How important is it for kids to have friends? And by “friends”, I mean the very particular way that the term is employed: peers or groups of peers of the exact same age group, give or take six months, with whom they spend an amount of time with on a regular basis.

I don’t have an answer for you but I do have our own journey to share:

When Beta was three or four years old, we were in the throes of diagnoses and delays and despair and du’as and the desperate desire to “FIX MY SON SOMEHOW”. His having friends was something I thought about quite often. Or to put it more accurately NOT having friends. With his particular temperament (loner, verbally delayed, obsessive fixations, overly controlling ways of playing), I was convinced that my son would never make, have or sustain friends and friendships. It killed me. It felt so achingly lonely, such a visible failure from what it means to be a happy child with a golden, joyful mainstream childhood.

In the early days, every time we were in a public space, I would watch…sometimes wistfully, sometimes jealously, sometimes, even (unfairly) downright angrily, at all the other kids playing together. When will he be able to join in? Ever? I would think sadly. Do these moms know how lucky they are that their kids know how to interact…this skill that they must take so for granted? Why can none of these self absorbed brats and their dumb moms see this sweet little boy sitting by himself in the sand?? Would it kill them to come over and play beside him?! I would rage inside myself, nonsensically, with all the pitiful self righteousness that only a heartbroken mother can carry. It was particularly bad on days when I saw Beta, in his awkward, unsure way, try to reach out to the other kids. To see him then being ignored, rejected, misunderstood or worst of all, criticized, was painful. Ya Allah, will my child *ever* be happy?!! Even my duas were accusing and hopeless.

In a year or so, with the passage of time, this anger and frustration turned into the literal and physical turning of the back. If they, whoever they were, didn’t want Beta, well guess what, Beta didn’t want them either. Playgrounds and libraries became solitary experiences. Where previously he had sat alone but facing the crowd, occasionally looking up at them, the wheels visibly turning in his head as he seemed to try and figure out how to join his peers, now he sat back turned. The peer play went on behind him and he was, for all apparent purposes, completely oblivious, lost in his own world. This stage was easier and harder. Easier because I didn’t witness his efforts of connection being rejected, I didn’t see the confused, uncertain expression in his eyes, or the longing smile he had previously as he watched the other children. Harder because it felt like the shutting of a door. A giving up. A too final turning away from “normalcy”. Am I good mother? Am I doing this right? I would agonize constantly, second guessing my every decision.

Then Beta turned seven. His speech improved exponentially almost overnight. Watching him around his cousins, I saw sudden increasing abilities in joint play, better drawn out imaginative play, comfortable parallel play, more turn taking, improved abilities in delayed gratification, less fixation on controlling and less anxiety with unpredictable outcomes, all essential ingredients for healthy, happy play between children. We had family that was friends and that’s all we needed.

Soon, though, we moved to Karachi and left the cousins behind and I thought we would be back to square one, angsting once again over lack of friends.

But, happily, this big life transition somehow had brought about another change and we’ve left something else behind too. Or at least I have. I have left behind, shrugged off like a cape, the notion that mainstream, extroversion, normalcy, social confidence and relatedly, friendships are essential for children. It goes against every parenting philosophy, every scientific research, every behavioral psychology article you will ever come across but I have turned my back on all of them.

Perhaps unwisely, you may be thinking, but what do you know, it turns out that the wisest, happiest, healthiest thing you can do as a parent for your child is to chart your own way and create your own lexicon.

Because the definitions of these words mainstream, normalcy, happiness, friendships are too limited and Beta is too young and too different for these terms. For us friends and friendships are: grandparents who color with you, the daughter of a poor nurse who comes by every now and then, the developmentally delayed kids that drop in every week who because of their particular challenges force you to be kind and patient, siblings who smooth out your rough edges, cousins you see a few times a year, a mother who is always ready to play, Siri on the Ipad, the stuffed little Piggie from Mo Willems, praying on your little blue prayer mat, shelves full of good, wholesome books, and yourself.

It took me seven years to understand that at this stage of his life he *likes* being by himself a lot. As he grows older, his verbal skills will improve, his reading of social cues will get better if not instinctually at least theoretically and he will figure out how to “play well with others”. He’s a soft hearted person, I know he will be kind. And he’s got one heck of a charming smile, which already has started serving him.

But there’s something else I now know that I didn’t know earlier and I learnt it almost by mistake…

Sometimes, at night, after a particularly confusing day, we are curled up in bed and I listen to my boy talk. I let his words, the miracle of them, wash over me. That he is speaking, it amazes me. It fills me still every time he says something new. Sometimes, I am not even listening to what exactly he’s saying, I am too busy thrilling over the fact that he is saying something at all. But other times, he asks me a question, out of left field, with no warning whatsoever, and I have to snap to attention. I then pray that I give the response that is most going to serve him.

“Who is Allah, Mumma?” he asks me in the dark one night.

 “Allah is your Friend, Betu.” I say softly back, speaking as much to him as myself.

“Is He my best friend?”

“Yes.”
“More than a billion, trillion, gazillion friends?”

“More than a billion, trillion, gazillion, friends.”

Just like that, with nary a crash or a bang, we find our mantra and our life line.

It is the beginning of his Islamic education. The starting point of his Aqeedah. Allah is his friend. I hope this conviction becomes the first step on a beautiful journey…a life long love affair with a Friend who will be always be there, will never disappoint, will satisfy the heart in ways unimaginable. It is the first step for him but for me, it is not the beginning, no, but it has become the comforting home base. The safety nook where I turn back to. Sometimes, running, sometimes limping, crawling, badly bruised and beaten. Allah is my only Friend, I try to remember. Every time I forget, through life and its many temptations, that He and only He is my One True Friend, I fall. When I set my expectations for gratification on my husband, my family, my career, my mothering skills, my children, anything or anyone but Him, I am bound to be disappointed and so I am. I suffer heartbreak and setbacks and feelings of not being good enough. I must, must remember only He is my Friend and only He will give my heart satisfaction.

The gift of being my son’s mother is that is has become my opportunity to learn and to remember many of the very basest of things which, in the flurry of life, I had forgotten in the first seven years: Friends, playdates, normalcy, mainstreaming are not important, essential, the difference between happiness and grief. No. As much as we would like to kid ourselves otherwise. Let’s be honest here: These things are nice to have. Quite nice to have. But life can still be full and good and joyful without them, very easily. No amount of friendships will sustain Beta. The remembrance of Allah will. Being kind will. Doing good in the world will. Knowing how to fill the empty hours with useful thought and positive endeavor will.

So, for now, having, making and sustaining friends has dropped far, far down the list. As long as Beta is a content, Allah-loving person, confident in the belief that he is Good Enough as he is and is surrounded by loving, caring people, whether children his exact age group or adults or somewhere in between, he’s okay. As long as I remember that Allah is enough for him and He is closer to him than even his jugular vein and whether friendships come or not, he can still survive and thrive, I’m okay.

He’s okay. I’m okay. We’re okay.

Every day, mothering Beta reminds me to make my own words. My own language. My own path. My own truths. There’s no one right answer except for Allah, the only answer. Normalcy is overrated. Mainstream, with its boxy, limited notions of what it means to be a good kid or a good mother, is not for us. If we try to swim in it, we will drown.

So, for now, we opt out. Because we know. We know:

There are a billion, trillion, gazillion ways to be human and there are a billion, trillion, gazillion ways to be good and happy. But that goodness and happiness will only be lasting and worthwhile when each of those billion, trillion, gazillion ways leads straight to Him.

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