



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
A SAMHSA Funded Drug-Free Community Coalition
Supported By Centre County Drug and Alcohol



February 3, 2010 – Boy-Girl Friends

Eileen Kennedy-Moore is a New Jersey psychologist and author or coauthor of several books about children's feelings and relationships, including [The Unwritten Rules of Friendship: Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Make Friends](#). She will be the keynote speaker at the February 27 Focus on Strong Families Conference at Mt. Nittany Middle School.

Visit any school playground and you'll see it: From about age four onwards, boys mostly play with boys; girls mostly play with girls. This division increases over the early school years, and it's a world-wide pattern, found not just in the United States, but also in India, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, and the Philippines.

One reason for this separation is that boys and girls tend to play in different ways. Boys are more likely than girls to do pretend aggression and rough-and-tumble play. Girls are more likely than boys to do make-believe play about family or school interactions. Boys spend more time competing whereas girls spend more time talking. Up to age 7, boys tend to be friends with a few other boys, whereas girls play with a whole group of girls, but after age 7, boys tend to hang out in larger groups whereas girls gravitate towards a few best friends. Playing separately maintains and increases differences in how boys and girls interact.

Group differences between boys and girls are interesting, but individual children don't necessarily reflect these average differences. There are plenty of active girls and gentle boys. In fact one study found that 80% of boys were indistinguishable from 80% of girls in their amount of rough play.

While it's more typical for children to stick to their own sex when it comes to friendship, many children do have friendships with members of the opposite sex. Boy-girl friendships are most likely to occur outside of school. Often these friendships come about because the kids are neighbors, or their siblings are friends, or the families enjoy spending time together. These friendships can provide a very healthy basis for later male-female relationships. They enable children to see members of the opposite sex as regular people rather than as mysterious, different, and even frightening "others."

Here are some ideas for parents about how to support friendships between girls and boys:

--Be matter of fact about the friendship. Treat it as you would any other friendship. Parents should absolutely not tease a child about having a boy friend or girl friend.

--Including the opposite sex friend in family outings is a great way to support the friendship and not make it seem like "dating."

--If your child is being teased about the friendship, you may need to help your child learn and practice some low-key responses. If other kids ask "Is that your girl friend?" Your child can say, "No, she's my pal" or "She's a friend who happens to be a girl." If they say, "Chris likes you!" Your child can say, "So what?" If they giggle and chant about sitting in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G, your child can just roll her eyes and say "Grow up!" in a bored tone of voice.

--Make sure your child has some same-sex friends. Because of peer pressure, opposite sex friendships can be fragile. If there is a break in the friendship, you want to make sure your child has other social options.