To discover a wide selection of 4-H activities and experiences, visit 4-H.org/4HatHome

BUILDING HEALTHY FRIENDSHIPS

Friendship is worth the work! Learn how to maintain friendships with the people who matter to you.
Building Healthy Friendships

Friendship is worth the work!
Learn how to maintain friendships with the people who matter to you.

About the Activity
Making connections with other people is an important part of your emotional well-being, no matter your age. Friendships help us to feel connected, and when friendships don’t last, we can feel lost or disconnected from our community. This activity will encourage you to reach out to others and help you to build safe and healthy friendships.

Supplies
These simple materials will get you started.

- Paper or Notecards
- Envelopes
- Stamps
- A writing utensil: pen, pencil, colored pencils, or markers
- Addresses of friends and family
- A favorite soft item (a pillow, sweatshirt, stuffed animal, blanket, etc.)
- Your favorite music
- Any social media that connects you to others

Grades: 6-12
Topic: Mental Health, Mindfulness
Time: 30-45 minutes
Before We Begin

What defines a healthy relationship?
According to youth.gov, a healthy relationship (friendship or romantic) is one where respect is shown. An unhealthy relationship is one where another person attempts to control and use power physically, sexually, or emotionally.

The characteristics of a healthy relationship include: mutual respect, trust, honesty, compromise, individuality, anger control, good communication, problem solving, fighting fair, understanding, self-confidence, non-sexual touch, lack of pressure to behave a certain way, and encouragement.

The characteristics of an unhealthy relationship may include: control, hostility, lying, cheating, disrespect, dependence, intimidation, separation from loved ones, physical violence, and sexual violence.

Activity Steps
Follow these steps to work on honing your relationships.

— Relax and Reflect
Grab your soft item and find a place to relax. Turn on your favorite music while holding or hugging that soft item, and take 3-5 minutes to reflect on the following statement: “I am important enough to be loved and to show love to others.” Continue to hug your item while you work through your reflection.

DID YOU KNOW?
Plants and animals have organic substances in their bodies called hormones, which regulate various processes in their bodies. For humans, hugging is important because it releases the hormone oxytocin and the brain chemical dopamine — both of which are linked to pleasure and happiness.

Hugging also directly impacts cortisol levels, which is our fight or flight hormone. It’s also your body’s main stress hormone, working with certain parts of your brain to control your mood and motivation.

So how often should you practice hugging?
It is recommended that we receive:
• Eight 10-second hugs a day for maintenance
• 12 hugs a day for growth
• At least 18 hugs a day for optimal mental health.

Important Tip: Before you hug someone, make sure to ask for and receive their consent. Asking for hugs will also encourage you to build and deepen personal connections. More on the importance of this in the following steps.

— Create Your Heart Chart
Connection looks different in every relationship. Sometimes you have a connection with another person due to chemistry — meaning you may just “click” with one another. Sometimes connections may stem from other types of interaction. Maybe you work together, are in class together, or share a common interest.

In the following steps, we are going to explore our connections with the important people in our lives:

1. To start, using your writing utensils and your sheet of paper, draw a large heart that takes up most of the space on your piece of paper.
2. Inside the left side of the heart you drew, write the word “people.”
3. Inside the right side of the heart you drew, write the word “peace.”
4. Inside the heart that you drew, write “I am loved,” “You are loved,” or any expression that reminds you of how important you ar
Activity Steps
(continued...)

—

Consider Your Connections
Think about five people who are important to you. These can be people who you see on a regular basis, but you can explore other types of relationships, too. You may want to pick a person who you were once close to but have since grown apart from.

Now complete the following:

1. Write the names of the five people you selected on the left side of your drawn heart.
2. Identify five activities that you like to do with people, and write them inside of the right side of your drawn heart.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:
Do you associate any of the activities on the right hand with the people listed on the left hand? How does this make you feel? Associations like this may help to release oxytocin, the hormone that promotes feeling of contentment, reduces stress, and promotes bonding.

Care for Your Connections
Your brain development thrives on connection. But not all connections have to be in person or verbal – we also communicate through nonverbal signals. Social media is one modern form of nonverbal communication. Writing letters can be another.

This next part of the activity will allow us to build connections as we work on our nonverbal communication.

To start, take out the paper, notecards, and envelopes. Write a note to each of the 5 people you listed on the left hand. In the letter:

1. Tell them why they are important to you.
2. Share a cherished memory that you have with them.
3. Thank them for a specific attribute (kindness, silliness, joy, etc.) that they add to your life.
4. Invite them to join you in one of the activities you have identified.
5. Mail the letter via snail mail. A handwritten note shows that you have put care and consideration into this communication and are willing to dedicate extra time and effort to connecting with them.

Remember: You are your biggest barrier to connection. To build connection, you must be vulnerable and empathetic - that is, showing other people that you understand their feelings. This includes opening yourself to the chance of rejection, which can be uncomfortable. Letter writing like we just did is one way to become more comfortable with being vulnerable.
Test Your Knowledge

See how much you know about connecting with other people.

**QUESTION 1**
Cortisol does the following:
- a. Acts as a flight-or-fight response
- b. Controls mood
- c. Controls motivation
- d. All of the Above

**QUESTION 2**
True or false? Connection can happen in contrived situations.
- a. True
- b. False

**QUESTION 3**
Oxytocin promotes:
- c. Disconnection
- d. Contentment
- e. Anger
- f. Frustration

**QUESTION 4**
How many daily 10-second hugs are recommended for optimal mental health?
- g. 3
- h. 8
- i. 18
- j. 27

**QUESTION 5**
True or false? Communication can be verbal and nonverbal.
- a. True
- b. False

Reflection Questions

Questions to deepen wonder and understanding.

- What are your strengths in building connection with others? In situations you choose to be in? In situations that you don’t choose?
- Where do you identify areas of growth in building connection with others? In situations where you choose? In situations you don’t choose?
- How can others show you that they are invested in a connection with you?
- How many connections do you need to feel healthy? For some, it is 1 or 2 people; for others it is as many as they can gather. There is no set number of positive connections needed, but knowing what you need is helpful.
- When you are feeling lonely and disconnected from others, what coping strategies do you utilize? Identify if these are positive (building healthy habits) or negative (putting yourself or others down).
We fall out of touch with various friends at different times of our lives. That is natural. But just because you may not see them on a regular basis doesn’t have to mean you can’t still be close with them – sometimes maintaining a friendship takes work, and for the right ones, it is worth it.

Think about people who you used to be closer with than you are now. Think about what they meant to you at that time, and ask yourself if they could or should still be a valuable part of your life. Do they bring out your best qualities? Do you feel good about yourself being around them? Do you think you make them feel good about themselves?

Take control of your own well-being. Pick up the phone. Write a letter. Send a text. Make a list of who you miss and start putting “Connect with ____________” on your to-do list every day. It will make a difference in your mental health and overall well-being.