

**Question: Our 6th grade son seems to have no real friendships. And I'm not even sure he wants them. Is this normal? Are there things my husband and I should be doing?**

First, it's important to know that this is a very normal situation for a young teen boy. In fact, it has become substantially more common over the past decade. So, your son isn't "abnormal" on this one.

But, that doesn't mean it's a healthy situation. As a youth worker, it's been one of greatest new concerns I've had for my students in the last ten years. Boys, particularly (girls also, but to a lesser degree), are not learning the skills of friendship. Historically, I don't think we thought of children and teenagers as needing these skills – friendship just came naturally to them! but today's 10 – 14 year old is so often isolated, they've not learned the skills of friendship in their day-to-day lives.

Boys are naturally less expressive than girls (especially at this age). And our culture has told them "the strong, silent type" is a great male archetype. Even the U.S. Army, which, ironically has learned – out in the field – that soldiers can only succeed in teams, has been advertising this notion like crazy for a several years with their "Army of One" campaign.

Add to these cultural notions the fact that today's young teens have reaped most parents' desire to "cocoon", by having a house-full (or more likely these days, a bedroom-full) of toys intended for solo use: television, video-gaming systems, CD-players. Not that these things are all bad. But the fairly normal overuse of them has greatly contributed to this "loner" trend.

So, what can you do? Here are a few ideas:

- *Encourage friendship groups.* Often, the safest place for a boy to learn about friendship is in a group, not in a one-on-one friendship. Hopefully, one of the best places for this is in a healthy and active middle school program at your church. I know many parents who have chosen their church based on this factor alone!
- *Service potential friendships.* When you see any spark of potential friendship for your son, find ways to subtly encourage that spark. This doesn't mean talking about it like crazy! (that will only lead to retreat for most boys.) Instead, offer to drive them somewhere; suggest fun ideas for excursions and make them possible. Also, make sure your home is a "safe" place for your son to have a friend over: a place where he won't be embarrassed or treated like a little kid in front of his friends.
- *Encourage your son, but don't nag.* When your son spends time with a friend (or potential friend), say something positive – but keep it short and sweet. Lengthy speeches will feel like pressure or nagging, and will backfire on you.
- *Pray like crazy!*