

Social Change:

When Your Child Worries About Leaving School Friends Behind to Attend Eaton Arrowsmith

One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Emily, twelve years old, looks at me, and then her parents, Richard and Karey. Her green eyes wide open, dark hair over her shoulders, she slowly leans forward in her chair uncertain about what she had just heard.

The admissions meeting has gone on for sixty minutes. Emily had not said more than a few words. The language of learning disabilities and cognitive intervention was one that did not engage her into conversation. Then the word “friends” was noted by her mother. She had said, “Emily likes her friends at school.” It was then that Emily focused in on the discussion. Her mother had mentioned a topic that defined her identity – her friends. “What about my friends?” Emily said.

Richard and Karey were interested in enrolling Emily at Eaton Arrowsmith School for the full-time program. They brought Emily along as she knew she was struggling academically, and hated learning. She was reading, but spelling, mathematics and writing were very difficult still. If Emily was going to attend the new school, she needed to be part of the admissions decision. In the morning, at breakfast, over some cereal and orange juice, she did not complain about taking some time off school to meet the admissions officer.

Emily had not thought through the entire idea of leaving her current school until that moment in time. She suddenly realized that if she attended Eaton Arrowsmith School her two best friends in Grade 7 would no longer be at her side during the school day. They had known each other since Grade 5. What would happen now? “I can’t leave my friends,” said Emily, “No way.”

The Big Question

What should Richard and Karey do? Is there a way to convince Emily that one will always have friends in life and that improving cognitive functioning was so much more important at this time in her life? Easier said than done. In fact, brain imaging can determine, through fMRI brain scanning, who has a high likelihood of being a potential friend.ⁱ That is, that two people would be more likely to be good friends if the brain activated in the same way when exposed to the same videos. If brain activation was different, then they were less likely to be a good friendship match. In short, our friends, the ones we are closest to, have similar daily neural activity. As friends, we may look different, but our brains are behaving the same! As the researchers said, “People tend to be friends with individuals who see the word in a similar way.”ⁱⁱ

Friends are critical to children. Even as we age, neuroscience is showing that the stronger our friendships, the healthier our brain will be.ⁱⁱⁱ Friends have shared interests, values and, now we know, brain waves. Our sense of self, or self-identity, is immersed in our relationships with others. To be pulled apart from the strong bond of friendship is a significant neurological experience. The brain could easily become anxious. One understands Emily's response to the realization that if she attends a new school, she would not have her two close friends in her school day environment. Again, do Richard and Karey make an executive decision and just tell their twelve-year-old daughter that she must go to Eaton Arrowsmith School?

What Factors to Consider

The answer to that question is not so simple, at least for Emily. Emily has had a history of problems making friends. In fact, when she was very young, she would often go right up to other children and, in the words of other parents, bother them. She appeared to have limited boundaries and challenges in understanding social engagement rules. Now, at twelve years of age her judgement is worrisome to her parents. She really wants to go to a friend's house to see her, and then take the bus back at night in an area of town that is problematic. She appears to have no worries about doing this, and often Richard and Karey have to say no, we will pick you up at your friend's house. This concerns them. Can she make the right decisions about social situations or obstacles? All these issues are reasons they are considering Eaton Arrowsmith School as the program addresses cognitive weaknesses related to strategic planning and social judgement. These are cognitive functions that centre around prefrontal functioning in the human brain and can be improved. Emily feels she is fine, but thus the problem.

Reasoning or logic are also issues for Emily. There is an area of the brain that takes in sensory information from our environment so we can make sense of what we are experiencing in real time. One can improve the capacity of this area of the brain so a child can reason with relative ease, see connections between ideas, and do this in real time. Thus, Emily struggles with social strategic planning and with reasoning through options in real time in order to make and execute the best social decision safely.

As noted above, Emily does not analyze all the possible ramifications of an action she might take. It is as if there is one possibility, and she is always right. No matter how they present their case as parents, Emily seems to struggle to take in a variety of differing opinions and see how they might all be related. "If I catch the bus, why does it matter if it is at night?" Emily would state. "Because it is not just night, but also where you are catching the bus," Karey responds. "I am on a bus; why does it matter where I am?" says Emily. And it goes on.

So, Richard and Karey must consider whether building cognitive capacities overrides not seeing two close friends at school as frequently. Emily is certain of her opinion at this point as we sit in the office. No way. Not happening. Not leaving my friends.

The Quote

“One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood.”

Seneca the Younger, who lived in Rome, from 4 BC to AD 65, was a Stoic philosopher, among many talents. The quote above is attributed to him. As a follower of the Stoicism, School of Hellenistic philosophy, he believed that a system of logic should form one's personal ethics. Humans should not be ruled by our passions (fear, anger, pain), but by using reasoning. Thus, the quote attributed to him follows his beliefs, that the best feature of a friendship is that we understand each other. That we can view the world in a similar way, and we perceive the meaning of each others' actions.

Thus, to develop “true” friendships it would be important to have a mind that can reason, understand and extract meaning from shared experiences. This is where it gets interesting for Emily, and the decision Richard and Karey need to make. Remember, reasoning, logical thinking, extracting meaning from experiences, are significant weaknesses for Emily. Thus, she can decode words, but her reading comprehension is weak. She can add and multiply numbers, but her math problem solving is below grade level. She hates Science and Social Studies and needs to go to the resource room at school for extra help to understand these subjects. It just takes Emily longer to get the meaning of a presentation at school or even when watching movies at home with the family.

How does this weakness impact Emily's friendships? Richard and Karey have watched friendships come and go, and yes, over the last year she has formed a good bond with her school friends. Though, these friendships were often one-sided. They would ask her to do something, tell her to go places, and essentially, she just tagged along happily. With past friendships, they would get annoyed with her as she would stretch social boundaries, by calling too often, or sending text messages that seemed disconnected to the flow of the actual conversation. One day she would have a friend, and the next day they'd be gone. Emily has struggled to understand her friends, and they can be confused by her actions.

Making the Decision

This is what parents are faced with when considering the “missing my friends” question at enrollment. Parents understand how their child would want to avoid social change. Often, for a parent, it is experiencing or observing one's child upset about a change that is so painful.

For children with learning disabilities, research shows that social success is not easy. What is more worrying is that the current social skills training programs are not having positive effects.^{iv} The most likely reason for this is that social skills training programs are not addressing the actual underlying cognitive deficits in an intensive and systematic intervention.

Children with learning disabilities often live in a world of uncertainty as a result of waking up on a school day morning just hoping all will go okay both academically and socially. This is where it is important to

make a decision for the long-term social success of your child. Mental health issues must also be weighed, as repetitive social failure can result in anxiety and depression.^v

Of course, the decision to leave a school, and one's friends, should not be announced suddenly without lots of dialogue. Though, eventually, the decision needs to be made for the best interest of the child. The goal is to improve the cognitive functions needed for improved social awareness and understanding once they are finished with the Arrowsmith Program. These cognitive functions are not needed for school socialization only, but long-term for employment, and if they desire, finding a partner and possibly raising their own children.

If necessary, ask for help from a child psychologist or counselor. They can often talk to a child in a way that helps with their decision making. Ultimately, however, it is the parents that must make the choice. I recommend listening to Emily's feelings and needs, repeat what you have heard from her to show your respect and understanding. Then, as parents, tell Emily how you are feeling, and what your needs as parents might be. Use some of the Arrowsmith Program language about improving the brain and how this will help her social skills. Write this all down. Review it. Then ask Emily, what action can we take that would make sense for you now, and for when you are all grown up. See what happens. This process may not be perfect, and you still may have to make a decision that results in short-term anxiety, but her thoughts and feelings were considered.

The eventual goal of attending the Arrowsmith Program is that children develop stronger cognitive capacities for self-awareness and social interactions. That they understand who they are based on their recall of life experiences and their ability to see meaning in their world today. That they can quickly interpret body language, spoken language, and understand the nuances of these social engagements during one-to-one meetings or as opportunities arise through larger group interactions. These social skills all require efficient cognitive functioning.

Of course, there are situations where the child is quite good neurologically at establishing and maintaining friendships. The problems are more academic as related to cognitive weaknesses. What is interesting in these situations is reasoning or logic often convinces the child that improving cognitive capacities is more important than missing one's friends for the school day for several years. They also realize that new friends can be made at the new school. There is logic to be used to reduce fears or anxieties and accept a new experience. Thus, once a child develops these social cognitive capacities they are often more flexible in decision making, resulting in their desire to experience the world and all it has to offer safely.

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References:

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ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/good-friends-might-be-your-best-brain-booster-as-you-age/>

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^v Kawachi, I., and Berkman, I. K. (2001) Social ties and mental health. *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 78(3), 458-467