



Curriculum >> Friends Forever: Is It Possible in International Schools?

For every child, making friends is an important part of social and emotional development. Friendships strengthen self-esteem and have a significant impact on academic achievement.

However, many of our students spend their lives transitioning to new schools, new countries and new social groups. Even students who remain in one school find themselves grieving for departed peers and adjusting to constantly changing social dynamics.

It is well documented that third culture kids (defined by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken as children who spend a significant portion of their formative years in a culture other than their own) form relationships in distinctive ways, as a result of their unique upbringing. As international educators, it is our responsibility to be aware of their complex lives and support their emotional development. In doing so, we provide an important foundation for academic success and lifelong wellbeing.

How can international schools support friendships?

Our academic curriculum must include explicit opportunities to address wellbeing and teach strategies for maintaining friendships. Daily lessons should include identification and practice of social skills, such as turn-taking, reciprocal conversation and joining games. Through collaborative learning, children should experience the joy, fulfillment, frustration and injustice of social interactions, within the safety of their class environment.

In-depth inquiries should explore significant concepts such as conflict resolution, leadership and identity. Students should practice conflict resolution skills, such as suggesting compromises, using I-statements and appreciating perspective. Regular opportunities for self-reflection, analysis of individual strengths, personal goal setting and self-talk are essential for building a positive self-concept.

Field experiences and extended camps also provide physical and psychological challenges, which build resilience and independence. Away from the contrived routines of the school day and in the midst of authentic experiences, students form deeper bonds with their peers and create memories, which extend the longevity of friendships.

Parent education is also a key component of an effective school-wide program. Through community events, workshops and individual meetings, fami-

lies should establish a strong connection to the school and have access to effective parenting advice. They should be informed of child development phases, strategies to build social skills at home, the value of play, and the importance of honoring their child's individual social style.

Providing social support for third culture kids is both challenging and crucial. It requires commitment and education on the part of all teachers, parents and students. At Beijing BISS International School, we attribute much of our success to the input of our School Counsellor, who works with all stakeholders and brings invaluable expertise to the team.

While lifelong friendships are rare, they *can* be born in international schools. We know of countless students who continue to correspond many years after parting ways. In any case, the development of lifelong social skills is not optional, but a necessary part of every child's education.

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