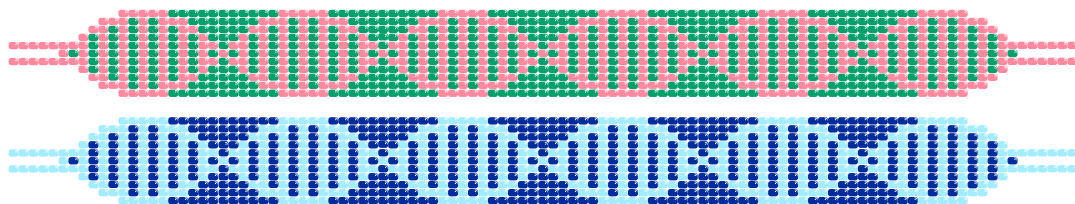


# FRIENDSHIP

The Playbook:  
How to Apply the Science of Friendship



Lydia Denworth

An addendum to the book:  
*Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond*

## Contents

The Basics of Friendship .....	3
Circles of Friendship .....	4
Friendship is Lasting: Put in the Time .....	5
Friendship is Positive: Accentuate the Good .....	6
Friendship is Reciprocal: Be Helpful .....	7
Friendship for Parents .....	8-9
Friendship at Work .....	10-11



***Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond*** is published in North America by W.W. Norton Inc. (Publication date, January 28, 2020). It is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

**Lydia Denworth** is a Brooklyn-based science journalist and author. She is a contributing editor at *Scientific American* and blogger for *Psychology Today*. Her work has also appeared in *The Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and many other publications. Learn more at [LydiaDenworth.com](http://LydiaDenworth.com) and [@LydiaDenworth](https://twitter.com/LydiaDenworth).

# The Basics of Friendship

---



## Know the Science

No doubt you know that time with friends is enjoyable and that friends affect our mood and psychological well-being. But friendship does more than that. It shapes our biology and affects our physical health—our stress responses, our cardiovascular system, our immune system. It even affects how long we live. Friendship is the relational equivalent of a superfood. Being a good friend and spending time with friends should be a priority just like diet and exercise.

At its simplest, a close friendship is defined by three things. It is lasting, positive and reciprocal. Despite cultural differences around the world, friendships everywhere (even in other species) share these qualities. That means friends make you feel good. Friends are there for you, especially in times of need. In time, you will be there for them. Friends cooperate; they reciprocate. Friendships that fit this model are the ones that are good for our health and that extend our lives.

There is no one way to do friendship. Psychologists have identified these styles:

- **Discerning** people are deeply tied to a few very close friends. (Most common)
- **Acquisitive** people collect a variety of friends as they move through life. This style of friendship can be sub-divided into those who are *unconditionally acquisitive* (who socialize broadly) and *selectively acquisitive* (who have large circles of friends but are a little choosier).
- **Independent** people consider themselves self-sufficient and are content to socialize casually. (Least common)

**Which are you?**



## Apply the Science

To be a better friend, work through the following pages and keep these principles in mind:

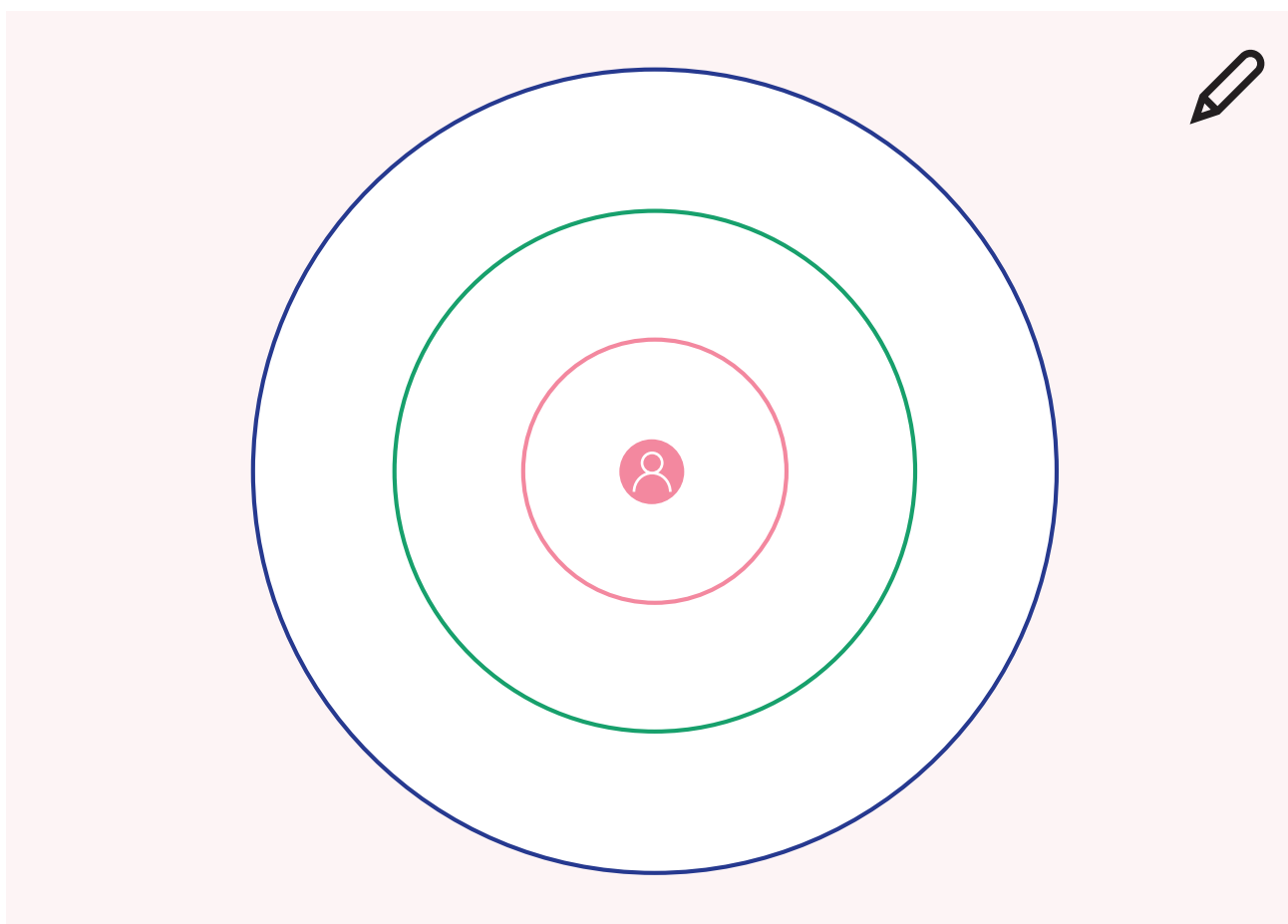
- **Friendship is worth your time** and you need to invest in making and maintaining friends.
- **Quality matters more than quantity.** But . . .
- . . . **Having a variety of friends is good for your health.** (The more diverse your friendships the less likely you are to catch a cold!)
- **Different friends can serve different needs.**
- **Editing your friendships** to focus on quality bonds is natural and healthy.

# The Circles of Friendship

Most of us know a lot of people. We like some of them more than others. That is natural. By definition, friendship is selective. It is a way of filtering the people in our lives. We don't have time to treat everyone the same way. Researchers think of our friendships as a series of concentric circles. Who are the people you want to see every day? Every week? Who have you been meaning to get in touch with? Is there someone you really miss? Everyone has a place in these circles.

**Imagine yourself at the center of the circles below. (1)** In the smallest circle, write the names of the people closest to you. They can be a mix

of friends and family, but should be people you have known for some time, who make you feel good, and are there when you need them. Most of us have between two and six people in that inner circle—the average is four. **(2)** In the next circle, write the names of people beyond your inner circle to whom you still feel closely connected. Perhaps they are the first ten to fifteen people you would invite to your birthday party. **(3)** In the third and largest circle, put extended family, friends you see less often, neighbors, and colleagues. These are people you like and help on occasion (an offer to babysit, an annual dinner), but who are less central to your life.



# Friendship is Lasting: Put in the Time



## Know the Science

People are an excellent use of your time, and friendship requires time. Even if you like someone the minute you meet, it takes about 50 hours of time spent together to consider someone a friend rather than an acquaintance,

and a full 200 hours to call someone a best friend. **Consider the names you just put into your circles.** Put in the time with them, prioritizing the people in your closest circle and working out from there.



## Apply the Science

There are so many ways to invest in friendship. Here are just a few. Expand on these or add your own ideas below.

### Make Your Friends a Priority

Make a date—for dinner, for a walk, for a phone call. If you have to resort to electronic calendars to coordinate schedules, do it, even if it feels like you are scheduling a business meeting. It is better to see your friends than not to see them.

### Show People They Matter to You

Show up when you said you would, when you are invited, and when something important is happening (good or bad). Show up to birthdays, weddings and funerals.

If you truly have no time to see friends in a given week or month, you can still show that you value them. Say hello in a text or email (then make sure you see them in person when possible.) Send a note—hand-written notes are so unusual these days that they carry a lot of weight. If you travel for work, how about sending postcards?

When you do have time face-to-face with friends, put down your phone and focus on the person in front of you. Be a good listener. Notice what's going on in your friends' lives.

### Give Gifts

Money not required! Across the world, anthropologists found that the giving of gifts is one of the most common themes in friendships. The point is not to be extravagant, but to acknowledge the relationship. Hand-picked flowers, home-made bread, the gift of your time, a book you loved, it all counts.

**List two things you can do tomorrow to invest in friendship:**



1.

---

---

---

2.

---

---

---

# Friendship is Positive: Accentuate the Good



## Know the Science

Time with good friends is not just psychologically rewarding, it's physiologically rewarding. When we enjoy someone's company our brain's reward systems are engaged—the happiness hormones (dopamine, oxytocin, endorphins) kick in. This is why quality matters. The relationships that are good for our health are the ones that make us feel good.

### The Problem of Ambivalence

It's probably not surprising that positive relationships are good for us, nor that toxic relationships are bad for us. But nearly half of our relationships are ambivalent—these are people who instill both positive and negative emotions in us. Researchers thought the good in these ambivalent relationships might outweigh the bad, but it doesn't, biologically speaking. Ambivalent relationships are not good for our health. We have two choices in these cases: end the relationship or invest in improving it. Neither is easy. Start by assessing your own behavior. What might you do differently?



## Apply the Science

What do you love most about your best friend? Have you let that person know? How can you make your friends feel good? Here are a few ideas. Expand on these and add your own below.

- **Engage in conversation.** Catch up on your friend's lives. Share a joke. You don't always have to share your deepest secrets and emotions. Just talk.
- **Let friends know what you appreciate about them.** Be generous with compliments.
- **Treat friends with respect and kindness.** Keep confidences. Be empathetic.
- **Invite a friend to join you** doing something you can enjoy together like going for a walk on a lovely day.

**List two things you can do tomorrow to make a friend feel good:**



1.

---

---

2.

---

---

# Friendship is Reciprocal: Be Helpful



## Know the Science

The third thing that good friendships share is that they are cooperative and reciprocal. You help your friends and your friends help you, especially in times of need.

What friendship is really about, say the experts, is creating a small circle of people you can rely on. Friendship is a way of alleviating the stresses of life.

All that investing of time and good feeling pays off when, eventually, your friend is there to help you when you need it and vice versa—to bring dinner over in a crisis, to help you move. The two of you must cooperate. When you don't — when a relationship feels too lopsided — it often fades away, or it should, because you need to invest in someone else.



## Apply the Science

Consider these questions. Are you pulling your weight with the people who matter to you? Is there someone who is all take and no give? What kinds of help have you most appreciated? Here are a few of the many ways you can be helpful to friends. Expand on these or add your own ideas below.

- **Is your friend sick or injured?** Drop off food. Offer to run small errands. Walk the dog.
- **Got young kids?** Offer a childcare swap. You each benefit.
- **Got teenagers?** Agree to keep an eye on one another's kids. Try to be a resource to friends' teenagers without overstepping. Know and respect your friends' rules and traditions.
- **Is your friend looking for a job, promotion, apartment?** Take a minute to forward useful articles you come across. Introduce your friend to someone who might be able to help. Share your knowledge.
- **Has your friend invited you over?** Return the favor. Entertaining does not have to be fancy. Get takeout and talk. Or organize regular potluck dinners so that everyone contributes.
- **Friend in crisis?** Listen. Show up. Share advice when it will help and keep quiet when it won't. Respect boundaries. Don't make it about you—offer support to those who need it, find someone else to talk to about how *you* feel. In other words, comfort in, complain out.

List two things you can do tomorrow to help a friend:

1.

---

2.

---



# Friendship for Parents

---



## Know the Science

### Early Childhood

From birth, children are building a social brain. Parents help sculpt that brain. We provide food and shelter, we teach children to walk, talk, and read. We also show them how to be a friend. Parents should model empathy and kindness. Show kids how to listen. Talk with them about how other children might feel.

Learning to make friends is a critical skill. It matters just as much as getting good grades. Parents say they want their children to be happy, but children say that what their parents care about most is achievement. That means we are sending the wrong message. Strong, healthy friendships are an essential part of a fulfilling life. Make sure children know you think friendship is a priority.

### Adolescence

The adolescent brain is a work in progress. The emotional, reactive parts of the brain are far more developed than the areas that control judgment, reason and planning. Everything that feels good feels even better in adolescence, literally. The mere presence of friends changes teen behavior because it affects the reward systems in their brains. But that does not mean teens are always subject to peer pressure to misbehave. The effect of friends can go either way. Friends can be a good influence (studying harder, saying no to drugs) and friends can steer kids toward bad behavior. Know your teenager's friends.

### Social Media

There is near hysteria around social media use. But claims that Instagram and video games have destroyed a generation are not borne out with evidence. Most kids are all right. Parents need to look beyond the amount of time kids spend online and look at what they are doing there and with whom.

### Does Your Child Have a Problem with Social Media?



Does it feel like your child is always online? Look at the big picture. If your child mostly plays video games with other kids rather than alone, or texts all morning but then sees friends in person in the evening, things may be just fine.

#### Warning signs:

- Are they struggling in school?
- Are there behavioral issues?
- Are they always alone at home?
- Are they prone to depression or anxiety?

**If you answered yes to any of these questions**, it might be a good idea to talk to a psychologist. But if your child is doing pretty well on all these fronts, social media use need not be such a critical concern.



## Friendship for Parents (cont.)



### Apply the Science

- **Coach young kids on good social habits** like taking turns and sharing.
- **Supervise playdates for young children.** Show them how to be a good host (share toys, offer snacks, etc.). Show them how to be a good guest (clean up after yourself, say thank you.)
- **Ban phones from the dinner table** (including your own) to help your children practice face-to-face conversation.
- **Remember that kids need time with friends just as adults do.** Let them have sleepovers. Let them just hang out.
- **Encourage them to pursue activities that interest them** like baseball or theater. Those are natural settings where they can find other children with similar interests.
- **Look beyond the video game to the context.** Are they with other kids either in person or online? Games can be a critical form of socializing, especially for boys. That doesn't mean they should spend all their time gaming, but parents often don't appreciate how social video games can be.
- **Send the message that time with friends matters at least as much as achievement.** Regularly ask yourself what signals you are sending your child about what is important in life.
- **Take friendships into account when making decisions about extra-curricular activities, camp, and school choices.** Most children do better in environments where they have one or two friends.

**List two things you can do to help kids build social skills and help them prioritize friendship:**



1.

---

---

2.

---

---

# Friendship at Work

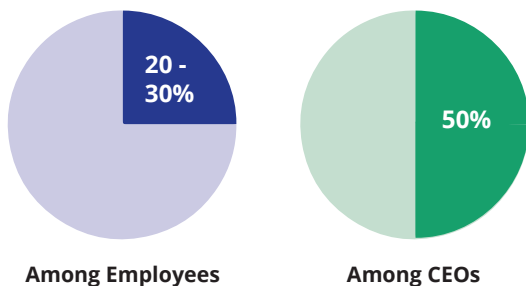
---



## Know the Science:

Office workers spend more hours with colleagues than with family. No wonder retirement often brings a painful loss of camaraderie. People with friends at work enjoy coming to work more, have lower rates of illness and injury, and are more productive and efficient. On the other hand, 20 to 30 percent of employees (and half of CEOs) say they experience loneliness in the workplace. They are more disengaged and tend to be lower rated in reviews. Co-workers may or may not become good friends, and some professional relationships won't outlast a job. But a collegial environment makes an important difference in day-to-day health and well-being, as well as productivity and performance.

### Loneliness in the Workplace



Telecommuting and the growing freelance economy can exacerbate loneliness. Solo workers need to do more to build connection and support systems for themselves. Doing so is a productive use of time.

Obviously, the workplace is a professional environment. It is where we work, not play. That does not mean you cannot have fun or be friendly. Being friendly at work does not mean oversharing or prying into other people's private lives in inappropriate ways. Remember, the word *collegial* stems from the word *colleague*. Your power to control your work environment depends on your role. Managers can set the tone and make policy. But individuals control their own behavior. Keep in mind that each of us wants to be seen as a person.

Strong bonds at work look a lot like strong bonds outside the office: They may not always last (though sometimes colleagues become our best friends.) But they are positive and reciprocal. They inspire trust and make people feel supported. They often include fun and inside jokes.

“When we  
laugh, we  
last,”

one employee told the  
*Harvard Business Review*.

## Friendship at Work (cont.)



### Apply the Science:

Generating connection at work does not have to mean requiring everyone to show up for parties they might not enjoy. It begins with small gestures that show people you see them and care about them.

**Unplug.** Make some meetings or parts of the workday device-free so that co-workers engage in face-to-face conversation. Walk down the hall occasionally to see someone in person rather than communicating by Slack or email every time.

**Be Helpful.** Do small favors. Reciprocity is integral to strong relationships. Kindness is also contagious and helps to create a positive environment.

**Work together.** Sometimes there is benefit in joining forces on a task instead of divvying up labor. Look for such opportunities.

**Reach out.** We have a tendency to affiliate with people who are like us, or who are on hand. Try extending yourself to one person you don't know at the next corporate event. Let colleagues who work remotely know you appreciate them. (Great example: An organization that closed a big deal celebrated with cake and sent cupcakes to a colleague who worked in another state.)

**Treat people as individuals, not skill sets.** It is possible to be professional and still acknowledge that people have personal lives and personalities.

**Just say hello.** A collegial environment is one in which people feel seen. Try saying hello and making eye contact, particularly with junior or back-office staff.

### For Solo Workers:



**Create an advisory board** of your peers (sometimes called a Mastermind group) or an accountability email chain with at least one other person.

**Attend conferences** and professional events. These are good opportunities to connect with new people or solidify existing business relationships.

**Make coffee or lunch dates with colleagues** and make them productive. Use the time to brainstorm or get feedback.

### List two things you can do to strengthen connections at work:



1.

---

---

2.

---

---