

Navigating the Social Maze:

A Parent's Guide to Middle School Friendships



Sun Counseling & Wellness

Juliet Kuehnle, MS, LCMHCS

Caroline Thompson, MA, LCMHCA

Austin Raines, MA, LCMHC

Dr. Megan Arends, PsyD

Maya's Story



**“I don’t know who I am
until I see myself through
my friends’ eyes.”**

— Dr. Mitch Prinstein, Psychologist

The Attachment Shift

**You're Still Their
Secure Base**

**Friends Become a New
Secure Base**

**Big Feelings Are Practice
for Life**

Friendship in Middle School by the Numbers

1 in 4

**7th-grade friendships
still going by 8th grade**

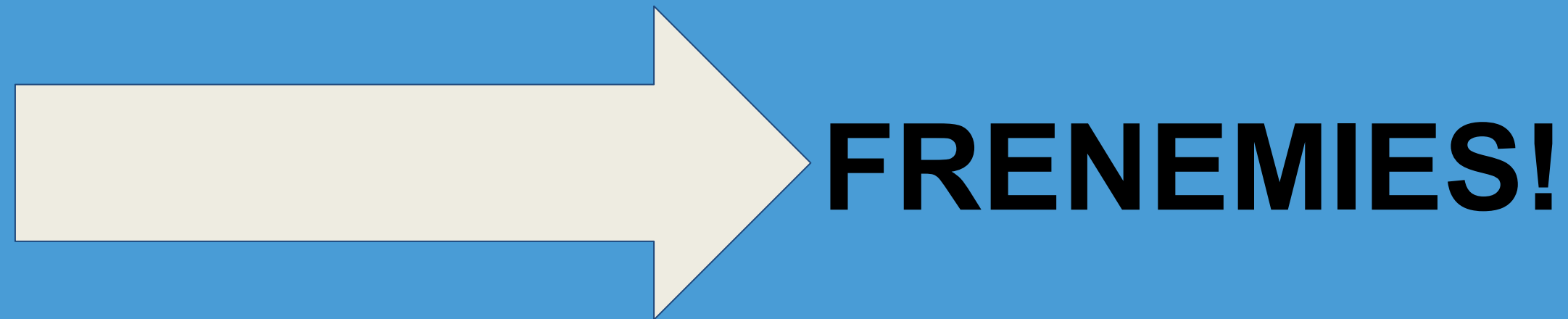
~50%

**of middle school
friendships
last a full school year**

1%

**of 7th-grade
friendships
are still intact senior
year**

Source: **Hartl, Laursen & Cillessen (2015), Psychological Science** (8th-grade and senior-year figures) · **Bowker (2004), Journal of Early Adolescence** (school-year figure)



FRENEMIES!

We don't want a conflict-free childhood.

**We want a childhood where kids get good at coming
back together after conflict.**



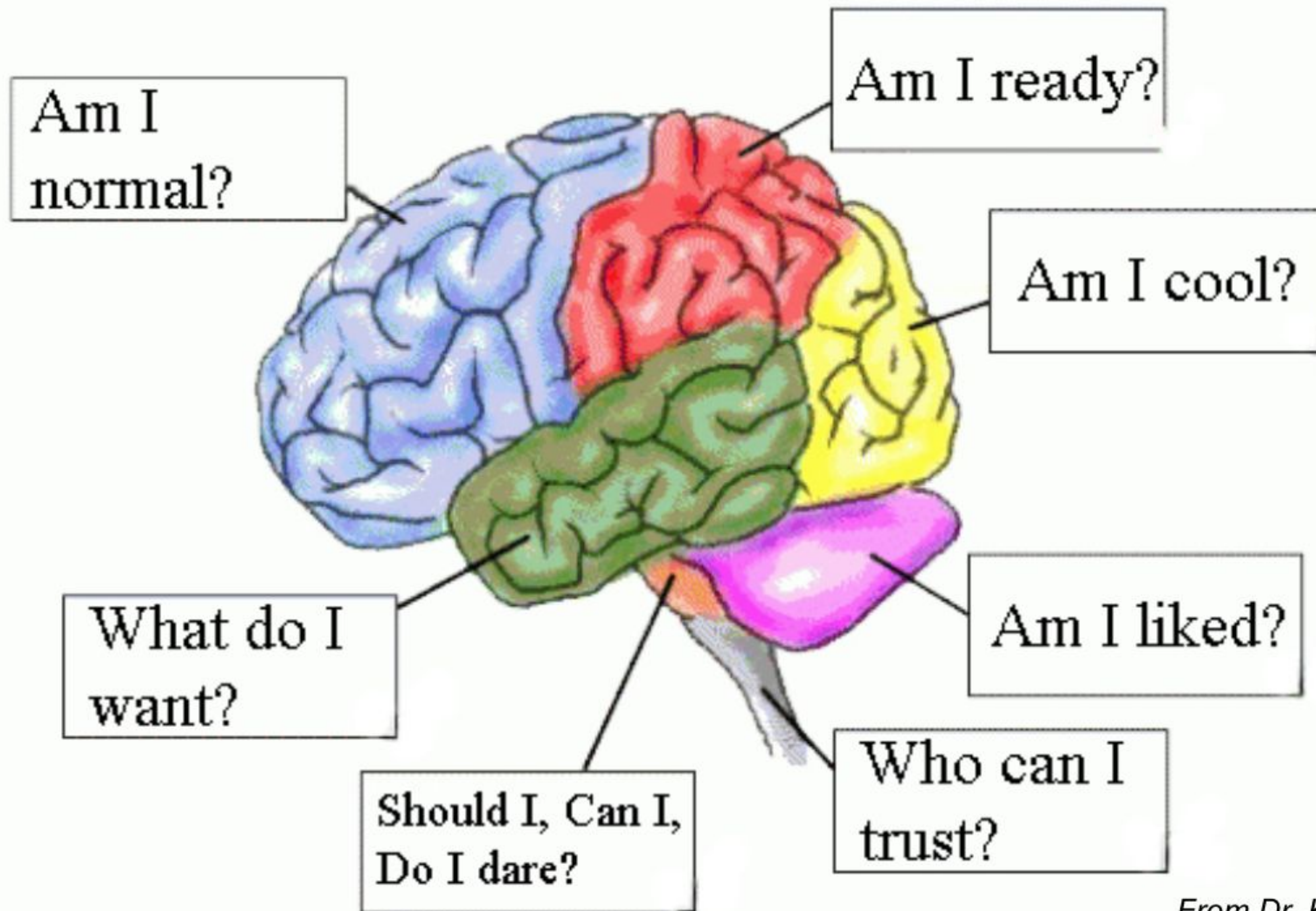
Things the adolescent brain is good at:

- Learning Quickly
- Connecting with Peers
- Being Open to New Experiences
- Adapting to Changes
- Recognizing Injustice

Things the adolescent brain isn't great at:

- Anticipating consequences
- Seeing the big picture
- Judging risks
- Seeing how their words and actions affect those around them
- Practicing Self Control
- Understanding Healthy Relationships

The Adolescent Brain:





My friend
hasn't texted
me back...

They're
probably mad
at me.

Maybe I said
something weird.

They're
talking about
me.

I have
no friends
and my life
is over.

ANXIETY KID

**ABLE TO JUMP TO THE
WORST-CASE SCENARIO
IN A SINGLE BOUND!**



Why Friend Groups get so Complicated in Middle School?

If This Behavior Could Talk...



Withdrawal

"This is too much."



**Sudden secrecy
about her phone**

"I don't feel safe telling you."



**Clinginess to
one friend**

"I need control somewhere."



**Repeating the
same conflict**

"I need help, not another lecture."

The Digital Layer

- **Screen Time usage** has skyrocketed in the recent years as technology advances
- **Feeds are built for comparison.** Constant exposure to everyone's highlight reel is linked to lower mood.
- **Nothing disappears.** A joke that used to fade after the hallway now lives in a screenshot, forever.
- **Skip the strict cap.** The AAP now favors a family media plan. Device-free bedrooms matter more than a number on a timer.

Helping Teens with Their Mental Health

**Encourage Open
Communication**

Be a Safe Emotional Anchor

Create a Balanced Routine

Recognize Warning Signs

**IF I AM A GOOD
PARENT, THEN
MY CHILD
WILL...**

- **BE COMPLIANT**
- **GET GOOD GRADES**
- **HAVE A PLEASANT ATTITUDE**
- **BE AGREEABLE**
- **CONFORM TO STANDARDS**
- **BE SUCCESSFUL**
- **EXPERIENCE ACHIEVEMENT**
- **BE AN OVERACHIEVER**

Right?!??!!

- Get curious before you get fixing
- Let them sit with the feeling before you solve it
- Coach the skill, don't fight the battle
- Praise kindness and repair, not just popularity

VALIDATING STATEMENTS

- "I can see why you would feel that way."
- "It's understandable that you're upset about this."
- "Your feelings are valid."
- "I appreciate you sharing that with me."
- "I understand why this is important to you."

INVALIDATING STATEMENTS

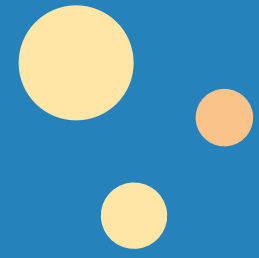
- "You shouldn't be feeling that way."
- "You're overreacting, it's not a big deal."
- "Stop being so sensitive."
- "You're just being dramatic."
- "You're wrong for feeling like that."

THE SCRIPT IN ACTION

1. She sees the photos: "I'm never going back."
2. Skip: "You'll make new friends."
3. Try: "That sounds like it really hurt."
4. Once calmer: "What do you want to say back?"
5. Two weeks later: she was genuinely fine

Watch for this in yourselves:

- Rescuing every conflict**
- Trash talking their friends or their parents**
- Treating exclusion as a hierarchy problem to win**
- Making their friendships about your own middle school wounds**



Taking Care of Yourself

Prioritize Your Needs

Practice Mindfulness

Build a Support System

Set Boundaries

Seek Professional Help

“Normal:”

- **Hurt feelings that come and go**
- **Occasional exclusion that stings but resolves in days**
- **Drama your kid complains about but still wants to be part of**

Worth a closer look:

- **Withdrawal from things they used to love**
- **School avoidance, sleep or appetite changes**
- **Persistent physical complaints, hopeless talk**
- **One group consistently targeting one kid**

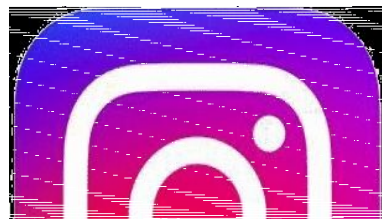
Ask the Experts!

What's one
takeaway?





**Thank
you!**



SunCounselingAndWellness

www.SunCounselingAndWellness.com