

Supporting Class Placement

Dr Judith Locke (clinical psychologist, former teacher, and the author of the parenting book, *The Bonsai Child* and *The Bonsai Student*)

Making friends at school is a wonderful by-product of the main task at hand – to learn. Their effort should primarily be in developing new skills, not overly focussing on being in the constant company of their best friend. Indeed, immersing themselves in study and school activities will help them cope with early social awkwardness and also have the byproduct of making more friends naturally and over time.

Some tips:

- If your child is anxious about starting a new class with unfamiliar people, do listen to them talk about their fears, but normalise them ('A lot of people feel worried about starting something new'), and then talk about their past strengths in facing tricky things and your confidence that they will cope with this challenge.
- When they come home from their first day at a new activity, keep your questions broad, 'How was it?' not, 'Did you make a friend today?' or 'Is Sam in your class?' This won't put unnecessary pressure on them or suggest things in which they should be disappointed.
- Keep your and your child's expectations realistic. It is highly unlikely that they will form close friendships in the early days of a new school year, particularly in early primary. How often have you started a new job and come home from your first day to announce, 'I made my new best friend today'?

There are things you can say if your child is not in a class they want to be in:

1. Listen to them. Then reflect back what you hear. 'You're upset because your friend is not in your class. That is a completely understandable feeling'. Or 'Sounds like you are upset because you didn't get the teacher that you wanted.'
2. Then state the potential benefits of facing this challenge, i.e. making extra, new friends; learning skills to make new acquaintances; being able to focus more on schoolwork in class than talking to their current best friend; learning how to work with a different type of teacher than the one they had last year.
3. Maybe tell them a story about how you learned a lot from a teacher you had who was a bit tougher but taught you a lot, or a time you went somewhere where you didn't know anyone but learnt how to get on in unfamiliar environments.
4. Let your child know that they can still see their friend/s at lunchtime or at play dates or parties.

Dr Locke explains that giving students the opportunity to choose a friend to be in their class or team or camp group implies that they need it and makes them rely too much on one or two people – this will stop them developing their social skills to make other friends. It inadvertently suggests that the child is incapable of making new friends or that they can't cope when their environment is not exactly the way they want.

Don't worry about your child coping. You can rely on the fact that teachers usually undertake activities that help children to get to know each other, early in the year. Even if your child is

offered an opportunity to choose, I would encourage you to suggest they don't nominate anyone and see what happens. In this, you encourage them to be confident in their skills to cope with a new set of classmates and develop a potential new set of friends.

Further information and the full article can be found online at:

<https://theparentswebsite.com.au/judith-locke-case-parents-influencing-class-placements/>

© Judith Locke. About the author Dr Judith Locke is a clinical psychologist, former teacher, and the author of the parenting book, *The Bonsai Child* and *The Bonsai Student*, which details practical strategies to help you build confidence and capability in your child. (You can purchase this at bonsaichild.com)