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What It Means to Be a Friend

Acts of Friendship

For Ashley, it was like this: She was sitting with a big group in the school lunchroom when she accidentally knocked her drink onto her lap. As word spread that it looked like Ashley had wet herself, the laughter began to mount. Then she noticed her best friend doing something strange.

"She poured water on herself," Ashley said.

True friendship is hard to find, Ashley says. But she knows it when she sees it. And so do many of you. We asked our readers what it takes to be a good friend. More than 5,000 of you shared your thoughts on friendship.

For some, the defining moments of friendship were profound, such as the soulmate who helps you through the grief of losing a family member or camps out in your hospital room when you're sick. For others, it's smaller gestures that loom large — the friend who talks for hours when you're feeling alone, even if it means going over on his cell phone minutes; the one who helps you with your homework, even when she hasn't done her own; or the friend who helps you search for your retainer, even when it means going through the garbage from the school lunch.

What Friends Do for You

Big or small, it's actions that seem to count the most in friendship. In a time when we can chat effortlessly by text and IM, talk is getting cheaper. Many of you believe that the evidence of true friends is what they *do* to show their loyalty, honesty, trustworthiness, or willingness to make a sacrifice when you need help.

Kaitlin, 14, told us about a friend who took the blame for her when she got in a fight at school. Her friend was suspended for 10 days. And Marissa, 16, said she discovered the difference between a close friend and casual friend on a school trip to California.

"I got sick, and my friend ran to the bathroom after me to hold my hair back as I became the Exorcist," Marissa said. "She stood by me, while my other 'friend' yelled at me to get off the floor and clean it up."

What You Do for Friends

It works both ways: Nearly three quarters of the people who wrote to us said they do as much for their friends as their friends do for them. Sometimes the most treasured acts of friendship are those for which you expect to get nothing in return, not even credit for a good deed.

"The nicest thing I ever did for a friend was when I let her date my ex — without ever telling her that I was against it," Rae'Johne, 14, said.

Elaina, 15, remembers the day she went clothes shopping with her best friend, who is overweight. The saleslady was being rude to her friend because there was so little in her size and nothing fit quite right.

Elaina is proud of how she helped her friend that day. "I had like an armful of clothes for myself (and may I add these clothes were to DIE for!) and I put all my clothes back and said, 'I don't like what they have in here, why don't we go somewhere with better clothes, not these cheap ones.'"

The One and Only

Many of the people who wrote us thought it was important to have a best friend, one who stood out from the rest.

"In reality, you are truly blessed to have one true friend to the backbone," Bizafalak, 14, said. "All the others are basically your acquaintances." That's what Rich, 17, meant when he described a person's friends being "like a pyramid" with one at the peak and others in supporting roles.

Some of you described the communication between best friends as being a perfectly clear connection, almost as if it's on a frequency only they can hear.

"A true friend understands you, even when you're not talking," Casey, 14, said.

"We practically finish each other's sentences," Kayla, 15, said.

The Wisdom of Friends

Often what you look for in your best friend is good judgment. Jackie, 14, said the nicest thing a friend did for her was to tell her mom a secret Jackie had told to her friend — that she was extremely depressed.

"My friend was scared and even though I told her not to tell anyone, she knew she had to," Jackie said. "She ended up saving my life, and I am grateful."

Not everyone thinks it's important to have one best friend. Molly, 14, said that together her friends make up all the aspects of what one "true friend" would be.

"I have friends who I would confide anything in and trust them to keep it all a secret," Molly said. "I have smart friends, funny friends, goofy friends, 'bodyguard' friends (a.k.a. the friends who will stick up for you no matter what), and just friends who are there on the weekends who want to hang out. So really, no one person can fill every void in your life."

"Friends Are Kind of Scary"

Friendship isn't easy. To hear many of you tell it, making a good friend is almost like adding a new family member. It comes with risk and responsibility.

"Friends are kind of scary," said Mary, 14, who has trusted some friends with secrets and regretted it. "Not them in person, but the thought of them in general. It's almost like you are investing in this one person, whoever it may be."

Sometimes what a good friend needs from you is brutal honesty, not a cheerleader. Gretchen, 15, said: "A true friend is a person who would really tell you how bad you look in that bright pink spandex suit, even though you really like it."

Friends aren't always forever. Angelica tells the story of a friendship that began in kindergarten. She remembers how close they were back in the days when she helped her friend cope with diabetes, sat with her after her appendix was removed, and listened to her as she struggled with family problems.

But her friend moved away recently and hasn't returned her calls. Angelica has heard that her friend now hangs out with kids who drink and do drugs. "I know what these things can do to you," Angelica said, "and I could help her again. But I feel too far away."

Romance, like distance, can complicate things. Many teens told of friendships that soured after their friend began seeing someone.

"I think the nicest thing a friend ever did for me was to decide that she would still be my friend this school year even after I dissed her to hang out with all these cute guys," 14-year-old Darilynn said. "I love her for that ... I've learned my lesson."

When Friends Move On

Many of you learned the true value of friendship after it was gone. Lots of you urged people to work at their most important friendships, rather than letting them fall apart after a fight or fade away.

Roxanne, 15, said her closest friend committed suicide recently. Her advice on how to treat your friends? "Cherish them like you only have one last day with them."

And for some, it was OK if good friends only accompanied them for part of their journey in life. People grow and change, and so do their friends. Lily, 14, said her best friend will be moving away this year. Lily will try to stay in contact, but she is realistic about the prospects.

"Friends come and go," she said.

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