

Parent-to-Parent: Your Children, Their Friends, Your Responsibility

Tom Everson

Pick up the phone and call. This one simple action can be the most challenging, and yet most important, action that we as parents ever choose to take. Why?

Because it is imperative that we get to know the parents of the children whom our sons and daughters choose to call friends. By making these calls we establish contact in order to find out essential information, such as:

- ▶ Is a parent present when your child is in the friend's home?
- ▶ What are the guidelines of the home? For example, where are children allowed to play with or without adult supervision? What games are children allowed to play? What TV shows, movies, and video games are permitted? What access do children have to computers? Where are these located in the home? Are children monitored as they use the computers?
- ▶ What behavior is expected in the home? This also gives you an opportunity to share the behavioral expectations you have for your child.
- ▶ With older children, middle school age and up: Is alcohol easily obtainable in the home

We can also learn much by talking with parents at social functions, such as sporting events, band concerts, school plays, dance recitals — any activity in which our children

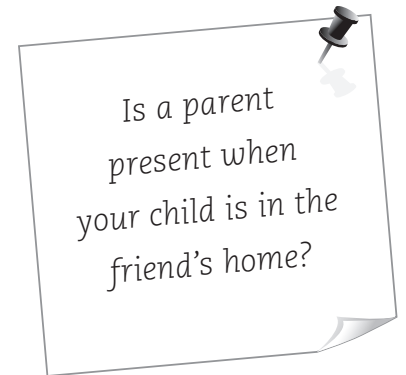
participate at which their friends' parents are present.

The point is that our responsibility as parents is a 24/7 job. This becomes all the more apparent as our children begin to make friends and venture beyond the walls of our own home. On a basic level we need to get to know other parents simply to ensure the safety and well-being of our children. A bonus is that we may well make new friends ourselves as we get to know the parents of our children's friends.

In addition to knowing where our children are and whom they are with, we need to teach them basic social skills so that they know how to act responsibly to get along with others. Make sure your children know how to do the following:

- ▶ Introduce themselves
- ▶ Greet others
- ▶ Share appropriately
- ▶ Have a conversation
- ▶ Apologize and accept an apology appropriately

Opportunities abound to teach and practice these skills. For example, a neighbor's visit is a great time for children as young as three to





practice introductions. Teach them to:

- ▶ Look at the person
- ▶ Say, “Hi, my name is _____. It’s nice to meet you. What is your name?”
- ▶ Extend your hand for a handshake and allow the other person to share their name.

When it comes to ongoing greetings, aside from family names and names of similar aged friends and classmates, many parents teach respect for adults by instructing their children to introduce themselves to adults using titles appropriate titles, such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., or other appropriate professional title.

Boundaries & Expectations

Boundaries are essential to children’s well being. When in place and reinforced, boundaries provide a sense of security for them. Children know we care when expectations about behaviors are communicated.

We begin by establishing safe places to play both inside and outside the home. When our children are young we monitor these spaces—a yard, a local park, a play area in our home—to make sure children stay safe.

However, as children grow and venture off to a friend’s house, to school, or to a local park to play, they need to know how to set and respect their own boundaries and the

boundaries of others as well. For example, establish expectations for going to a friend’s home. These expectations can include playing outside or in an open area inside where the friend’s parent(s) can easily see them. This can be reinforced by calling the parent to make sure your child’s friend’s parent(s) are home and are aware that your son or daughter is coming over.

In addition, we can teach our children to check in regularly so that we know where they are and with whom they are playing. This is a simple courtesy that family members extend to each other.

Consequences

When boundaries are violated — whether it is wandering down or across the street for a young child, or not being where they said they would be (and possibly lying about their location), it is important for parents to anticipate the possibility of these or others transgressions and have appropriate consequences in place. A few tips regarding consequences:

1. **A consequence is a teaching opportunity.** When children violate a boundary or expectation, it both shows that they have not learned how to behave in a positive way and is also an invitation to continue to teach them appropriate behavior. Teaching is ongoing, like coaching. With proper coaching, an athlete will practice over and over until

muscle memory is developed. They will only become better through such practice. Teaching our children the skills necessary to be competent in relating to others requires no less a commitment.

2. **A consequence should be meaningful to the child and should be related to the issue.**

This simply means that the consequence will catch his or her attention and get your child to consider acting in a more appropriate manner in the future. A consequence is part of the teaching process, not the whole teaching process itself. For example, losing the privilege of using a cell phone might be a fitting punishment for misusing one.

3. **Begin with smaller consequences to address misbehavior — something meaningful and immediate.**

For example, try a modified time out. Remove your child from whatever activity he or she is engaged in and have him or her accomplish a task or two, such as emptying trashcans or running the sweeper. The time it takes to complete the task well (consequence) is up to your child. When the work is finished, have your child report back, and continue your teaching. Be calm and let your child know what was done wrong (boundary violated) and then let them know what your expectations are or have your child tell you what the expectation is. If apologies are

in order, do so. Next time you see your child exhibiting appropriate behavior (meeting expectations) be sure to show that you noticed and offer praise. This is a lesson we can learn from good coaches who use encouragement and praise to reinforce the lessons they are teaching players.

Other examples of consequences include:

- ▶ Early bedtime
- ▶ Loss of privileges, such as TV, computer time, video games
- ▶ Extra chore for the day
- ▶ Loss of use of bike (if riding in unsafe manner or riding without a helmet)
- ▶ Not going to a friend's house after school or having a friend over to play (if not completing homework)
- ▶ Loss of cell phone for a day or two (parent keeps phone)
- ▶ Favorite toy is taken away (short time limit as first consequence)

Remember, consequences should be meaningful to the child. If a consequence does not contribute to a change in behavior, then, as a rule, it is not meaningful to the child. The better you know your child, what she or he likes and does not like, the easier it is to create a list of meaningful consequences that will serve both your child and yourself as she or he grows into a socially responsible young person.