

Interfering in a Child's Social Life

My seventh grade daughter is struggling socially, and having a hard time with friends. There is a sweet girl in her class who can really make a difference to her social life, if only I could explain to her just how much my daughter respects her etc.

My friends, however, have advised me that a parent getting involved in a child's social life is counter-productive and I had best stay out of it. I feel that I am the only one that can really present the points to this friend, however, and am anxious to address this head-on. What does the chashuve panel advise?

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Throughout my years in *Chinuch*, as a principal, I tried many times to achieve what you would like to achieve with your daughter and I failed a great majority of the time. There were many children who were not successful in their social skills and I often asked others in the class to befriend them. I did this on the elementary and high school levels, and, believe it or not, even on the Seminary level, to no avail. I would select girls who I thought had the skills to be able to befriend another who was socially inept in order to "bring her into the crowd". They would be helpful and cooperative for a few days, but then their interest in the girl would wane and we would be back to square one.

The reason my efforts were unsuccessful was because, while these children and teenagers may be popular, they lacked the necessary skills to make someone else feel comfortable in their milieu for the long run. They might have been able to do it for a short time, but their interest in being *mekarev* them, eventually petered out. Don't you, as a grown-up, pick your friends and stick to them? You might do a *chesed* and invite someone who is not part of your crowd for a *Shabbos* meal, etc. but it will be with no strings attached for a future friendship. Sometimes, as a grown-up, you might invite *almonos*, elderly people, newcomers, shul friends, etc to your home. However, you will only do it for the altruistic reasons of *chesed* and *mitzvah*. True friendships rarely develop from these actions.

How then can we expect children to befriend others for a true mutual and lasting relationship, at the request of others? Friendship cannot be legislated. A relationship must be allowed to develop and be nurtured on its own based on mutual interests. Should you decide to follow through on your idea of asking the classmate to befriend your daughter, it will only backfire. If your daughter ever finds out what you did, and secrets are very hard to keep, she will be very upset and will certainly suffer a loss of self-esteem.

We also know that this is true when we try to break up a relationship that we feel is detrimental to our children. You can try to legislate it, so to speak, but ultimately the relationship will most probably continue clandestinely. As an example, *Shaul HaMelech* objected to the friendship of *Yehonasan* and *David* who continued their relationship unbeknownst to him. Whenever well-meaning adults try to either make or sever a relationship among children, it just doesn't work. The ability of the children to understand and carry through what you are suggesting, does not exist within them.

The bottom line is that I agree with your friends and urge you to work with your child in developing social skills which will allow her to successfully make her own friends without your help. Ultimately, this is your responsibility. It will not be easy as each child needs to be taught differently depending on the circumstances and his/her social make-up. Chazal tell us "*knei l'cho chaver*". Teach your child the subtleties of 'buying a friend' by utilizing the *middos* of *chesed*, extending favors, going out of her way to pursue a friendship even at the cost of time and *koach* and even using small amounts of money for little gifts. You may need help and input from others who are not personally involved. Leave no stone unturned in your quest to raise a child who is comfortable in her own skin, proud of who she is, and who will easily make many long and lasting friendships.

Hatzlocho Rabo.