

**WHAT REAL MOMS IN THE TRENCHES
ARE SAYING ABOUT *BETTER TOGETHER*:**

Better Together gave me much-needed confidence to create a community of moms to do life with. We were not meant to do life alone!

CHRISTINA EASTMAN, *husband-supporter, ever-present mama, wannabe sitcom writer*

As a frequent mover, it's often difficult to start over, building new relationships grassroots-style. *Better Together* offered great tips on how to proactively create community rather than waiting for new community to find me. A great reminder to prioritize sisterhood, because we are, indeed, better together than we are alone.

BRENDA OTTINGER, *loving wife, grateful mom of noise and dirt (read: boys), fledgling blogger, cupcake lover*

Jill is a wonderful, close friend to me. She is genuine to the core and lives what she writes about friendship. I believe we should always have friends of all ages, and I joke that we especially need to have younger friends so we have someone to visit us in the nursing home! *Better Together* teaches you how to be that kind of friend and have that kind of friends!

BECKY GLENN, *collector of friends, older than most of you reading this, thankful to do life with God, has been known to wear a conehead on occasion!*

Better Together is a very practical, candid, honest book about why it's important to have your "mom tribe." Anne and Jill do a great job speaking on how to develop the friendships we all crave in the society we live in today. Even though I'm a grandma now, it reminded me that we should not mother (or grandmother) alone! Friendships enrich our lives and challenge us to become better women overall.

BONNIE MILLER, *mom of two, grandma of one, and enjoying being an empty nester!*

Jill's newest book for moms encouraged me to think about the importance of relationships with other moms. *Better Together* showed me that it does not matter if you are an Innie or an Outie (you'll see), we all have our stuff somewhere! We all need mom community no matter the stage of mothering!

KARLA P., *wife, mom, family childcare provider*

Better Together reminded me of all the great times we had together as moms raising kids, and I thank the Lord I had such good friends to help me along. Jill is the best mentor I could ever have hoped for. I'm a better mom because of her guidance, and she's still helping me as a grandparent!

BETH H., *wife, mom, grandma, child of God, and the Purple Cat Lady*

better together

Because You're Not Meant to Mom Alone

JILL SAVAGE

with ANNE McCLANE

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

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Published in association with the literary agency of Transatlantic Agency.

Edited by Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse
Interior and cover design: Erik M. Peterson
Cover: photo by Tami Paige / lettering by Connie Gabbert
Photo of Jill Savage and Anne McClaine by Tami Paige

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Savage, Jill, 1964- author.

Better together : because you're not meant to mom alone / by Jill Savage ; with Anne (Savage) McClane.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8024-1379-6

1. Motherhood—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Female friendship—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4529.18.S237 2016

248.8'431—dc23

2015033764

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America



THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
ALL OF THE WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN
A PART OF OUR MOTHERING COMMUNITIES.
WE'RE BOTH BETTER MOMS BECAUSE WE
DID LIFE TOGETHER WITH EACH OF YOU.



CONTENTS

1	Where It All Begins	9
2	Who Are You “Momming” With?	27
3	Variety Is the Spice of Life!	53
4	Learning Together: “What a great idea! I can’t wait to try that out!”	79
5	Helping Together: “You don’t have to do that alone. I’ll help you!”	93
6	Caring Together: “You’re not alone. We’re here for you.”	115
7	Sharing Together: “Really? You feel that way too?”	133
8	Praying Together: “I’m standing in the gap for you.”	153
9	Forgiving Together: “I’m sorry, I let you down.”	171
10	Encouraging Together: “You’ve got this! You can do it!”	187

Notes / 203

Bonus Features:

Appendix A: Conversation Starters / 205

Appendix B: Mothering Personality Inventory /209

Appendix C: Mom Co-ops /219

Appendix D: 33 Bible Verses to Share with a Friend Going
through a Hard Time /231

Leader’s Guide / 237

Acknowledgments / 251

CHAPTER 1

Where It All Begins



One year after our first Hearts at Home conference, I found myself driving across town alone in my filthy minivan filled with car seats and five weeks' worth of Sunday school papers. I was having a conversation with God about the unexpected place He had me. I was leading a moms group in our church that had held what was supposed to be, a one time conference for moms. We expected 400 moms to attend and 1,100 showed up. It seemed that God's vision was much bigger than mine. We were now within a few weeks of our second conference and over 2,800 women had already registered to attend! We had assembled a board of directors, incorporated as a nonprofit, and were growing faster than I felt I could keep up with.

"You have to be laughing, God," I exclaimed with a mix of humor and resignation. "You now have me leading a huge ministry to moms and I DON'T EVEN LIKE WOMEN!"

I'm a late bloomer when it comes to female relationships. Growing up, most of the kids in our neighborhood were boys. My two sisters and I played softball with the neighborhood guys in the empty lot next to our house nearly every night during the spring, summer, and fall. Even

though I went to all twelve years of school in the same school district, I never had one girlfriend who was my “best friend since first grade” as some people have.

I did have friends who were girls. I went to a few birthday parties and sleepovers over the years. Some girls eventually moved into the neighborhood and we had fun together . . . playing baseball in the side lot. I also had some girlfriends I ate lunch with in high school.

Maybe it was growing up in a neighborhood of boys, or maybe it was being attracted to the simplicity of guy friendships, but female friendships weren’t exactly a priority for me. I liked my guy friendships because they seemed to be less complicated. These weren’t boyfriends . . . just guy friends who didn’t get their feelings hurt easily, communicated at face

value, and protected me fiercely. They were more like the big brothers I never had.

What do I do when I feel left out even as an adult?

I met some friends late in high school and I spent a year living in a sorority my freshman year of college (that, honestly, never really met my friendship expectations), but I never seemed to really “click”

with the whole girlfriend thing in my younger years. While I privately longed to have girlfriends to share secrets with, laugh together, and talk on the phone for hours, I summed it up in my mind that I just wasn’t meant to have many girlfriends and I needed to be content with what I had.

And then I became a mom.

Suddenly I had this desire to spend time with other women who understood what my life is like. I needed to learn from them. I needed

to know if what my kid was doing was normal. I needed to know if my feelings were okay. More than anything, I needed to know I wasn't alone! Seeking female friendships to meet those needs, I discovered that I longed for a mothering community around me, but I had no idea how to find one.

I stumbled my way through those early years of mom friendships. I lived far from family, so my friends became family. I experienced both the high of "doing life" with other moms and the low of being rejected by some I thought were my friends. I've made lifelong friends and experienced friendship "breakups." I've come to learn that my personality and temperament affect the number of friends I will likely have. I've discovered that some friendships are seasonal and others are lifelong. Finally, I've learned some strategies along the way for making friends, keeping friends, and even understanding when it's okay to let a friendship go. I hope you're ready to dig into all of that, because the truth is, we need each other. We need to be with other women who understand our world of mothering, but most of us struggle with some aspect of making those relationships work.

Friendships change as motherhood changes. That's why I'm glad to have my daughter Anne writing with me. Anne just turned thirty. She's been married nine years and is the mother of a preschooler and a kindergartner. Anne has moved to a new community in the past eighteen months and has been knee-deep in forging new friendships. She's also never known motherhood without social media and the reality of "friend" being both a noun and a verb. Anne is an at-home mom who runs a day care in her home. Her experiences and season of life will likely resonate with some of you.

I, on the other hand, am just on the edge of the empty-nest season of life. With my youngest in college, I'm discovering a new season of life where friendships are no longer knit together by our kids' activities. Many women in my season of life are working full-time, which greatly factors into this friendship thing as well.

Anne and I have collaborated throughout the book, but we've chosen to write only in my voice. Anne's stories are woven in and out of chapters, but some of Anne's are also set off by themselves in ways that will help present a concept you can think about more deeply. We hope this makes reading easier for you!

Anne and I asked our online communities what challenges they found in mom friendships and what topics they would like to see addressed on these pages. I bet you can relate to some of these:

- How can we pursue relational depth without the drama?
- What do I do when I feel left out even as an adult?
- How do I find time to build friendships?
- How do I take a friendship deeper?
- What do we do with the comparing we tend to do in friendships?

These are great questions and we're going to dig into every one of them plus more! Most of us face relational struggles in some way. Too often we think we're the only ones struggling, but that's not true at all. We're just not exactly willing to advertise, "Hey, I'm struggling with friendships" on Facebook, in our Bible study, or even in our moms group for fear of appearing like we don't have it together.

Looking back over the past thirty years of mothering five children, I can truly say I am who I am because of the women who have been in my

life. I'm glad I pushed through the struggles, chose to risk again after being hurt, and learned some relational wisdom to navigate the sometimes-rocky waters. My mom friends have grown me in my organizational skills, my parenting, my marriage, and my spiritual life. I've been cared for, encouraged, corrected, and loved on by the women in my life. More than anything else, I've truly come to understand that we really are better together.

WHY ARE MOM FRIENDS SO IMPORTANT?

There's a new business in the community I live in that gathers women together to make freezer meals in a home party type of setting. I'm not a home party girl at all, but when I'm going to end up with ten meals in the freezer in less than ninety minutes and someone else does the shopping, food prep, and cleanup, you've got my attention! I put an event invitation out on Facebook and had twenty women join me at a party I hosted. Most of the ladies who came didn't know one another because they were all from different parts of my life—some from church, some from a moms group I used to go to, some from Hearts at Home where I work, some from online relationships I've built, and a few women came because they were friends of someone who was coming.

As we assembled the main dishes for these meals, we broke down into five groups of four. Each group was in charge of assembling two of the recipes. We formed an assembly line of sorts, putting together twenty of each recipe. After the first five minutes, you would have never known that these ladies didn't know each other. The buzz of conversation was electric. There was laughter, stories, and wisdom being shared. Toward the end of the party someone said, "This is so much fun! I'm sure this is what it used to be like when women would cook together more often."

A century ago, extended family often formed a woman's natural mothering community. While quilting with aunts and sisters-in-law, marriage wisdom was passed along. While cooking with your mom and grandmother, parenting knowledge was shared. While scrubbing clothes with sisters and friends, homemaking tips were discussed. If a mom was sick, her community helped care for her kids. When a new baby was born, the village fed and cared for the new mom and her family. When there was a big project to accomplish, her tribe of mothers pulled together to help.

Today, many of us live away from our moms, aunts, sisters, and in-laws. Families are more independent in carrying out their household responsibilities. Even if a mom lives near her family, many older women are now in the workforce and just don't have the time or the opportunity to be together in the day to day—which is what it takes for regular interaction and natural conversation to happen.

Because our mothering community is no longer formed naturally within extended family relationships, we have to pursue, discover, and assemble it ourselves. We have to recognize the value of it and make it a priority in our lives because we're stronger, wiser, and even healthier when we have a mom community around us.

THE BENEFITS OF FRIENDSHIP

It was Eleanor Roosevelt who said, "Many people will walk in and out of your life; but only true friends will leave footprints in your heart." Those footprints represent the impact, the influence, and the inspiration our friends give us. Exactly how are our lives enriched by friendship? Here are ten powerful benefits of friendship:

Benefit #1: Connection

Many women tell us that when they attended a Hearts at Home mom conference for the first time, they found themselves crying within the first few minutes of the conference.

There's truly nothing happening that is that tear-producing, and many report that they are not really criers at all, but the impact of being with thousands of other moms and suddenly realizing you're really not alone is almost more than the heart can handle. The emotional response overflows in tears.

.....

When you give to a friendship, it's usually because you want to.

.....

Being with like-minded people who really do understand your life in some way is very powerful. Having someone to talk with and share interests with adds so much richness to your life. Friendships keep us connected to the world outside of our home and family. They help us remember the important things in life and provide much-needed perspective no matter how we choose to connect.

Benefit #2: A Sense of Belonging

The human soul longs to belong. We want to know that people believe in us, approve of us, and accept us for who we are. Friendships provide a place where we're needed, we're contributing, and we're really known.

They also allow us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We can align with others who have the same beliefs, experiences, and interests. Sometimes we band with others to accomplish something together that

we couldn't accomplish on our own. The "team spirit" we experience contributes to our sense of belonging. "We did this together!" might be said internally or aloud.

However, belonging doesn't just come from being a part of a group. It can be felt in smaller circles of friends as well. Small gestures, like when a friend sends you a text that she's thinking of you, communicate you're important to someone, being thought of, and are a part of their world.

Benefit #3: The Ability to Give

When you care about and care for other people, it brings a sense of satisfaction to your own life. Your contribution to another person's well-being, your encouraging words, your physical help all contribute to your feeling of being needed.

We all need relationships we can contribute to. Yes, as a mom you're giving all the time, but that kind of giving is somewhat "required." When you give to a friendship, it's usually because you want to.

When we give to others, we feel closer to them. That "interconnect-ness" builds a sense of community in our life. Giving time, energy, and encouragement enriches our lives and increases our capacity to love.

Benefit #4: The Ability to Receive

Most of us are much more comfortable giving than receiving. Yet, if we refuse to receive, we rob others of the joy of giving. A healthy friendship is a dance between the two.

We might receive comfort, encouragement, wisdom, knowledge, a shoulder to cry on, or practical help from a friend. Seasons of crisis may be times of receiving more than usual.

Friendships provide opportunities for us to admit our need for help. They give us the opportunity to open up our hands and our heart and allow others in. We benefit from learning to both give and receive!

Benefit #5: Sounding Board

A good friend is the perfect person to run ideas past. She can listen, share in your excitement, or bring some much-needed perspective. Sometimes we need the wisdom of others or the viewpoint of someone who isn't as close to a situation as we are to help us keep our head on straight.

Friends are the ones with whom we can also share our dreams, frustrations, and fears. They provide a safety zone where we don't have to worry about being judged. With honesty in place, a good friend can also provide much-needed accountability. Sometimes we need a swift kick in the seat of our pants if we're off track in our thinking or need to look at something from another angle.

Benefit #6: Wisdom and Experiences of Others

My friend Tonya, who has a special education degree, shared with me wisdom about learning challenges our adopted son was facing as he learned a new language at the age of nine. My friend Lora helped me sponge-paint my hallway after she perfected her technique on her living room walls. My friend Julie, who is a doula, prepared me to be Anne's birth coach along with her husband, Matt. My friend Becky is a natural organizer who shares her wisdom when I'm overwhelmed and need help with a home reorganization project.

On the day I received my breast cancer diagnosis, I was an emotional mess. I ended up on my friend Crystal's doorstep. Crystal, a former nurse -

practitioner-turned-homeschooling-mom, and I have been friends for many years. I needed Crystal's comfort as a friend and her wisdom and medical knowledge as an NP. I sat at her kitchen table, called my doctor's office back, and asked them to give Crystal all the info on my biopsy. She knew and understood the medical terms and she knew the questions to ask.

Friendships fill your gaps. They allow you to tap into the strengths of others. They broaden your knowledge in so many ways.

Benefit #7: Marital Health

Husbands make terrible girlfriends, and honestly it's unfair to expect them to be something they're not meant to be. Women and men communicate differently. If he's like the majority of men, your husband will likely communicate factually. He'll want to fix any problems you talk to him about. He's great at giving you three ways to proceed.

A girlfriend, however, will likely communicate emotionally. She'll listen and empathize with your challenges. She'll make sure you know you're not alone as you journey through motherhood.

Not only that, but there are activities that your husband may not enjoy as much as you do, that a girlfriend might enjoy doing with you. If your husband isn't into going to the theatre, picking strawberries, or garage sale-ing, it might be better to do those things with a girlfriend who enjoys them as much as you do!

Benefit #8: Spiritual Health

A good friend can encourage you to keep your eyes on God's truth when you're tempted to believe the lies of the enemy. She can pray with and for you. She can send a Bible verse just when you need it.

The Bible tells us “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10a NIV). When faith is part of a friendship, you’re able to share what God is teaching you and spur each other on to grow deeper spiritually. This benefit shores up the foundation of our life. Even if the friendship fades, the spiritual benefit can last a lifetime.

Benefit #9: Emotional Health

Knowing someone cares makes such a difference in how we feel about ourselves. Friendship increases self-esteem, and good friends can even help you break a pattern of destructive self-talk, if you struggle with that. While it’s entirely possible and even probable that you’ll sometimes feel lonely even when you have friends, friendship staves off the general feeling of loneliness that can often contribute to depression and anxiety.

I didn’t know her at ALL, but knew of her. She’d recently delivered a stillborn baby. One Sunday a video was shown in church promoting small groups. In the video, a woman who’d had a stillborn baby shared her story. My chest tightened watching the video and knowing the mom who had recently delivered a stillborn baby was in the room. I saw her get up and walk out of the room. I knew I couldn’t let her just be alone. I met her in the bathroom and just hugged her. (And I was not a “huggy” person back then!) One year later, I buried my own child after a household accident. She was the one who met me at church the next Sunday. I even remember the sweater she was wearing. It’s been fourteen years since that first hug in the bathroom and she’s still one of my best friends.

—CHRISTY

Friends can help create emotional stability. When you weather the ups and downs of life with someone who cares, you feel stronger than if you were navigating life on your own. Just knowing you have someone in your corner can help you feel more capable and confident in handling the challenges you face.

Benefit #10: Physical Health

It's no secret that friends are good for your emotional health, but did you know they are also good for your physical health? Though both men and women respond to stress physically with the fight-or-flight response, women also respond by producing brain chemicals that cause them to seek out friendships with other women, a UCLA study¹ suggests. The study discovered that when the hormone oxytocin is released as part of the stress response in a woman, it encourages her to tend children and gather with women. And when she "tends and befriends," more oxytocin is released, which actually calms her and reduces stress.²

Other studies have found that social ties reduce our risk of disease by lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. In one study, for example, researchers found that people who had no friends increased their risk of death. So hanging out with friends can actually help us live longer!³

It also appears that friends help us live better. The Harvard Medical School Nurses' Health Study found that the more friends a woman had, the less likely she was to develop physical challenges as she got older. In fact, the results were so significant, the researchers determined that not having close friends or confidants was as damaging to your health as smoking or carrying extra weight.

You and I will not have a single friend who will bring all of these benefits to our lives. We'll likely not experience these all at once either. However, over time and with a commitment to investing in friendships, we'll experience many of them in our lifetime!

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Our youngest son was home from college for the summer. He had just celebrated his one-year "anniversary" of dating his girlfriend. As he was helping me cut up vegetables for dinner, I asked, "So, Austin, what are you planning on reading this summer?" "Reading?" he responded with indignation. "I'm taking an online class and that's all the reading I'm doing this summer." The next week he declared that the girlfriend signed them both up for the adult summer reading program at the local library and he thought it was a great idea. We've had dozens of other "crazy mom/smart girlfriend" interactions over the past few months. In exasperation, I told him I was going to write a blog post about the fact that everything I suggest to him he thinks is a ridiculous idea, and everything his girlfriend suggests he thinks is a great idea. He said, "Mom, what would the purpose of a blog post like that even be?" "To let other moms know they're not alone," I responded, determining to get that post written sooner rather than later.

You. Are. Not. Alone. Those four words are powerful for moms. We wonder if our kids are normal. We wonder if other moms feel like we sometimes feel. We wonder if our marriage is the only marriage having issues. We long to know that we're not the only mom who's driven somewhere and realized the car seat wasn't buckled in, or has forgotten her kid at school, or has fed her family cereal for dinner. We all need the reassurance

that happens when “momming together” as we share real-life stuff, and realize we aren’t alone.

Recently I had lunch with a dear friend. We both have kids who struggle with mental health issues. I was almost fearful to meet her at a restaurant because I’d been on the verge of tears for several days after a trying week with our child. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself in public. Yet I knew that I needed to go. My heart needed to connect with a heart who truly understood what I was feeling. Our conversation was raw, honest, and yes some tears were shed. The remainder of the day,

however, I was strong, steady, and tears weren’t even close to the surface. Being reminded I wasn’t alone strengthened and encouraged me in a powerful way.

As much as we desperately need to know we’re not alone, too many of us are momming alone (and yes, I’ve just turned the word mom into a verb) and we don’t need to be. Not only that, but we weren’t created to do life alone.

God created us to be in relationship with others. Jesus modeled living in community and the value of friendship. The Bible has all kinds of wisdom about friendship. We need to understand how friendship and faith go together and how to find, build, contribute to, and embrace our mothering community!

.....
*Jesus taught,
corrected,
comforted, and
served His friends.*
.....

FAITH AND FRIENDSHIP

One of the most beautiful stories of friendship in the Bible is the friendship of David and Jonathan. Jonathan’s father, Saul, was the first king of

Israel. Although Jonathan would have been in line to be the next king of Israel, his father's disobedience to God resulted in having the kingdom taken away from him. God chose David to be the next king of Israel. Enraged, Saul became incredibly jealous of David and set out to kill him.

Even though Jonathan knew David would be the next king, he built a friendship with him. Jonathan trusted God's decision for David to be king even if doing so resulted in his own loss of the throne. Jonathan knew of his father's hatred and intent to murder. He was such a loyal friend to David that he alerted him of the danger and saved his life (you can read the whole story in 1 Samuel 18–23). Jonathan's loyalty was an incredible gift to David. He risked his own life to protect David's life, causing Saul to eventually turn his anger toward his own son. Jonathan and David had to eventually part ways out of necessity. Their story is one of loyalty, courage, and sacrifice.

Another beautiful story of friendship is the story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth was married to Naomi's son. Ruth and Naomi both became widows when both of their husbands died. When Naomi decided to return to her home country of Israel, Ruth insisted on going with her. Even though Ruth was not an Israelite, she accepted the God of Israel as her God and the Israelite people as her people. She did not want to lose her friend Naomi, so the two women returned to Israel together grieving, deeply for their mutual loss.

Although Naomi initially resisted Ruth's loyalty and encouraged her to return to her own people, she eventually grew to appreciate her daughter-in-law's tenacity and commitment. Eventually one of Naomi's relatives, Boaz, fell in love with Ruth. Their marriage brought incredible joy to both women.

However, it is the story of Jesus that gives us the most beautiful picture of doing life together. At the age of thirty, Jesus began His three years of public ministry before His death on the cross for us. Jesus was not a lone ranger. He did life with His disciples as well as other friends like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Jesus' relationship with the disciples was both a teacher-student relationship and a friendship. Jesus called the Twelve that He "did life with" His friends. They traveled together, shared meals, and attended weddings. Jesus taught, corrected, comforted, and served His friends.

Jesus also experienced the hard side of friendship. He cried when He heard that His friend Lazarus had died. He was betrayed by His friend Judas. Peter rejected Him when he denied being Jesus' friend. His friends let Him down when they promised to pray with Him in the garden of Gethsemane but fell asleep instead.

So Jesus understands the reality of what it's like to live with people—the good and the hard. One of my favorite verses that drives this home is Hebrews 4:14–16, and I particularly love the way it is worded in *The Message*: "Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help."

Jesus modeled living in community and the value of friendship. He dealt with the realities of living life with imperfect people. You and I need to know how to find, build, and use our mothering community to the fullest. Turn the page and let's dig into the practical side of making that happen.



FROM ANNE'S HEART

Moving into a new community where I knew no one was daunting. Through our church, we started hosting a small group for young families. (It was the one time of the week my house was actually tidied up!) We weren't sure how this group would gel: We all come from unique backgrounds and have different personalities. However, I now see how God connected the dots for us to share life together with people who are going through similar joys and challenges. We need each other and really are better together!

As a teenager, I was having a conversation with my dad about how a friend of mine only ever asked me to go shopping. We never talked about deeper stuff and never did anything outside of going to the mall together. I questioned whether this friendship was worth my time. Dad responded, "There isn't one single friend who can fill all of the friendship needs you have."

I now better understand Dad's wisdom. There will be lots of different friends filling different needs. The shopping friend. The coffeehouse-chat friend. The friend you call when your two-year-old smears poop all over her face. Some friends can fill several different needs, but none can be everything you need in a friend. That isn't fair to ask of them and it isn't possible to fulfill.





SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT . . .

*Are you expecting one friend to fill
all your friendship needs?*

Today's Friendship Assignment

It's been said that we are to work as if everything depends on us and pray as if everything depends upon God. No doubt you'll be working to form, expand, or invest in your friendships as you read this book. When was the last time you talked to God about your friendships?

Take just a few minutes here to thank Him for the friends you have or pour out your heart to Him about the friends you don't have.

He knows, He cares, and He understands.