

WISDOM'S *Wishes*



How to turn anxiety into a gift
that will connect your family



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Chapter 6

Cactus Friend Flower Friend

Friendships can become a source of stress for many children very quickly once they start school. I remember thinking when my child was struggling that maybe all children navigate friendship challenges and get this upset about seemingly little disagreements and differences of opinion. They are just meeting loads of new people and working out stuff on her own in the yard, kinda for the first time. They just haven't learned how to not take every perceived slight so personally and not like it's the end of the world. Gradually, however, I noticed with my little bub that it was weighing very heavily on her.

Disagreements are going to happen, possibly even physical fights and emotional bullying. Unless something very unexpected happens, our children are going to be in class or in this school environment with these children for the next eight years. Therefore, we as their parents can't simply make them feel better by saying, "*Oh, that little so and so is just like her mother. Don't mind her; she has no manners and doesn't know how to behave.*" Our child might feel better instantly but then where would we be? Eventually everybody would be some class of so and so and they'd run out of people to connect with.

Our children spend nearly six hours, five days a week in the company of other kids, so writing them all off in a judgemental way was just not going to work and it just wasn't me either. Additionally, how will our children feel about themselves if they make a mistake, lose their temper, and treat somebody badly? Will they then think I'm a little so and so too? My quest to find the words to help my child navigate these little ups and downs began. What I needed was a non-judgemental path of least resistance that fostered forgiveness and kindness because that's the way I wanted my child to respond to themselves if they acted out of character or made a large bo bo.

Luckily, I stumbled across a post by Plant,love,Grow on Facebook and it captured my imagination. It introduced the concept of cactus friend and flower friend. It was a simple image of a list of positive and negative behaviours to describe how friends should behave. I just loved it and immediately understood that I could use it to help my child navigate this challenge called friendship.

Cactus friends

Get too close and you'll get hurt!

They may pretend to be your friend,
but they are not.
They make mistakes and may
pretend to apologize.
They pick on you or others.
They want to control you.
They ask you not to tell others
if they have hurt you.
They don't want you
to have other friends.
They don't let you have a say over things.
They say bad things about you
in front of you.
They say bad things about you
behind your back.
They hurt your feelings on purpose.
They make you feel bad
about the way you look.
They don't care about your opinion.
They like to get you in trouble.
They create stories
about you that are not true.
They make you feel miserable.
You don't feel safe
when they are around.

YOU are allergic
to cactus friends.

Flower friends

Everyone blooms together!

They genuinely care
about you as a friend.
They make mistakes
and apologize.
They are respectful of your feelings.
They like you as you are.
They make sure that you are safe.
They understand that sometimes
you want to play with other people.
You can work things out
when issues come up.
They will not tease you
if you tell them to stop.
They will talk to you directly
if there's a problem.
You can discuss together if you
have bruised each other's feelings.
They support you
and encourage you to be yourself.
They respect your opinion
even if it's different.
They like to play and have fun with you.
They tell the truth.
They make you feel good
about yourself.
They want to spend time with you.
You feel safe
with them around.

YOU want to bloom
with other flower friends.



All remarkably simple and straightforward, right? Yes, except how you deliver them and frame them is very important. Life happens, and at times we get it wrong...the best laid plans and all that. As I've mentioned before, people can say and do things that make us feel pretty crappy or self-conscious. This is especially true for little kiddies who are learning to navigate the world both externally and internally. Setting boundaries and finding the balance between letting shit go and taking some learning from an experience can potentially be life changing. The thing is, with kiddies, best friends today can be full-on foes tomorrow and vice versa. You don't want to be falling out with the neighbours constantly. To explain the application of flower friends and cactus friends, I have used an example below. I hope you find it clear, understandable, and that you feel empowered to use it going forward with your own child.

So little Mary and Jonny usually behave like flower friends. They play and have fun and get on well. Then Tuesday after school Mary comes home extremely upset because little Jonny hurt Mary's feelings on purpose. So rather than having a rant and calling the child names, you ask Mary, "*Hey, do you think Jonny was having a cactus day today?*" That simple question completely bypasses the child's usual response within themselves of "*Why did Jonny do that to me? What did I do wrong?*" It, very simply but effectively, transitions the child away from a negative self-narrative of *I must be the problem* to *hey, Jonny was just having an off day*. Now that is powerful. No self-judging or critical thinking, just *aaagggghhh was Jonny having a cactus day?* Let's remember to be kind towards Jonny. He's usually a flower friend and he normally has your back, so let's forgive him. Maybe he didn't sleep last night or maybe Mum understands that Jonny's mummy has a new baby in the house

and they might all be lacking in sleep or Mum might know that Jonny's dad is away with work at the minute and he's probably really missing him. Just cut him some slack and be kind.

Kindness is free, effective, and very powerful. The beauty of this response is it removes any potential blame that your child might take responsibility for. It shifts from a reactive, potentially blaming thought process to a gentle, responsive, caring one. It is non-judgemental, loving kindness, and forgiveness going forward.

So what happens when you're growing up and a person moves into the realm of more cactus behaviour than flower behaviour? Again we are presented with a choice: as opposed to critical self-examination of what we could have possibly done wrong, I would ask Mary or Jonny how they feel in this person's company now. Do they feel safe in this person's company or are they on edge, fearful of a reaction to what they are about to say or do? Ask: "*Do they say bad things about you in front of your face?*" Your choice here is to decide how much time you are going to spend with this now-cactus person. If you don't feel good around them, then why are you spending time with them? There are choices to be made here, not judgements. If it's a fifty-fifty kinda thing, then your questions may center around being watchful of telling them personal stuff. It's not a bad thing to have lots of friends and only one or two close buddies who you share all your little treasures with.

How powerful is it for our children to learn at a young age that not everyone is for them and they are not for everyone either and that's okay? You get to choose who your friends are and it naturally evolves over time as we grow and mature. It's totally possible to navigate that journey in a way that is gentle and not emotionally painful.

I also at times apply the same cactus versus flower framework to my child. It's great because it allows you to have open conversations that are not as intense because of the language, but also because you are not ordering them around. Lots of people get to tell kiddies what to do all the time and they get rightly fed up with it. Especially for the anxious child...they spend too much time in their head on the best of days. For example, it's Friday night and your child has training but is feeling lethargic and wants to skip practice. Instead of getting into it and telling them they have to go, I'd say, "*Do you think you not turning up is cactus or flower behaviour towards your teammates and trainers? If you were giving of your free time to train kiddies, how would you receive somebody not bothering to show up? Think about those things before you make a decision, but also remember I think you should go and I think the idea of getting ready is putting you off, not the actual training because once you're there you spend half your time giggling. Also, your body enjoys movement, so are you being a cactus to your body too?*" If they choose not to attend, as much as that will frustrate me, I'll accept it, but also I will make it clear that they will have to apologise to their coach at the next session for their lack of attendance.

All the time I'm trying to honour their ability to make informed, measured choices and equally call it when they are trying to flake out. In general, having been given the time to process and weigh up all the pros and cons, they will make the right choice, building positive brain pathways that will serve them well into the future. They are looking inward when they are presented with choices, trusting their gut responses, and listening to their inner wisdom. Woo hoo, parenting win right there. Holy Grail achieved; that's our empowered, centred kiddies rocking their own wisdom!

Next Steps

I hope you enjoyed that chapter. Please do go ahead and purchase the complete book on www.sineadflanagan.ie (Digital download)

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