

# A Best Friend? You Must Be Kidding



Erik S. Lesser for The New York Times

**PLAYGROUP** Margaret Guest, center, in striped shirt, often has groups of friends at her home in Dunwoody, Ga.

By HILARY STOUT  
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FROM the time they met in [kindergarten](#) until they were 15, Robin Shreeves and her friend Penny were inseparable. They rode bikes, played kickball in the street, swam all summer long and listened to Andy Gibb, the Bay City Rollers and Shaun Cassidy on the stereo. When they were little, they liked Barbies; when they were bigger, they hung out at the roller rink on Friday nights. They told each other secrets like which boys they thought were cute, as best friends always do.

Today, Ms. Shreeves, of suburban Philadelphia, is the mother of two boys. Her 10-year-old has a best friend. In fact, he is the son of Ms. Shreeves's own friend, Penny. But Ms. Shreeves's younger son, 8, does not. His favorite playmate is a boy who was in his preschool class, but Ms. Shreeves says that the two don't get together very often because scheduling play dates can be complicated; they usually have to be planned a week or more in advance. "He'll say, 'I wish I had someone I can always call,' " Ms. Shreeves said.

One might be tempted to feel some sympathy for the younger son. After all, from Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn to [Harry Potter](#) and Ron Weasley, the childhood "best friend" has long been romanticized in literature and pop culture — not to mention in the sentimental memories of countless adults.

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But increasingly, some educators and other professionals who work with children are asking a question that might surprise their parents: Should a child really have a best friend?

Most children naturally seek close friends. In a survey of nearly 3,000 Americans ages 8 to 24 conducted last year by Harris Interactive, 94 percent said they had at least one close friend. But the classic best-friend bond — the two special pals who share secrets and exploits, who gravitate to each other on the playground and who head out the door together every day after school — signals potential trouble for school officials intent on discouraging anything that hints of exclusivity, in part because of concerns about cliques and bullying.

“I think it is kids’ preference to pair up and have that one best friend. As adults — teachers and counselors — we try to encourage them not to do that,” said Christine Laycob, director of counseling at Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School in St. Louis. “We try to talk to kids and work with them to get them to have big groups of friends and not be so possessive about friends.”

“Parents sometimes say Johnny needs that one special friend,” she continued. “We say he doesn’t need a best friend.”

That attitude is a blunt manifestation of a mind-set that has led adults to become ever more involved in children’s social lives in recent years. The days when children roamed the neighborhood and played with whomever they wanted to until the streetlights came on disappeared long ago, replaced by the scheduled play date. While in the past a social slight in backyard games rarely came to teachers’ attention the next day, today an upsetting text message from one middle school student to another is often forwarded to school administrators, who frequently feel compelled to intervene in the relationship. (Ms. Laycob was speaking in an interview after spending much of the previous day dealing with a “really awful” text message one girl had sent another.) Indeed, much of the effort to encourage children to be friends with everyone is meant to head off bullying and other extreme consequences of social exclusion.

For many child-rearing experts, the ideal situation might well be that of Matthew and Margaret Guest, 12-year-old [twins](#) in suburban Atlanta, who almost always socialize in a pack. One typical Friday afternoon, about 10 boys and girls filled the Guest family backyard. Kids were jumping on the trampoline, shooting baskets and playing manhunt, a variation on hide-and-seek.

Neither Margaret nor Matthew has ever had a best friend. “I just really don’t have one person I like more than others,” Margaret said. “Most people have lots of friends.” Matthew said he considers 12 boys to be his good friends and says he sees most of them “pretty much every weekend.”

Their mother, Laura Guest, said their school tries to prevent bullying through workshops and posters. And extracurricular activities keep her children group-oriented — Margaret is on the swim team and does gymnastics; Matthew plays football and baseball.

As the calendar moves into summer, efforts to manage friendships don’t stop with the closing of school. In recent years Timber Lake Camp, a co-ed sleep-away camp in Phoenicia, N.Y., has started employing “friendship coaches” to work with campers to help every child become friends with everyone else. If two children seem to be too focused on each other, the camp will make sure to put them on different sports teams, seat them at different ends of the dining table or, perhaps, have a counselor invite one of them to participate in an activity with another child whom they haven’t yet gotten to know.

“I don’t think it’s particularly healthy for a child to rely on one friend,” said Jay Jacobs, the camp’s director. “If something goes awry, it can be devastating. It also limits a child’s ability to explore other options in the world.”

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But such an attitude worries some [psychologists](#) who fear that children will be denied the strong emotional support and security that comes with intimate friendships.

“Do we want to encourage kids to have all sorts of superficial relationships? Is that how we really want to rear our children?” asked Brett Laursen, a [psychology](#) professor at Florida Atlantic University whose specialty is peer relationships. “Imagine the implication for romantic relationships. We want children to get good at leading close relationships, not superficial ones.”

Many psychologists believe that close childhood friendships not only increase a child’s self-esteem and confidence, but also help children develop the skills for healthy adult relationships — everything from empathy, the ability to listen and console, to the process of arguing and making up. If children’s friendships are choreographed and sanitized by adults, the argument goes, how is a child to prepare emotionally for both the affection

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“No one can teach you what a great friend is, what a fair-weather friend is, what a treacherous and betraying friend is except to have a great friend, a fair-weather friend or a treacherous and betraying friend,” said Michael Thompson, a psychologist who is an author of the book “Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children.”

“When a teacher is trying to tone down a best-friend culture, I would like to know why,” Dr. Thompson said. “Is it causing misery for the class? Or is there one girl who does have friends but just can’t bear the thought that she doesn’t have as good a best friend as another? That to me is normal social pain. If you’re mucking around too much in the lives of kids who are just experiencing normal social pain, you shouldn’t be.”

Schools insist they don’t intend to break up close friendships but rather to encourage courtesy, respect and kindness to all. “I don’t see schools really in the business of trying to prevent friendships as far as they are trying to give students an opportunity to interact socially with other students in a variety of different ways,” said Patti Kinney, who was a teacher and a principal in an Oregon middle school for 33 years and is now an official at the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Still, school officials admit they watch close friendships carefully for adverse effects. “When two children discover a special bond between them, we honor that bond, provided that neither child overtly or covertly excludes or rejects others,” said Jan Mooney, a psychologist at the Town School, a nursery through eighth grade private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. “However, the bottom line is that if we find a best friend pairing to be destructive to either child, or to others in the classroom, we will not hesitate to separate children and to work with the children and their parents to ensure healthier relationships in the future.”

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