

Guiding Children Toward Righteous Friendships

There is a quiet crisis unfolding in our homes today. It's not that children simply struggle to make friends. It's that many are forming bonds with the **wrong** people. Friends who slowly influence their speech, their priorities, their respect, and most critically, their Deen, in fact their complete profile.

Every laugh, every conversation, every choice made in the company of these friends, shapes who they are becoming. This is not something we can afford to ignore.

It is often said: *"You are the average of the five people closest to you."* Yet, Islam taught us this long before modern psychology did where The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: *"A person follows the religion of his close friend, so let each of you look carefully at whom he befriends."* (Abu Dawud)

It's not that children today are fundamentally different, but the world they are growing up in presents unique challenges to friendship formation.

Friendship is not casual. It is directional. It either pulls you toward Allah, or away from Allah.

I have outlined the challenges in two categories; however, before we explore them, let us first reflect on the value of friendship in Islam.

THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIP IN ISLAM

Good friends are protection, reinforcement and spiritual support. Allah says: *"And keep yourself patiently with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening..."* (Qur'an 18:28)

Righteous companionship strengthens imaan, encourages good character, protects you from sin and even provides emotional stability.

The Prophet ﷺ also said: *"The example of a good companion and a bad companion is like the seller of musk and the blacksmith..."* (Bukhari: Book 54, Hadith 34). You will carry either fragrance or smoke.

Also look at the friendship between Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Abu Bakr (RA), loyalty, sacrifice and mutual elevation. This was not entertainment-based friendship. It was purpose-based companionship.

CHALLENGE 1: CHILDREN STRUGGLE TO MAKE FRIENDS

Friends help kids develop social skills, build confidence, and learn empathy. Good friends can also be a buffer against stress and anxiety.

Today's children aren't inherently worse at making friends. They are growing up in a world that offers fewer opportunities to practice this crucial skill and a world that presents more obstacles in their path. Many children today **struggle to form friendships**, and the reasons are complex:

1. The Digital Shift: Screens vs. Real-Life Interaction

Children are not practicing real-life social skills the way previous generations did.

- **Displacement of Free Play:** For generations, children made friends through unstructured, spontaneous play in neighbourhoods and parks. Today, that free time is often replaced by structured activities, homework, and, most significantly, screen time. The nuanced skills of

negotiation, conflict resolution, and reading social cues are learned on the playground, not on a tablet, cell phone or through gaming.

- **Digital vs. In-Person Social Skills:** Texting and messaging lack the critical components of communication like tone of voice, facial expression, and body language. A child who is a witty texter may struggle to initiate a conversation or join a group at the playground because they haven't practiced those real-world skills.
- **The Allure of the Screen:** For a child who finds social situations awkward or stressful, a tablet, cell phone or video game is an easy, comfortable retreat. This creates a cycle where avoiding social interaction leads to even less practice, making future interactions harder.

2. The Changing Structure of Childhood

The way children's lives are organized has changed dramatically, often limiting their opportunities for independent socializing.

- **The Decline of Unstructured Play:** Free, unsupervised play is the primary training ground for friendship. Without an adult to solve every problem, children learn to share, take turns, compromise, and stand up for themselves. These are essential friendship skills.
- **Over-Scheduling:** Many children's days are packed with adult-led activities like sports, extra-murals, and tutoring. While these have benefits, they leave little to no time for "hanging out" that allows friendships to blossom organically.
- **Increased Academic Pressure:** The focus on academics begins as early as pre-school, reducing break time and prioritizing grades over social-emotional learning.
- **Constant Adult Supervision:** At school, at home, and in activities, children are almost always being watched by an adult. This can inhibit their ability to navigate their own social world, make mistakes, and learn from them without immediate intervention.

3. Parenting With Good Intentions

With the best of intentions, some modern parenting approaches can inadvertently hinder a child's social development.

- **Helicopter Parenting/Taking Over:** When a parent steps in to solve every playground dispute or arranges all playdates, the child misses the chance to practice social problem-solving and develop resilience. They don't learn how to get themselves out of a social jam.
- **Focus on Safety:** Fear for children's safety, while understandable, has led to a reduction in the kind of independent exploration (like walking to a friend's house or playing in the park alone) that built confidence and social networks in the past.
- **Structuring Social Time:** Playdates are often carefully scheduled and orchestrated by parents. While valuable, this is different from the natural, spontaneous friendships that form from just playing together in the neighbourhood day after day.

Resolving every dispute stops children from learning resilience. *Children aren't weaker, they simply face fewer opportunities to practice social skills in today's world.*

4. Social Factors

- **Increased Anxiety and Mental Health Challenges:** We are seeing a rise in anxiety and depression among children and teenagers. Social anxiety can make approaching new people and forming friendships feel terrifying. The pressure from social media and the general state of the world contributes to this.
- **More Diverse Families:** Families move more often for jobs, and family structures are more varied. While this isn't negative, it can mean children have to work harder to build new friendship circles repeatedly.

5. What Can Parents and Caregivers Do?

The good news is that these skills can be taught and fostered.

- **Prioritize Unstructured Time:** Make "boredom" and free play a priority. Send kids outside or give them unscheduled time with friends, with minimal adult intervention.
- **Be a "Coach," Not a "Manager":** Instead of fixing problems, talk through them. "What do you think you could do next time?", "How do you think your friend felt when you did that?"
- **Model Good Social Behaviour:** Let your children see you making small talk, being a good friend, and handling social conflicts gracefully.
- **Create Opportunities:** Facilitate initial connections but then step back. Invite a friend over for a simple, unstructured play session.
- **Teach Explicitly:** If a child is struggling, talk about social cues. "See how he's looking at the ground and has his arms crossed? He might be feeling sad or shy."
- **Limit Screen Time ON A DAILY BASIS:** Enforce firm, consistent limits on devices to ensure there is ample time and motivation for real-world interaction.

CHALLENGE 2: CHILDREN CHOOSE THE WRONG FRIENDS

1. What Should Young People Look for in Friends?

We must teach them clearly that a good friend should have trustworthiness, respect, shared values, positive influence, support the right things, support in times of need, encouragement toward good and protect them from doing sinful behaviours.

In Islam, there are many examples of epic friendships. Here are a few:

1. Abu Bakr and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ: Their bond was unbreakable. Abu Bakr was the Prophet's ﷺ closest friend and confidant, and he supported him through thick and thin.
2. Umar and Abu Bakr: These two companions had a deep friendship, working together for the sake of Islam and the Muslim community.
3. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Abdullah ibn Abbas: Their bond was like a father-son relationship. Abdullah ibn Abbas was like a sponge, soaking up knowledge from the Prophet ﷺ.

Emphasizing again that these **friendships are direction** and show us the importance of loyalty, trust, and mutual support.

2. Signs of Potentially Harmful Friendships

- Decline in salah or other religious habits.
- Increased secrecy or disrespect.
- Adoption of inappropriate language or behaviour.
- Shifting priorities away from family or faith.

HOW PARENTS CAN GUIDE CHILDREN TO THE RIGHT FRIENDS

It is not enough to warn them about bad company. We must actively help them access good company.

1. Place Them in the Right Environments

- Masjid programs, Qur'an circles, youth groups, Islamic camps, purpose-driven activities.
- Righteous friendships grow in righteous spaces.

2. Build Relationships with Like-Minded Families

- Host gatherings, connect with parents who share your values.

3. Teach Them Criteria and to Identify Good Character

Ask them:

- “Do they pray?”
- “Does this friend respect Allah and their parents?”
- “Do they respect themselves and others?”
- “Do they speak well of others?”
- “Do you feel closer to Allah after spending time with them?”

4. Keep Communication Open, Without Interrogation

Instead of: “Why are you with him?” Ask:

- “What do you enjoy about him?”
- “How do you feel after spending time together?”
- “Do you feel stronger in your Deen?”

Guide - don't attack.

WHEN YOUR CHILD REFUSES TO END A HARMFUL FRIENDSHIP

Children may say: “Everyone is learning”, “I can guide him”, “You’re judging him” or “You don’t trust me.”

This is where wisdom matters most. Children often believe they are strong enough to influence others without being influenced themselves. But influence is rarely one-directional.

1. Start with Acknowledgment

- Before correcting, affirm their intention.
- “I love that you want to help someone grow. That shows compassion.”
- Affirm the heart before redirecting the path.
- Then gently shift the focus: “Do you feel stronger in your Deen around him or weaker?”

Even adults are shaped by those closest to them.

2. Shift from Labelling to Impact

- Avoid saying: “He is bad.”
- Instead, focus on what you observe:
 - “I’ve noticed your salah has changed.”
 - “I see you becoming more distant.”
 - “Your tone feels different lately.”
 - “I hear language from you that worries me.”

Focus on impact, not accusations.

3. The Swim Analogy

- “If someone is still learning to swim, we don’t send them to rescue someone who is drowning.”
- Children are still forming their identity. They are still strengthening their Deen. They are not yet spiritually equipped to carry someone else.
- Even the strongest companions surrounded themselves with strength.

4. When the Influence Is Clearly Negative

- If you notice decline in salah, increased disrespect, secrecy, personality changes, new inappropriate habits, then **calm firmness is required**. Not anger. Not humiliation. But clarity:
- “I trust you. But I also see changes that worry me. For now, we need to limit how often you are together. This is protection, not punishment.”
- You as a parent are not trying to win popularity. You are protecting their future.

5. Keep Communication Open, Without Interrogation

- When children fear judgment, they hide their friendships.
- Instead of asking: “Why are you with him?”
- Try:
 - “What do you enjoy about him?”
 - “How does he make you feel?”
 - “Have you noticed any changes in yourself since becoming close?”

Guide, don't attack.

6. A Calm but Firm Conversation Script

You might say:

- “Can we talk? This is coming from love, not control. I am always here for you, not against you. I see how important this friendship is to you. I respect that. But I've noticed changes. Your salah is inconsistent. Your tone has shifted. That concerns me. Do you feel stronger around him — or weaker?”
- Pause. “If I see positive changes, we can reassess. But right now, I need to set some limits.”

If they say: “You don't trust me.”

- Respond: “It's not about trust. Even adults are influenced by their company. This is about protection.”

If they say: “You're judging him.”

- Respond: “I am not judging his heart. Only Allah judges that. I am responding to what I see happening to you.”

Stay calm. Stay steady. Stay loving. Because guidance without relationship becomes control but relationship without guidance becomes neglect.

7. A Parent's Du'a

“Ya Allah, protect my child from harmful companionship. Replace any influence that weakens them with companions who strengthen their Imaan, character, and future.”

*Parenting is not about control, it is about **cultivating character, protecting Deen, and shaping destiny**.*

As parents, we do this out of love. We see what they may not yet see. Setting limits is not about control, it is about protection.

One day, they will understand that every boundary came from a heart that wanted Jannah for them In Shaa Allah.

EDRIS KHAMISSA

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