I would wave goodbye as we headed off to our respective classes or homes, and these waves would always be accompanied with 'Write me a letter!' When we saw each other again, we would exchange letters and keep them to read when we next had to endure separation for more than 10 minutes. Due to my hoarding tendencies, I have kept every one of these letters. And let me clarify that these are not notes – some stretch to 20 pages long!*

The technology is different now but the drive is the same: the desire to connect with others, explore friendships, delve deeper into your emotions, and understand and develop relationships. When it comes to core needs and values, you aren't that different to your parents' generation as teens – it's just that the tools you use to express yourselves have changed.

Some people are concerned that social media prevents teens from developing real friendships. Have you heard that one? In presenting my workshops to teens all around Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia, I've seen no evidence of this.

It's important for you to feel connected to your friends – both in real life and online. However, as I mentioned before, it's also important to keep yourself open to meeting new friends. A lot of expat students have told me that when they first moved to

an international school, they spent so much time online talking with their old friends that they cut themselves off from making new ones. Plus, it can be really off-putting for your new friends if you spend a lot of time talking to them about how wonderful your old friends are!

**6 I really value the diverse friendships I made, which helped me to be a lot more accepting and open-minded than I think I would have been without spending seven years studying in Singapore. The best thing I learnt to do was not to focus on what I was missing out on (like the Year 6 graduation of all my friends back home) but instead to properly appreciate just how unique and valuable my experience was and how unique and valuable my new friends were! During my time at the Australian International School in Singapore, I made friends with people from all over the world – at one point in my circle, I had friends of Japanese, Kenyan and Danish citizenship. I now have a cool spread of friends to catch up with (and crash at their houses!) in every part of the world. 9**

*Shovan, 18*

## How can you cope with missing your old friends?

I asked young people who had spent years studying overseas as expats how they'd dealt with these feelings. Here's what they told me:

**6 Living overseas is an incredible experience, but leaving everything you know and love makes the experience such a conflict. Social media is crucial – I don't know where I would have been without Facebook and Skype. It enables you to stay in touch with the people you care about most. In addition, you need to connect with the new people around you. As an expat, everyone is going through the same thing; everyone is missing home. Talking to your new friends, teachers and family who also miss home really helps. I also found it so helpful to connect my current friends and my old friends. It sounds crazy, but I would Skype with my old friends while I was with my new friends. It helped me to connect my present and past lives, and I loved then being able to talk to my new friends about stuff that was happening back home and having them know what I was talking about! 9**

*Madison, 21*

**6 It's always difficult when your friends leave, especially because many of them only stay for two to three years, but I guess I coped by being open-minded about making new friends and understanding that old friends were just a message/Skype call away if you ever needed their advice, help or just for them to make you laugh. 9**

*Carissa, 16*

**6 At times I didn't cope, but the access to various means of social media, like Skype and Facebook, allowed me to stay connected. When distance comes into play, you also start to realise who really cares about you and who you care about, because you'll make more or less of an effort to remain in someone's life. 9**

*Dominique, 14*

**6 In order to cope with the change of environment and missing my old friends, I found myself going through social network apps more frequently. Keeping in touch with other overseas friends was rather hard due to time differences, so I would stay up and Skype old mates. The best way to cope is to slowly detox off old friends and make new ones – by making new friends, you stop living in the past and you finally have the ability to make a new life for yourself. 9**

*Adrian, 20*

**6 The hardest thing was when I would return home and talk about living in Kuala Lumpur and all my adventures there to my old friends – they didn't seem that interested, really. I felt like I changed and grew a lot but they remained the same. Eventually, I drifted away from my old friends and although that was sad at first, I think it was also inevitable. I would say don't force it – if it feels like some friendships have run their course, let them go. 9**

*Sara, 15*

**6 The thing I did that I regretted was talking about my old friends all the time to my new friends. I realised it just annoyed people hearing me compare them like this. I think it's important to stay connected to the old friends (especially if you know you'll go back home after a few years) but also meet new people and accept them for who they are. 9**

*Zachary, 14*