

The gift of FRIENDSHIP

Resolving conflicts with friends and family is not easy for adults, let alone children. But a new card game aims to help the younger ones acquire the skills necessary to handle and resolve any clashes. **Luca Caruana** has a chat with Julian and Joanna Sant Fournier, the creators of the Friendship Cards.

Friendship is important for children. Making friends, whether with peers, family members or other caregivers, is a vital part of growing up and can help a child develop emotionally and morally.

Studies show that friendships enable kids to learn more about themselves and develop their own identity. Such attributes as social competence, altruism, self-esteem and self-confidence have been positively correlated to making friends.

However, it is not always easy for children to manage their friendships and, just like adults, they can come into conflict with their peers, parents and teachers. And can children handle conflict? Not really.

This is what the founders of the Relationships Are Forever Foundation, Julian and Joanna Sant Fournier, are trying to resolve with their Friendship Cards, a child-friendly version of their Couple Cards game.

“The greatest gift we can give our families is to be connected. This involves sharing our feelings and resolving conflicts that are part of everyday family life,” says Joanna.

“Building a strong relationship between parents and children is a lifelong journey, which we have to work at every day. It involves learning new skills to build better communication.

“Friendship Cards was developed with this vision. During several workshops we did on Couple Cards, we realised how children found it difficult sometimes to relate to peers, parents and teachers. >



Julian and Joanna Sant Fournier are the founders of the Relationships Are Forever Foundation.

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"Once there was a child who picked the card 'I am missing you' and gave it to his father. On another instance, there was a PSCD teacher who pointed out to us how beneficial a concept like Couple Cards would be if it were adapted to children, and how it would help their relationship with parents and even teachers.

"Such episodes sparked off the idea, and after two years of research and development with a team of professionals including PSCD teachers, designers and artists who voluntarily dedicated their time, the Friendship Cards were launched."

Each card contains suggestions that can help the child think, speak up and learn life skills.

The Friendship Cards game, which is also available in the Maltese language, is divided into four phases: Feelings, Bad Move, Good Move and Making Up. Each time a child processes a situation through the four stages, a relationship may grow deeper and the child learns important life lessons.

such as blaming others, making the argument even bigger and being passive or doing nothing.

"The cards will teach children not to escalate their bad feeling into bad moves which can have further negative consequences," Joanna remarks. "The cards can teach siblings, for example, how to react to each other when certain negative feelings are expressed."

The next stage, 'Good Move', involves a complete set of learning strategies to understand what might have gone wrong, work together and find a solution.

"Such cards encourage children to get to know themselves better, be more assertive - which helps children to take decisions and be more confident - and spend more time with others," says Joanna.

The final 'Making up' stage closes the chapter.

"This stage teaches children to say 'I am sorry' and forgive each other, an essential skill for a long-lasting relationship."



"To resolve a conflict, you first need to express your emotion. This process is facilitated by the feelings cards which form the first stage of the Friendship Cards game," Julian explains.

"One can express feelings such as loneliness, sadness and anger. A child might find it difficult to express these feelings for a variety of reasons and the cards can thus facilitate the process. It is when such feelings are expressed that a conflict can be resolved."

The cards, however, can be used in any situation, not just in times of conflict. Children might want to express their emotions with parents or teachers.

"We would like these cards to help children's development, by helping them learn how to express and share their feelings - this is part of their emotional literacy. The set also gives the child the opportunity to create their own card, by drawing what they are feeling," continues Julian.

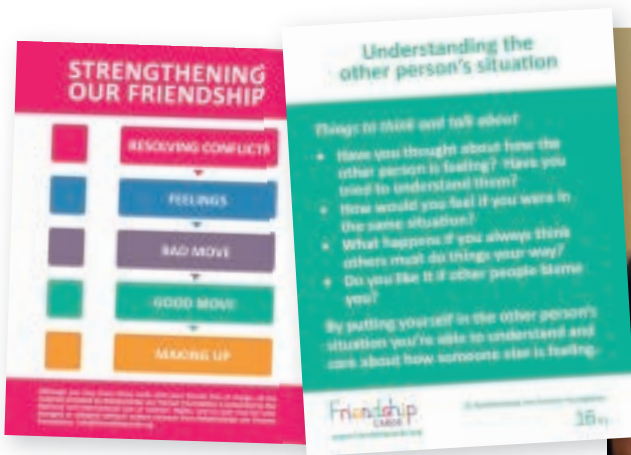
The second phase of the cards game features behaviours which tend to escalate an argument. This phase is appropriately named 'Bad Move'. The cards in this phase include concepts

Joanna and Julian have already led several workshops for schools, teachers, parents and children to explain the cards' concept but hope to continue spreading their message. They wish to train more teachers and maybe even include the cards in school curricula.

"Our target from the very beginning has been to strengthen the relationship between parents and children," says Julian. "We want to instil a new culture, a new mentality, from children's early age, so that when they grow up, they would start using the cards' concepts in society in general.

"Children will be the leaders of tomorrow, the parents of tomorrow, let's all work together to give our children values, life skills and a strong character formation." >

The Friendship Cards can be acquired against a small donation during workshops organised by the Relationships Are Forever Foundation. To register and find out more about the Friendship Cards, visit www.friendshipcards.org or www.facebook.com/friendshipcards.org.



Users share their experience

Amanda Bezzina, one of the members of the core team who worked on the Friendship Cards initiative, describes the cards as “an effective resource for all teachers to facilitate communication, empathy and conflict management skills in a classroom environment.

“Through these cards, children have the opportunity to observe and practise problem-solving skills by analysing the problem, the feelings attributed to it, the bad moves, the good moves and the making up. In this way, they can realise that a conflict is not solved aggressively or passively but assertively, with proper communication and empathy”.

Helen Buhagiar, a parent who attended the workshop with her son Anthony, also found the cards game to be a positive experience.

“The cards have shifted the pressure off me in the sense that I am usually telling my son what to do and what not to do, which can become quite stifling and can very often turn into a power struggle between us.

“The cards are such a child-friendly, clear, subtle, bright, factual, playful structured way of thinking that, with repetition, help develop the right thinking strategy in the child. The amazing thing is that the child feels in command as he leads himself forward, one card leading to the other, until he realises the strategy that he needs to adopt and the pitfalls he needs to avoid.”

Helen’s son, Anthony, found the cards very helpful when it came to resolving conflicts with friends.

“If I run into an argument or a problem like a fight at school with a friend, I go home, think about how I am feeling, bring out the card that matches my

How the Friendship Cards work:

- The first edition of Friendship Cards is focused on conflict resolution.
- Friendship cards help children to process the argument into simple stages:
 - a. Feel comfortable to express how they feel, talking with each other and finding out what caused the argument;
 - b. Realise that they may have said or done something wrong;
 - c. Focus on taking positive steps and avoiding hurtful behaviour so that it is possible to make up and be good friends again.
- Each card helps the children to express an emotion and includes ‘Things to think and talk about’ to enable the child to discuss and understand the particular situation.
- Children will learn new life skills while having fun.

feelings best, read the backside to understand my feelings and then look for the card which shows me what is the bad move that must be avoided, and the other card which tells me the good move that should be carried forward in the situation. Finally, I choose a making up card to make peace with my friend”. ●