

Helping Kids Connect IRL

Gina Boscarino | Wedgwood's Positive Youth Development Group Specialist and Teen CHARGE Manager

In today's fast-paced and highly digital world, with lots of communication happening through screens, it can be challenging for teens to connect with another in person. For many teens, this is a skill that was never developed due to stay at home COVID restrictions in their formative years. Others struggled with the transition back to being face-to-face and retreated to video games and social media for their interaction.

While online friendships can provide support, they cannot replace healthy offline friendships, which are critical for helping teens develop empathy and communication skills. Here are 5 ways you can help your teen make connections IRL (in real life).

1. TALK ABOUT ONLINE VS. IN-PERSON FRIENDSHIPS

- Start by validating and acknowledging the importance of your teen's online friendships.
- Ask what they like about these friends and their online relationships. You may discover that there is a reason why your teen prefers online socializing. Is it easier to meet people with shared interests that way? Do they lack confidence in their in-person communication skills?
- Talk about the importance of in-person relationships and brainstorm some steps they can take to build more offline friendships.

2. ENCOURAGE GROUP PARTICIPATION

- Participating in group activities gives teens the opportunity to expand their social circle. While joining an existing group may feel daunting, there are groups, like Teen CHARGE, that emphasize working together and have clear meeting objectives. This provides a low-pressure way to get to know other kids while working toward a common goal.

3. MODEL HEALTHY SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

- Make it a point to visit friends and family in person or have them over. Start conversations with other adults when they are around.
- Demonstrate how to make plans by inviting new neighbors or people from church over for dinner.

4. SUPPORT THEIR EFFORTS

- Make it easy for kids to make new friendships by offering to provide transportation, hang out space, snacks, and other things that could be potential barriers to in-person hangouts.
- If your teen is part of a group, connect with another parent (*you may want to ask your teen first*) and offer to carpool to meetings. The kids just might bond in the backseat over your "cringey" 90s playlist!

5. ENCOURAGE TEENS TO LOOK FOR OTHERS WITH SHARED VALUES

- When looking for potential friendships, it's natural that kids would gravitate toward those who share their interests. But shared values can also provide a basis for long and healthy friendships.
 - Do they care about faith, family, or specific cause? Are they interested in volunteering?
 - Service-oriented groups like Teen CHARGE can provide an opportunity for them to get to know kids that they might have otherwise overlooked.

Keep in mind that building friendships IRL takes time. Continue to encourage your teen, ask questions, and listen when they share. Watch out for youth-oriented community groups where they can expand their circle. In doing so, you will help them develop the skills they need to have healthy friendships on and offline.