Parent and carer guidance

Let's talk about healthy relationships: friendships and conflict

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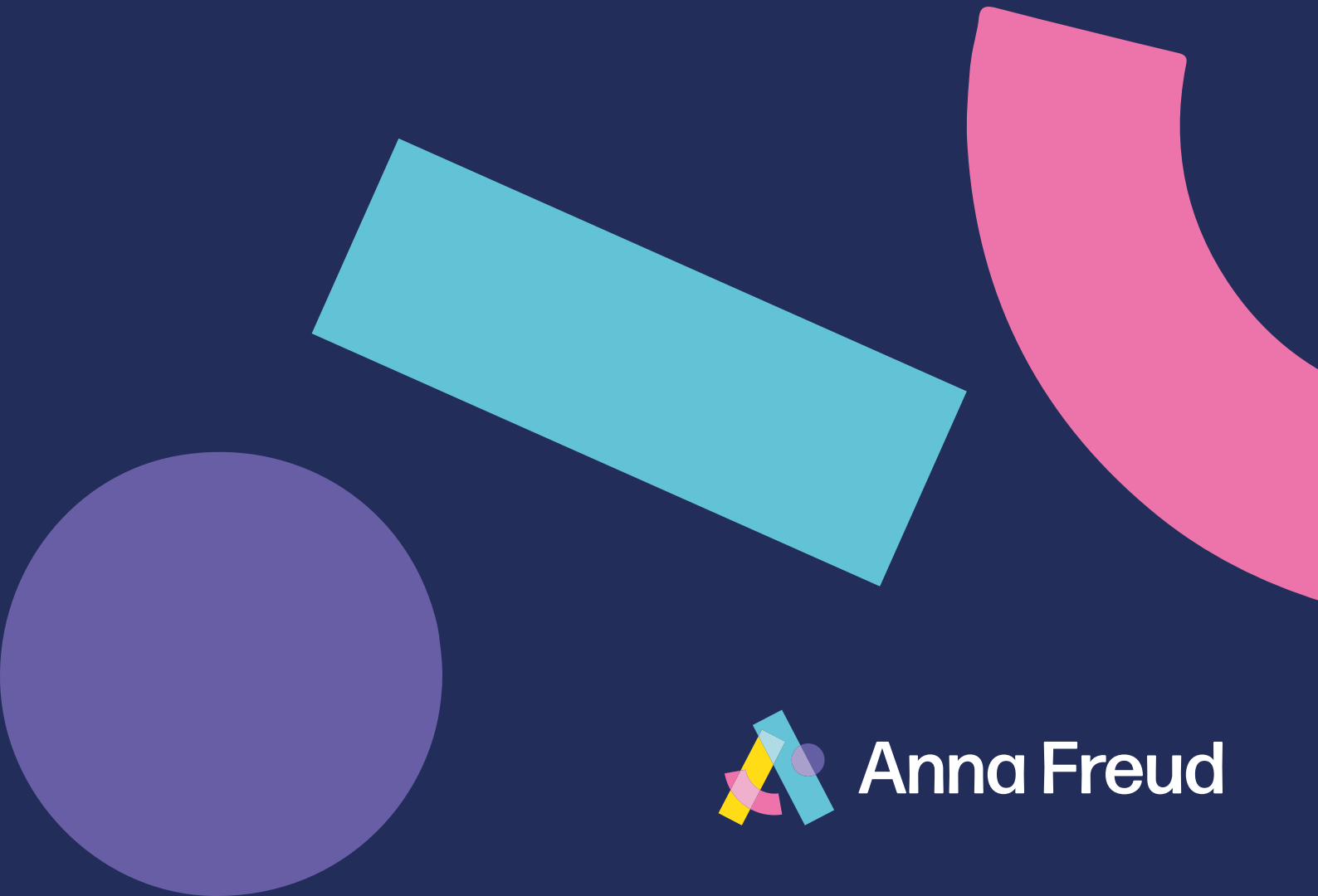

Anna Freud

What is this resource and how do I use it?

This resource has been created by Anna Freud, a UK-based mental health charity working with schools, colleges and families to support children and young people's wellbeing.

It is designed to accompany the *Let's talk about healthy relationships: friendships and conflict* lesson series your child will be exploring at school. The lessons focus on what makes a healthy friendship and how relationships can affect our mental wellbeing.

This guide gives an overview of the key messages being shared in class and offers some practical ways you can support your child if they're experiencing friendship difficulties.

What is a healthy friendship?

Friendships are one important type of healthy relationship. They often involve loyalty, sharing interests and experiences, offering support with problems, and showing kindness and generosity. A positive friendship also includes valuing each other, understanding boundaries and respecting differences.

Like all relationships, friendships can have ups and downs. Disagreements are natural and learning to navigate them respectfully is an important part of maintaining healthy relationships.

It's important to remember that not everyone expresses connection in the same way. For some neurodivergent children and young people, building friendships can feel more complex, or they may prefer to spend time alone. This isn't always a cause for concern and may simply reflect how they feel most comfortable.

How can I support my child?

Parents and carers are experts on their own children. You can help your child by providing support in the following ways:

Role-model healthy emotional regulation

Children and young people learn and absorb life skills from those closest to them. Demonstrating how you resolve conflict and react to challenging situations and friendship issues is a key learning opportunity.

Validate their feelings and model emotional vocabulary

Use a wide range of vocabulary for emotions to help your child understand and express how they feel. You could say things like “It’s ok to feel upset when you have a disagreement with a friend”.

Listen to understand

Listen to your child with curiosity and openness. Ask open-ended questions: “How does that make you feel?” or “I wonder if that made you feel...?”

Talk about boundaries

Support your child to recognise what makes a friendship feel positive and respectful. Encourage them to set and maintain healthy boundaries when needed.

Support your child to reflect

When behaviour has become challenging, it can be helpful to spend some time together exploring how they were feeling beforehand, how others may have felt, and how those emotions might have influenced what happened. This can also be a chance to think through what could have been done differently.

Encourage problem-solving

Help your child explore different ways to navigate friendship difficulties. You could role-play conversations or discuss possible approaches together to help build their confidence in social situations.

Consider your reaction

It’s normal to find your child’s emotions challenging at times. Try to respond in a way that makes space for how your child is feeling. It can be helpful to avoid making assumptions, downplaying their experience, rushing to reassure or offering quick solutions. Phrases like ‘calm down’ or ‘relax’ may feel dismissive in the moment and can make it harder for your child to feel understood.

What if my child’s strong feelings don’t get better?

If friendship difficulties are having a lasting impact on your child’s wellbeing, it may be helpful to speak to someone at school in the first instance. Education staff can provide support and look at ways to help them feel more comfortable in social situations.

Further support

- **Childline**
  Support, guidance and advice for children and parents.
- **MindEd**
  Free e-learning for parents and all adults working with children and young people.
- **Young Minds**
  Providing young people with the tools to look after their mental health. Empowering adults to be the best support they can be to the young people in their lives.

Looking after yourself

Supporting your child through friendship difficulties can sometimes feel stressful or challenging. Try to ensure that you also look after your own mental wellbeing.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, it might be helpful to:

- talk to someone that you trust – this could be a friend or family member
- try a calming technique, such as box breathing – breathing in, holding, and breathing out for four counts
- practise positive self-talk to remind yourself that you're doing your best and that it's okay to find things difficult
- make time for self-care, including seeing friends and family, enjoying hobbies and taking time to rest.

If you continue to feel affected, you may find it helpful to speak to your GP.

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