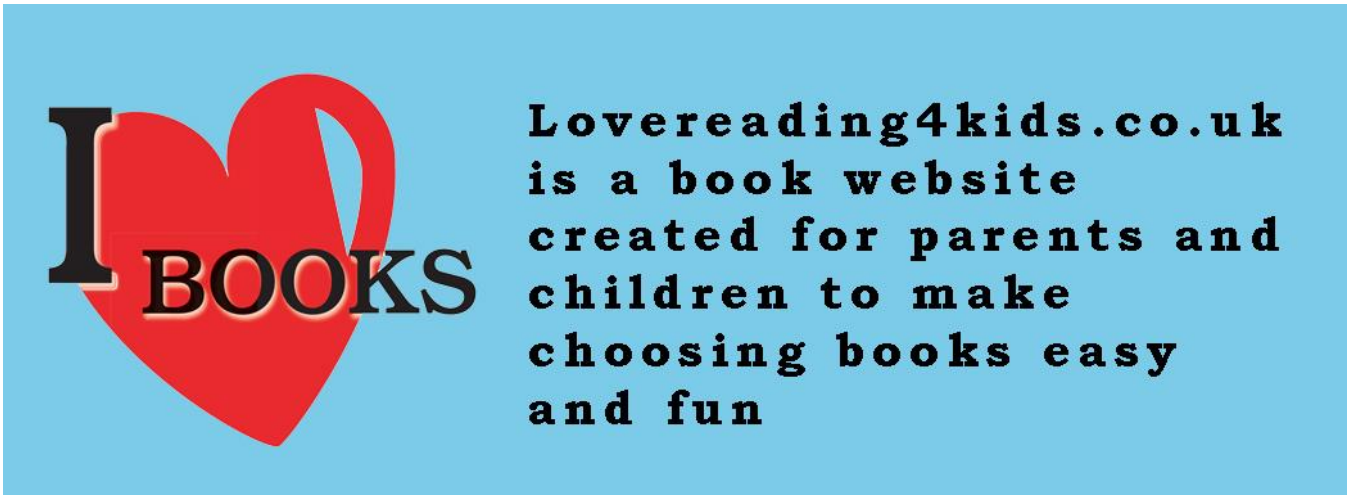


Opening extract from

The Teenage Guide to Friends

Written by

Nicola Morgan

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Please print off and read at your leisure.



To everyone who wants to see into the minds of the people around them.

MORE INFORMATION

There is lots of free information on Nicola Morgan's website: **www.nicolamorgan.com** Do follow her on **Twitter: @NicolaMorgan**

DISCLAIMER: All the advice in this book is given in good faith and after a great deal of care and consideration. However, every situation is different and sometimes effective and safe advice requires specific knowledge of that situation. If you have any doubts or if your situation seems different from those described here, please always seek help from a trusted adult such as a teacher, professional or other person who cares about you.

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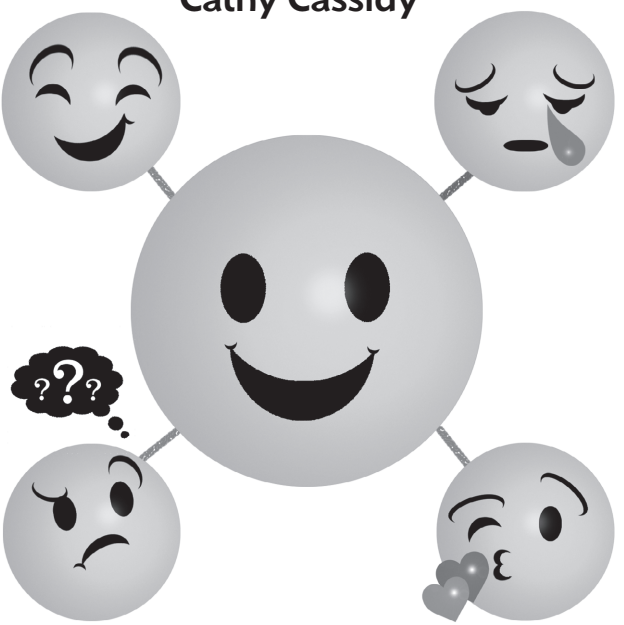
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NICOLA MORGAN

The Teenage Guide to Friends

with a foreword by

Cathy Cassidy



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Introduction

Whether our friendships are going well or not makes a massive difference to our happiness and wellbeing. That's the same whatever age we are. I don't think anyone can go through life without some stressful times with friends – or enemies, or people who are supposed to be friends but behave more like enemies. While you're at school, it can be much harder. It's a very intense time and you're surrounded by so many people every day, all with different personalities, needs and behaviours. Some of those people are positive influences and some are not. Often, peer group and friendships situations are really painful. You'll wonder how someone could be so mean, cruel, careless or selfish.

Thing is, humans are complex creatures who don't always behave in sensible and positive ways. We're emotional and often not very well controlled. We say the wrong things, do the wrong things. We fail to understand each other. Adults do all that, too.

But this book is about much more than solving problems! In a way, it's a book about empathy and human psychology because it tries to get inside the heads of the people around you to see how they might be feeling and thinking, because how they are thinking and feeling affects how they behave to you. We can't be sure exactly what someone else is feeling, but the more we try to

understand them, the closer we will come. And the better we understand other people's behaviour, the better we can manage our relationships and not beat ourselves up when someone behaves in a cruel or thoughtless way.

So, if you're interested in the fascinating ways that differences in personality or life experiences affect our behaviour, read on! You'll find advice, strategies and things to think about. Some of the advice or situations won't apply to you: ignore those and focus on what you feel does apply to you and will help you. Everyone is different and this book tries to celebrate that as well as to understand it.

MY SHORT PERSONAL STORY

My own childhood was one of not fitting in. For my primary school years, my sister and I were the only girls in a boys' school because my parents taught there and there wasn't anywhere else we could go. For my secondary school years, I was much younger than everyone in my year. I was 11 when I started at that school and the others were nearly 13. An 11 year old girl who has only ever played with boys is very different from a teenage girl, believe me!

I felt more different than when I'd been at the boys' school. I didn't know about any of the things the girls seemed so expert and interested in. I was geeky, swotty, skinny, undeveloped. They seemed to speak a different

language from me. They thought I was the clever one in the class. I thought I was the boring one that no one wanted to hang out with. I wasn't bullied but I was left out. At weekends my main aim was to find out what everyone else was doing, so I could tag along. If I didn't, I'd be left behind and no one would notice I wasn't there. They weren't mean about it; I was just invisible.

So, if you feel you don't fit in for any reason, I understand.

Did it damage me, wreck my life, stop me making great friendships later? No. Not in the slightest. I just learnt a bit late. Actually, I think it makes me a better person because I'm now very sensitive to people being left out.

NOTE ABOUT THE QUIZZES

The personality quizzes in this book are informal and have not been scientifically tested. They are just the start of finding out more about yourself and to give you some more insight.

Whatever answers you come up with, don't make the mistake of saying, "Right, that's how I am and there's nothing I can do to change it." If we discover that our personality makes us behave in a certain way and if we would prefer to behave differently, we can alter our behaviour and thinking and so improve our lives. But remember that you will naturally change as you grow older so don't get too hung up on your personality type:

it doesn't define you.

Besides, people don't fit neatly into boxes and it isn't helpful to try to fit yourself into one or label yourself. These personality tests give us clues and explanations about our behaviour, that's all. We are all different and it's interesting to understand the differences.

I suggest you don't write your answers on the pages of this book: I think it's better if you keep them to yourself. Although it's fun to do the tests with a friend - and of course you can do that if you want to - it's also likely that you'll be more honest if you do the tests privately.

TRUSTED ADULTS

You don't have to deal with problems on your own. Talk to a trusted adult if you would like to. That might be your parents or carer, a teacher at school, or another adult you trust. It could be Childline , especially if the problem feels as though it is damaging your life and you don't know how to deal with it.

On friendship issues, it usually makes sense to talk to someone who knows you and, perhaps, who knows the others involved. That person might have more relevant suggestions than a stranger. So, one of your teachers would often be a good start. Your school should make it clear who you can go to with problems but you can also speak to a different teacher if there's one you feel more comfortable talking to.

However, I realise that sometimes adults don't help when it comes to friendship issues! Adults might regard something as a trivial reason to be upset. For example, if someone is giving you the silent treatment, adults may not realise just how horrible this feels. Or if there's been an argument or problem, they might say things like, "Oh, it'll all be fine," or "Just shake hands and everything will be sorted." Sometimes, that advice might be right in the end but the problem is that you feel much worse than the adult realises.

It can also be difficult asking adults because you might believe you're going to be judged. I can't promise adults won't judge you, of course, but I think the trick is how you approach the question. If you start by saying, "I know you might think this is silly, but I need you to know that it's really upsetting me," you have a good chance of getting a sympathetic response.

Whatever your doubts or fears, it's still important to know that you can ask for help, especially if there's a situation you think is either getting worse or is frightening.

SECTION ONE

What Are Friends?

Different types of animals behave in different ways. One difference is whether they tend to live in structured groups, alone or in pairs – how "social" they generally are. Some species almost always live in groups or packs and are described as being more social. Think of dogs compared to cats. Cats act more independently and seem "happier" on their own. Of course, they can form friendships when they happen to live together but they don't stay naturally in close groups. Dogs are usually different: when dogs are kept as pets they treat their family as their "pack" and seem to need company. They may even become ill if they are too isolated.

Humans have extremely large, complicated social networks, beginning with their immediate family and spreading more widely to other relatives, groups of friends and other contacts. This was true even before social media came along to create far bigger networks.

Social behaviours have been built into our biology

over thousands of years of evolution. However, one of the special things about humans is how individual we all are. Different dogs behave differently, depending on things like their breed and how they were brought up. But humans, being incredibly complex, have far more individual differences.

Also, because of our powerful brains and ability to think rationally and use self-control, we can often make choices that push against those thousands of years of evolution. For example, although human adults in most societies tend to form a tight "pair bond", many choose not to. We have that power. Although humans, like all animal species, are evolved to reproduce and pass on their genes, many people opt not to. So, we don't have to be dominated by everything evolution makes other animals do. We have some choices.

One other aspect of being human is that we have created lots of ways of supporting each other, through different sorts of friendship. Using empathy, we can understand, value and respect different bonds and lifestyles, including very social and more solitary ones. In fact, it's partly empathy that allows us to have large social groups in the first place. Scientists have argued that the bigger the brain a species has, the larger the possible network of "friends". (I'll talk more about that later.

Because we are each different and have some control over our behaviour, in theory we can choose the sort

of social life we feel comfortable with. For some people, this means having a wide circle of friends and for others it means enjoying the close friendship of a small number. Finding your own way through these choices can be very difficult during adolescence, because you are changing all the time and so are the people around you. You may feel pushed towards friendships that don't actually suit you. Also, you have fewer choices than adults about who to spend time with. You usually have very little control over which school you go to; or, if you're home-schooled, your choices are limited by where you live and what is available to you.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

The point of friends is support. That's why it can feel so bad when friendships go wrong. But you have more than friends: you have social groups, too. Your social groups consist of people you've had some kind of contact with: it could be your friend, brother, teacher, neighbour, aunt, employer, postman, doctor, step-cousin, etc. Some are close to you; others are not. Some you might only have contact with once a year or less; others you see every day. Even if you think you don't have that many friends, you do have people who will support you.

We need these groups. The world is a scary place and we sometimes need help with the choices we make. We can achieve far more if we work together, supporting each

other. Then, when we're ill, old, injured, tired, confused or all sorts of other things, our groups are there for us. We need to know who to rely on and if we've picked the right people they will be happy to help us.

Because human social systems are so complicated, it can take a long time to learn how they work. When you're a young child, it's much simpler because your group is really small, usually your parents, or one parent or carer, and maybe a brother or sister (or more!) Then you probably go to nursery and learn to get on with a few other small children and some adults you haven't met before. Primary school is a bit more complicated: you spend most of the time with your classmates and a few adults. The adults can usually keep an eye on things and make sure you're coping with friendships and that everyone is treating each other well. (Ideally.) During that time, you discover that you like some people and not others. You learn that people behave differently and some make you feel good and others don't. You learn what happens if you smile, hug, cry, borrow a pencil without asking, or hit someone.

Secondary school adds a whole extra layer of complication: bigger classes, different classes for different subjects, more teachers, teams, groups, clubs. It's much harder for adults to spot problems. And you're all changing, too, becoming teenagers and then moving towards being adults.

To sum up, humans are, by nature, social animals, but there are two things that make us different from other animals: first, we have unusually large and complicated social systems, which can be difficult to negotiate and fit into. Second, our powerful brains give us choices, including the possibility of being different from the people around us if we wish. But that is a difficult choice, and mostly we spend our time and energy trying to find the right social groups that can support our needs and where we feel comfortable and useful. We need to be useful, because if we are useful to our group, it will look after us.

Group behaviour can cause problems, too, as I'll talk about later. But for now, the important thing is that humans need these connections. Some only need a small group - the number of friends you have is not a sign of your success at being human. Others thrive in big groups. It's important to value each type of person equally and not to worry if you have a small number of friends. What's important is that they give you what you need and you give them what they need. That's how friendship works: it's a two-way thing.

WHAT IS A FRIEND?

One thing's for sure: it's not what certain social media platforms would have you think. Those are mostly just contacts and most of them are not, in my opinion, friends. Here's what I think a "friend" is: someone you know and

like enough to be happy to spend time with. You believe they feel similarly towards you. They would want to help you if you had a problem and you would help them. . They would not let you sit on your own at lunch. You know enough about them to feel that you trust each other to some extent. You feel fairly comfortable around them and they share many of your beliefs, values, likes and dislikes. Most of the time, you understand the person, as though you are "on the same wavelength".

This doesn't mean you have to like and dislike all the same things or agree about everything; and you don't have to reveal everything about yourself or trust all your friends with your deepest secrets. But there are enough positive bonds between you for you both to feel a proper human connection. Perhaps your heart lifts a little when you see the person. Imagine you bumped into them on holiday: you'd be happy and you'd want to stop for a chat.

Your friendship might change over time. That's ok. You're human: you change. Don't be afraid of that.

HOW MANY FRIENDS DO YOU NEED?

You might feel you don't have enough friends. But who says what "enough" is? How many will you think is enough? Remember I said that some people like to have lots of friends and others prefer a few? Let's look at that more closely. It's not as simple as it seems.

You see that really "popular" or cool girl who seems

to have loads of friends? She looks relaxed and confident and people just seem to gravitate towards her. In a group, she's the centre of attention and you can't imagine her ever being left out of anything that's going on. Or that boy who always seems to be the life and soul of the party? You can't imagine him being bullied or ignored or anyone being mean to him. No one would dare, you think.

Hang on. You're assuming they are happy and that they have a strong support network of friends. You might be right but you might be wrong. The fact that they're relaxed in company and don't seem as self-conscious as you feel doesn't tell you anything about their happiness or inner confidence. They might be one of those extrovert personalities who tends not to be so self-conscious. Or they may have grown up in a big family with loads of chances to practise social interaction. Or they may be quite insensitive and not care much about what people think. So, yes, social situations may look easy for them, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they have perfect friendships.

They might crave a close and trusting friendship which they don't get from their "fans". Perhaps they're dealing with complicated groupings and break-ups amongst their friends. Maybe they have high maintenance friendships or their popularity exposes them to jealousy. Or shallow friendships, after which their so-called friends move on,

leaving those popular-looking people behind. You really can't tell.

And don't assume that people who seem to have lots of friends have better or easier friendships than others.

You see those students who often keep to themselves during break or lunch and don't join in noisy chatter or games, preferring quieter activities they can do on their own? You might be assuming they're unhappy and don't have a good support network of friends. You could be right but you could be wrong. Perhaps they have a couple of really close friends, people they can quietly trust and who can trust them. They might like being on their own some of the time. They might be strong "introverts" (see Chapter xxx) and they might need quiet time to think, dream, be creative or just to wind down. Introverts may not be the life and soul of the party but they can be very happy and have wonderful friendships.

Remember again: not everyone needs lots of friends. And not everyone shows their friendships with linked arms and hugs. Although everyone needs some contacts and connections, we don't all need them all the time. We don't all need our friendships to be out there.

So, my answer to the question how many friends do we need is: enough to feel supported, enough that we know we've got someone to go to and that we can feel useful to others when they need it. That could be one person or thirty. You're not a better person if you have

thirty friends. Don't spend time worrying about whether you have enough friends; just get involved in activities you enjoy and friends will come. (But you will find tips for making more friends in Chapter XXX.)

DO BOYS AND GIRLS DO FRIENDSHIP DIFFERENTLY?

This is a really complicated question! Lots of people talk about differences but these differences may be exaggerated. It's too easy to fall back on stereotypes of how different genders behave. Whether we were brought up to be a boy or a girl, and what sort of boy or girl, can make such a difference to our behaviours. Maybe if children were all brought up exactly the same, regardless of gender, they would behave the same in their friendships. We can't really know. What we can know is "how things often are". The world we have to deal with is the one we have, not the ideal one.

Here's what I do think: you do not have to conform to anyone else's needs or behaviours. Whether you like friendships where you can discuss your inmost feelings, or you want to keep your feelings hidden, or you want whatever types of friendship suit you, the choice is yours. Don't be trapped by stereotypes. Do what makes you feel comfortable and look for friends who are understanding and accepting of who you are.

If you find that difficult at school, because you don't

have a choice of who's around you, see if you can make friends outside school, in local activities, for example. And look ahead to the time when you'll leave school and be able to have more control over friendship groups.

CAN BOYS AND GIRLS BE "JUST GOOD FRIENDS"

Of course! Since people become friends with each other when they share opinions, values and tastes, and you can share those with people of any gender.

In secondary school, hormones are kicking in and you might be physically attracted to someone in much more than a "just good friends" way. But if you're not physically attracted to someone but you like each other, you can certainly be good friends with someone regardless of gender.

There can be complications, mainly because of other people's perceptions. Ignore them. If you feel safe and comfortable and both of you want the same thing from your friendship, ignore everyone else.

One thing to remember, though: if you have a good friend who is a different gender from you, they may also want to hang out with friends of the same gender sometimes. You need to accept that.

Different friendships bring different benefits. Celebrate them all.

CAN YOU BE FRIENDS WITH SOMEONE MUCH YOUNGER OR OLDER?

A friendship with someone much older or younger than you is not an equal friendship. You may both get something out of it but the older person is almost certainly "dominant" over the younger. This makes it something to be cautious about.

First, it depends on how big the gap is. It's usual for friendships to be within the same year group and sometimes schools discourage friendships that cross year groups. Being friends with someone just one year above or below might not seem that big a deal - and usually wouldn't be a problem outside - but it can lead to problems in school environments and that's what the school may want to avoid. Mainly, the problems are minor or unpredictable: teasing for one or both of the friends; disruption of the peer groups surrounding you both; or the fact that you both might be less involved in the activities for your specific year group, leading to isolation for either or both of you and, if the friendship breaks down, even more trouble for you.

The larger the age gap, the greater the potential problems and the more likely adults are to discourage the friendship. If the age gap is more than one school year group, there would be concerns about the younger one "growing up too fast" or being involved in activities that aren't appropriate for that age, such as going to parties

with older teenagers or becoming sexually active. You might feel you want to grow up fast, but there's no long-term advantage to that. But you might feel that you are more mature than your year group and be naturally drawn to older teenagers. Or you might be old for your year and closer in age to students in the year above. This is very understandable.

But be aware of possible difficulties. Remember that you are both changing and you are likely to be changing at different rates. If your friend is much older, he or she will leave school long before you and soon be in the world of work. It's likely that your friendship will become more difficult, especially once they've left school, so it's really important that you keep strong links with the other students in your year group otherwise you could feel isolated.

If your friend is much younger, perhaps you get a sense of status from having their peer group look up to you. I understand this but I don't think it's very healthy for your own growth if you rely on it. It's great that you're giving support to a younger teenager but this is a different sort of friendship from the ones we have with our equals and peers. As an adult, your equals and peers will naturally include people of different ages but in adolescence that's much harder.

When we're young, a few years makes a lot of difference. Think how different an 11 year old is from a

13 year old – just two to three years but a huge leap in development, desires, outlook, behaviours and emotions. Of course, some people are more mature than others at the same age, and age difference can seem less in some people than in others, but I still don't think you'll find many 11 year olds whose minds work in the same way as that of a 13 or 14 year old.

As you get older, age differences matter less and less. A 25 year old and a 30 year old can be indistinguishable, and once you're into your 30s even more differences have melted away.

So, the best friendships during teenage years are usually between people of roughly the same age and friendships between teenagers who are two or more school years apart are potentially difficult. I'm not saying don't be friends: just make sure that it is a two-way friendship and that you have friends of your own age as well.

ARE ADULTS YOUR FRIENDS?

What if there's an adult you consider as your friend? I think we need to be clear what we mean by "friend". Supposing your home situation means you don't have good and consistent support from your parents or other carers; or you only have one parent and that parent is not the same gender as you so you rely on the support and friendship of an adult of your gender. (Many people don't find gender relevant but others do. Only you know whether

this is important to you.) In that case, friendship of another adult can be incredibly helpful. But I think you'd agree that this relationship is more like one you could have with a trusted older relative than with someone your age. It's very different from the sort of friendship I'm talking about in this book.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does he or she encourage me to have lots of other friends?
- Do I always feel comfortable with this person?
- Does someone else I trust think I spend too much time with this person?

If your answers were Yes, Yes and No, this sounds like a healthy relationship and it is, by most definitions, a friendship.

If not, it's wrong for me to make judgments without knowing the circumstances but I believe you should think carefully about whether this friendship is benefiting you. Someone who prevents you from having other friends is not a proper friend. You need to feel comfortable and safe. Why does someone else think you spend too much time with them? (They may be wrong or right.) Is it possible that you're allowing yourself to be over-protected? In any case, if you're in doubt, do talk to someone else you trust.

Even a positive friendship with an adult is not enough

to provide the bonds and connections you need as you move towards adulthood. If you really trust this adult, one of the best things he or she could do for you is help you find ways of also making friends of your age.

I hope you have adults in your life who support you and who you like being with. But I hope you also see that the relationships you have with them are different from the equal friendships you can have with people your age.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Remember that you really only know about one person's experience: your own. You can guess what other people feel about their friendships but you can be sure that many people who seem confident and popular also have problems and heartache.
- Can you remember when you first met one of your current friends? Did you know immediately that you would be friends? What did you first notice about them? Who spoke first?
- Some people say "opposites attract", meaning that people are often friends with someone who is very different in some way. Do you agree with this? Think about some of the ways you're different from any of your friends. Does it matter?

What is important to you in a friend? Put these in order of importance to you:

- They laugh a lot - and about the same things as me
- They would never laugh at me
- I can trust them with a secret
- I believe they feel the same way about me as I do about them
- I feel equal to them in most ways
- They will help me when I'm feeling down
- If they have to tell me something I don't want to hear, they will do it sensitively and kindly

Not all your friends need to have the same positive features but they should all give you some good feelings most of the time.

* * *