

Friendship Criteria for Success: Teaching Students How to Build & Maintain Trust

Adapted from the work of Rebecca Cann, M.A., CCC-SLP; [Inclusive Educational Consulting](#)

Why Understanding Friendship Depth Matters

Many students, including neurodivergent learners, struggle to navigate the complexities of friendship. They may misinterpret social cues, overgeneralize trust, or assume all relationships operate at the same level. Teaching students to recognize different dimensions of trust helps them build healthy, reciprocal relationships, avoid misunderstandings, and respond effectively when conflicts arise.

The Three Dimensions of Trust

| Dimension | Definition | School-Friendly Example |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| 1D (Surface-Level Trust) | Basic trust developed through consistent, predictable interactions; limited personal sharing. | A classmate you work with in a group but don't spend time with outside of school. |
| 2D (Moderate Trust) | Mutual sharing of interests, ideas, and limited personal information; some emotional support. | A friend you sit with at lunch and talk about shared hobbies. |
| 3D (Deep Trust) | High level of emotional intimacy, consistent support, and shared vulnerability. | Your best friend who knows personal struggles and supports you in difficult times. |

Friendship Confusion Pitfalls

- **Time Confusion:** assuming the amount of time spent together equals friendship depth.
- **Sharing Confusion:** assuming sharing personal information always means deep trust.
- **Reciprocity Confusion:** assuming one-sided effort still equals a balanced friendship.

Friendship Criteria Checklists

Use these checklists to help students identify which dimension of trust a friendship is currently in.

- **1D (Surface-Level Trust):**

- We talk mostly about school or surface topics.
- We interact mostly in shared environments (class, lunch table).
- We have limited personal knowledge of each other.

- **2D (Moderate Trust):**

- We share some personal stories or interests.
- We spend time together outside of required settings.
- We can ask each other for help with personal or school challenges.

- **3D (Deep Trust):**

- We share important personal experiences and feelings.
- We support each other consistently, even in hard times.
- We trust each other to keep personal information private.

Friendship Problem-Solving Framework

When conflicts or changes in friendships occur, students can use this framework to decide on next steps:

- **Direct Plan:** Talk to the friend directly about what's bothering you.
- **Indirect Plan:** Seek advice from a trusted adult or mutual friend before addressing the issue.
- **Boundary Plan:** Limit time or sharing with the friend to protect your well-being.

Teaching Tips

- Integrate friendship discussions into morning meetings or advisory periods.
- Use role-play scenarios to practice identifying trust dimensions.
- Encourage students to reflect on their own friendships in a journal.
- Collaborate with school counselors to reinforce lessons in small groups.

Mini-Activities & Prompts

- **Friendship Sorting Cards:** Students sort example scenarios into 1D, 2D, or 3D trust levels.
- **Friendship Mapping:** Students draw circles representing different levels of trust in their own friendships.
- **Scenario Discussion:** Read a short story about a friendship conflict and identify the trust dimension involved.