



Izzy's Friends

The trauma and drama of female friendships is the geography of a girl's life at ten.
Friendships rule, and alliances change hourly.

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By Marcia Walker, *skirt! Magazine*, 2014

It's become a ritual. At the end of the school day my daughter, Izzy, shrugs off her winter jacket, plops her backpack on the floor and moseys on over to the breakfast counter with a bowl of fishy crackers. Then she sighs with as much woe as a ten year old can muster and says, "So, do you want to hear about it?"

Without waiting for me to answer she launches into her latest friend crisis. There is one, at least, a day.

On Monday, her friend Sarah wore her hair in French braids even though they (my daughter and her other friend Laura) agreed they would only wear their hair in traditional braids (except on weekends...obviously). On Tuesday, Laura refused to trade her fruit roll up for Izzy's Babybell cheese. Instead, Izzy tells me Laura traded lunch snacks with Sarah (that French braid wearing floozy). By Wednesday, Sarah and Laura were no longer speaking to Izzy. Recess was a lonely affair. "Lunch," Izzy said, "was a dismal failure."

I try to stay neutral. First of all, my daughter – though my favourite girl in the world – is a consummate liar. (Last month she convinced the principal we were moving to Costa Rica.) Secondly, I don't want to become the next front page parent who, passionately embroiled in their child's social life, decks out another parent at the French school play. No, I remember Grade Five. My self-esteem rose and fell according to how well I was liked. The trauma and drama of female friendships is the geography of a girl's life at ten. Friendships are king and alliances change hourly.

What I don't remember though is discussing my friendships with my parents or working through my feelings of worthlessness with any kind of clinical rigor. Izzy, on the other hand, recaps the intricacies of her friendships and her *feelings* about the friendships with me after school, her father every night before bed and the school counselor during her lonesome recesses. The result of her perseverance (or obsession) is her own classification of friendship. She explained it to me during one of our afternoon chats. Izzy's Categories of Friendship:

1. The Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious friend (or banana friend for short)

This is the best friend you can find: trustworthy, fun and kind. They hold your secrets like their own. Izzy tells me you get one, maybe two banana friends. They don't put you down or feel threatened by you. If you fight with a banana friend, you can still talk to her, even if it's weird, because she cares for your friendship as much as you do.

2. The Monkey friend

Like a monkey swinging from tree to tree, this kind of friend swings from person to person. They don't stay with one friend too long. When they get older, these are the people who thrive at cocktail parties. They are a lot of fun but there is always the sense they are looking for the next best tree. You feel great when they're with you but when they latch onto someone new, you feel discarded.

3. The Spider Friend

These are friends in quotations because when you get right down to it they're not very friend-like. The problem with spider friends, other than you feel like crap when you hang out with them, is that the core of the relationship is power. If they feel dominant in the friendship, things go well, but if they feel vulnerable, they lash out, either insulting you or someone close to you. Spider friends are savvy. You won't realize they put you down until later. Instead you feel powerless. You feel less like yourself. In an effort to feel better, you gossip about other people and then feel even worse. The only way out of spider friends, Izzy tells me, is through the true friendship of a banana friend.

4. The Lollipop Friend

These are sweet friends but they have no substance. They are fillers, back up friends and while easy to maintain, you can't count on them for anything. Like lollipops, after a few juicy licks, there is nothing there.

After my daughter explained her categorization I thought about it. Later that night I asked her to explain it again. Then I wrote it down and thought about it some more. She was right. Most of my friendships fit neatly into one of those categories. As I mentally slotted my friends into their appropriate classification, I struggled to place Natalie, one of my oldest friends.

Natalie was my banana friend all through university. We were each other's maid of honour. She named my daughter when she was born but something happened during her divorce. We struggled to like each other. I didn't feel like myself around her anymore. There were topics I couldn't bring up and these turned into gaping black holes in our friendship. We continued to play the roles of our old friendship but it felt false. I began talking about her behind her back in a way I never would have before. I clung to the old idea of our friendship but the more I held on, the worse I felt about our current superficial friendship. Gradually we both stopped calling each other and our friendship drifted into a bi-annual lunch. At best we were lollipop friends. I began to wonder if we were closer to spider friends.

A few weeks after my daughter explained her theory of friendships I was due for my yearly lunch with Natalie. I was dreading it. Half way through lunch I blurted out that we weren't good friends anymore. It came out casually, it wasn't planned but to me it was obvious. She almost choked on her sushi when I said it but she didn't argue. We both knew it was true. I told her I felt sad about it for a long time but we had both changed. It was awkward but authentic, something our friendship had lacked for some time. The great thing about acknowledging the truth of our friendship was that for the rest of lunch we didn't pretend. Neither of us got out our daybooks to schedule the next lunch. Once we had clarity about our friendship we could let it go. I think this is why my daughter worked so diligently on her own understanding of friendship. Placing her friendships in different categories helped her to know which friends had priority in her life. As for me, I took a long sober look at a friendship that had ended years ago and finally said goodbye.