



When equipped with the emotional tools to navigate complex female friendships, girls are happier

You've got a *friend in me*

Navigating peer relationships is one of the most important lessons learned at school, writes **Sarah Pittaway**, Senior Deputy Head Pastoral at Francis Holland, Sloane Square

At Francis Holland, Sloane Square, we ask pupils to Be The Difference – we want them to go out into the world knowing what compassion, empathy and kindness look like and feel like, with tools to be upstanders rather than bystanders. As our Head, Alexandra Haydon, has said, “the world is getting more complex and we need to continually be doing more to develop the traits that will allow our girls to flourish as adults and, most importantly, be happy.” We achieve this by prioritising mental wellbeing

and teaching pupils how to navigate the complexities of female friendships, so that they're empowered to develop healthy and happy relationships throughout their lives.

In the beginning

Our journey began at Francis Holland Prep where, having found that conflicts in the playground couldn't be left at the door of the classroom, we consulted *Thrivers*, a book by Dr Michele Borba that emphasises the fundamental importance of cultivating emotional and moral intelligence and nurturing children's

character traits including self-confidence, empathy, self-control, integrity, curiosity, perseverance and optimism.

Next came the introduction of Friendology 101, a curriculum designed to equip girls with practical tools for managing friendships. Curated for different age groups, it helps children establish and maintain healthy relationships, manage conflict with kindness and increase overall resilience. We've embraced this curriculum, dedicating time to teach it to every year group in the school, knowing that a common language around friendship would be hugely beneficial. Parents are equally involved, with regular Friendology Forums and the ability to access advice via a dedicated Parent Hub. "The Friendology curriculum has been transformative," says our Head of EYFS. "It's given the girls essential social-emotional skills and helped the adults around them offer more consistent support." Pupils are equally positive, with



The Friendology 101 curriculum has been transformative for the school's Early Years girls

CURATED FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS, *Friendology 101* helps children establish and maintain healthy relationships, manage conflict WITH KINDNESS AND INCREASE RESILIENCE



Empathy, curiosity, self-confidence, perseverance and optimism are nurtured, which enhance friendships

a year-three pupil saying, "Now I know what to do when I feel my friendship is going wrong; we've learnt how to say you don't want to play and that bullying is when someone is unkind on repeat," and a year-six pupil added, "Friendology helps us to understand our friendships more and helps us navigate our class better."

Building a skillset

By the time Francis Holland girls reach year seven and join our senior school at Sloane Square, they've built a solid toolkit of skills and feel confident in their ability to navigate the ups and downs of their friendships. This provides the perfect foundation for the next step in this journey: Girls On Board.

Developed by Andrew Hampton, a headteacher with decades of experience of challenging friendship dynamics, the programme was borne from the realisation that girls' friendship difficulties almost always involve a complex web of issues, variables, perceptions and realities that are fluid and constantly shifting. Girls are likely to only communicate one side of the story and omit certain information, meaning that parental or staff intervention is often ineffectual. The programme works by acknowledging that girls are the world experts on their own friendship dynamics; empowering them to resolve issues with empathy, openness



Girls On Board empowers students to resolve relationship issues among themselves

and confidence.

Our Heads of Year have completed extensive training which allows them to lead reflective sessions with pupils, tailored to each year group and based on what has come up in previous sessions, exploring the pros and cons of responding in different ways to friendship dilemmas. Gradually, the girls learn to understand and respect the perspectives of others, and therefore are able to resolve their friendship dramas themselves.

Taking control

The programme has been transformative for our school community, supporting girls as they navigate friendship turbulence, harnessing and nurturing their empathy, empowering them to take control over their own friendships without becoming overwhelmed and really contributing to our strong sense of community and belonging. Staff and parents, who were invited to hear directly from Andrew Hampton

and given helpful literature when we launched the programme, also benefit from having to dedicate less time to fruitless intervention. Feedback has been universally brilliant, with one parent highlighting that Girls On Board “puts girls in the driver’s seat of solution finding and course correcting their own lives – invaluable skills that many adults could benefit from!” One year-seven pupil notes, “Girls On Board helps us navigate complicated friendships, so that they can develop into lifelong friendships.” A year-eight pupil adds that “it teaches us to show empathy towards each other and trust that we can resolve friendship fallouts by showing kindness.”

The impact of both Friendology and Girls On Board has been quietly powerful, shaping a culture where friendship, kindness and emotional literacy sit at the heart of Francis Holland life. At Francis Holland Prep, a recent parent survey found that 99% of parents agree that their children are happy and

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FRIENDOLOGY'S TOP TIPS

Lessons from this school curriculum which can be helpful for parents too

- Remind children that conflict is a natural part of any relationship and encourage them to face it head on – no friendship or relationship is perfect. Give them practical strategies that honour how they feel and how the other person feels, aiming for resolution.
- **Friendships can be particularly all-consuming for children. Empathise with them. Sometimes a child just needs some extra support and a listening ear. While you should definitely cheer them on, remind them that they can solve their problems for themselves.**
- Encourage children to name and recognise their feelings, express them openly and understand that all emotions are natural and nothing to be afraid of. This can be in child-friendly language, such as replacing the word “anxiety” with “butterflies”. Butterflies aren’t to be feared and can be set free!
- **Help children put their friendship struggles in perspective. Talk to them about what’s important and help them understand where this particular struggle is on the hierarchy of ‘what matters most’.**
- Friendships change over time and that’s OK. As we evolve and grow, so do our friendships.
- **Encourage children to build lots of different friendships. It’s beneficial for them to spread their friendship wings, so they aren’t relying on just one person. Having a circle of friends is healthy.**



Francis Holland girls benefit from access to the school's therapy dog, Kanga, a Hungarian vizsla

EACH YEAR, WE SEE RESOURCEFUL, *imaginative and brave young women leave our FHS sixth form with the world at their fingertips* AND A TRIBE OF LIFELONG FRIENDS

safe at school; as well as feeling part of a community that genuinely values connection. The way the school supports pupils in developing friendships was rated well above national benchmarks, with Friendology frequently praised by parents. Many described the school as a happy, welcoming environment where relationships are nurtured with care.

Building brave young women

A parallel survey at Francis Holland, Sloane Square echoed those sentiments, with parents across all year groups strongly affirming their daughters' happiness, safety and sense of individual care – particularly when it came to wellbeing and friendship support. Our ISI Inspection Report of October 2024 echoed this, noting: "Pupils' self-awareness develops quickly, and they learn to show respect for each other and other cultures".

Each year, we see resourceful, imaginative and brave young women leave our FHS sixth form with the world at their fingertips and a tribe

of lifelong friends. They respect their own and others' needs; they know the importance of having trusting and reliable relationships; they can listen without judgement; they know the power of empathy and they are confident in their ability to resolve conflict with kindness... invaluable skills that every adult could put to good use! 🐾



Girls learn the importance of building a supportive, inclusive circle of close friendships

GIRLS ON BOARD

Helpful advice from this programme geared at senior-school ages

- All friendships experience some turbulence as girls gradually learn more about what they value in friends and about themselves.
- **The role of parents and teachers is to actively listen and empathise with girls when they explain their friendship issues.**
- Nurture empathy by encouraging your child to understand perspectives and motivations of different girls within a group.
- **Guide girls towards finding their own solutions rather than trying to fix their problems.**
- Teach girls how to negotiate with each other without resorting to relational aggression.
- **Recognise that social media can exacerbate friendship issues and contribute to feelings of FOMO.**