

BACK TO  
SCHOOL  
2011

# The Social Scene

When kids go back to school, they may find a bunch of surprising situations with friends, classmates, and cliques.

BY VIRGINIA SOLE-SMITH

When Shannon Brandt's son Alden started third grade last September, he was worried about whom he'd hang out with all day because his best friend, Gio, would be in a different class. "Alden and Gio were both pretty upset about the separation," recalls Brandt, of Beacon, New York. On top of that, Alden soon found out that most of the boys in his new class were really into wrestling—which is not exactly his favorite activity. "It's always hard to connect with new people when you don't have many common interests," Brandt says. "Plus, to make matters worse, the kids were also starting to splinter off into all these different 'boys' clubs,' and there was a lot of talk about who's in and who's out, and what you have to do to stay in the club. I couldn't believe that we were having to face that kind of peer pressure already."



Kids this age aren't too young for gossip and secret clubs.

It's a brand-new school year, and along with all the other stressful things that come with that, your 7- or 8-year-old may be dealing with a tricky new set of social dynamics as well. "This is a breakaway time, when kids are much more consciously forming their own identity and engaging in the world of their peers," says Michelle Anthony, Ph.D., coauthor of *Little Girls Can Be Mean: Four Steps to Bully-Proof Girls in the Early Grades*. "They're also aware of the existence of social strata: Who's the

best at reading or soccer? Which kid is the most popular? However, they don't yet have the tools they need to navigate all these situations." Check out three common social challenges your child may face this year, and learn how you can help him get through it.

## Fading Friendships

Like Alden, many children will feel at sea for the first few days in a new class—especially if their favorite go-to

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LUCY SCHAFFER: STYLING BY KRISTEN PETLICK; GROOMING BY SUSAN DONOGHUE FOR ENNIS INC. ON GIRLS; LEFT TO RIGHT: ORANGE SHIRT, THE CHILDREN'S PLACE; BLUE TUNIC, PINK CHICKEN; ORANGE SHIRT, SES PETIT'S MAINS; HEART BACKPACK, OLD NAVY; PINK SHIRT, TEA COLLECTION; DOT BACKPACK, FOUR PEAS.

buddies from last year aren't around and they can't identify any new insta-friends in their class. A few kids will be lucky enough to readily pair up with their new seatmate. But most others, unfortunately, find the transition more difficult and will worry about how to hold onto their old friendships, even though it's totally natural for these connections to fade. Resist the urge to say, "Don't worry. You'll make new friends this year!" notes Dr. Anthony. "Kids in this age group are old enough to understand that it's not that easy to make new friends." However, there are ways you can help him maintain his old friendships, for example, through playdates or a shared extracurricular activity. "It was a big relief when Alden and Gio finally figured out that they'd see each other every day at recess," says Brandt.

While keeping old friends is important, of course, you can also encourage your child to expand his horizons a bit. As he settles into the routine of the new year, ask him about the kids whom he's meeting in his class. What are they interested in? Who sat with him at lunch and what did they talk about? Once he identifies a few friend prospects, you can suggest a low-pressure activity, like inviting a kid and his mom to join you guys on the playground for ten minutes or so after school lets out. "You don't have to orchestrate a whole playdate right off the bat," Dr. Anthony says. "That may feel too formal for them."

## Cool and the Gang

While it's true that last year your child might have happily plopped down at any old lunch table with a vacant seat, this year is different, and she may be very conscious of whom she sits with and whether or not they even want her to be there. "Seven- and 8-year-olds have definite opinions about whom they like and don't like," says *Parents* advisor Michael Thompson, Ph.D., coauthor of *Mom, They're Teasing Me: Helping Your Child Solve Social Problems*. Voicing opinions is

an important part of a child's identity development, but it can lead to trouble if your kid ends up feeling excluded or is the one doing the excluding. For Alden, the fact that he was a committed vegetarian made him an easy target for teasing among the wrestling fans in his class. One "boys' club" even managed to pressure a good friend of Alden's into calling him a nasty name. "Alden was hurt, and his friend felt so guilty he cried for hours," says Brandt.

Cliques tend to form around shared interests like sports or video games at this age, so it makes sense that your child will fit in more seamlessly with kids who share her same passion for drawing, dinosaurs, or the flute. Dr. Anthony's own 7-year-old daughter, Maya, has never been particularly athletic but recently decided to play soccer with an after-school team because she wanted to spend some time with a group of nice soccer-playing kids. "I know my daughter is never going to be a star soccer player, but we want to help her participate, so now she practices soccer on the weekends with my husband," Dr. Anthony explains. "It's a friendly group of kids, and they're happy to have her on the team, even though that usually means kicking around her on the field." A less friendly group might have teased Maya when she missed a goal, just as the wrestling fans teased Alden for being a vegetarian. If that happens with your child, you can point out some of the other kids who appear to have the same skill level, or help guide her toward a different activity where she can meet children who do share her interests.

## Spats and Struggles

Of course, the hardest part about kids' changing social relationships at this stage is figuring out how to handle those arguments that sometimes erupt into name-calling and tears. Experts actually advise letting the kids work out their disagreements on

their own as much as possible, especially when they revolve around practical matters, like how to choose teams for the kickball game at the park. “These types of situations actually help kids learn about conflict resolution,” says Dr. Thompson. “It’s important to remember that a friendship can sometimes turn accusatory and ugly—that’s not necessarily bullying. It just means that children this age don’t have a lot of social experience.” At the same time, it’s also a good idea to stay attuned to any unfolding drama so your child knows that you’re always on hand and available to offer help when he needs it.

Let your kid vent about how he feels about the argument he had with his classmates, and explain why he’s angry or hurt. Once he settles down, you can gently voice to him the perspective of the other kids—whether your child happened to be the instigator of the fight or the one who was getting attacked—so he learns that there are always two sides to every argument. And be sure to talk to him about any possible compromises or resolutions for similar situations so that he’s ready the next time something like that occurs and will be better able to handle it.

In certain situations, however, it will probably be hard for you not to bad-mouth one of your child’s friends who constantly picks fights or doesn’t treat your kid fairly. Dr. Anthony remembers how Maya fought regularly with a former best friend for months at a time. “I wanted her to just ditch this kid and move on to someone who didn’t make her so miserable, but she just wasn’t ready to do that,” she says. “Kids sometimes forget fights quickly at this age, so it’s hard to recognize when a friend is constantly making them unhappy.”

Dr. Anthony helped her daughter identify the pattern of fighting with regular check-ins: “I’d say, ‘How are you feeling about how things went with Katie today? Is that the same as how you felt yesterday?’ so she could start to put all the pieces together.” Another smart strategy is to subtly encourage friendships your child has with other kids who seem to come with less drama. “As Maya grew closer to some other girls she knew, she felt more ready to let Katie go,” Dr. Anthony explains. “We want our children to evaluate their friendships and pick kind people who treat them well, but know that they’re going to need time, practice, and our support to develop these skills.” □



**I’ve tried to get my daughter to help me around the house, but nothing I do seems to work. Should I punish her for not doing her chores?**

No. Punishing your daughter could make her hostile toward you and the task at hand, says Stephanie Mihalas, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Los Angeles. Instead, step back and think about why she’s not cooperating. Does she feel overwhelmed? At this age, a child should start with just one or two simple household jobs—such as clearing the dishes or dusting the coffee table—in addition to picking up her own things. Is she afraid to fail? Practice even the simplest tasks together, and be sure your praise is 100 percent positive (you can worry about refining her technique later). If she simply doesn’t want to work, you might try establishing a reward system, tapering it off gradually so she won’t expect one every time. While your child may never look forward to chores (who does?), she’ll eventually learn to do her part.