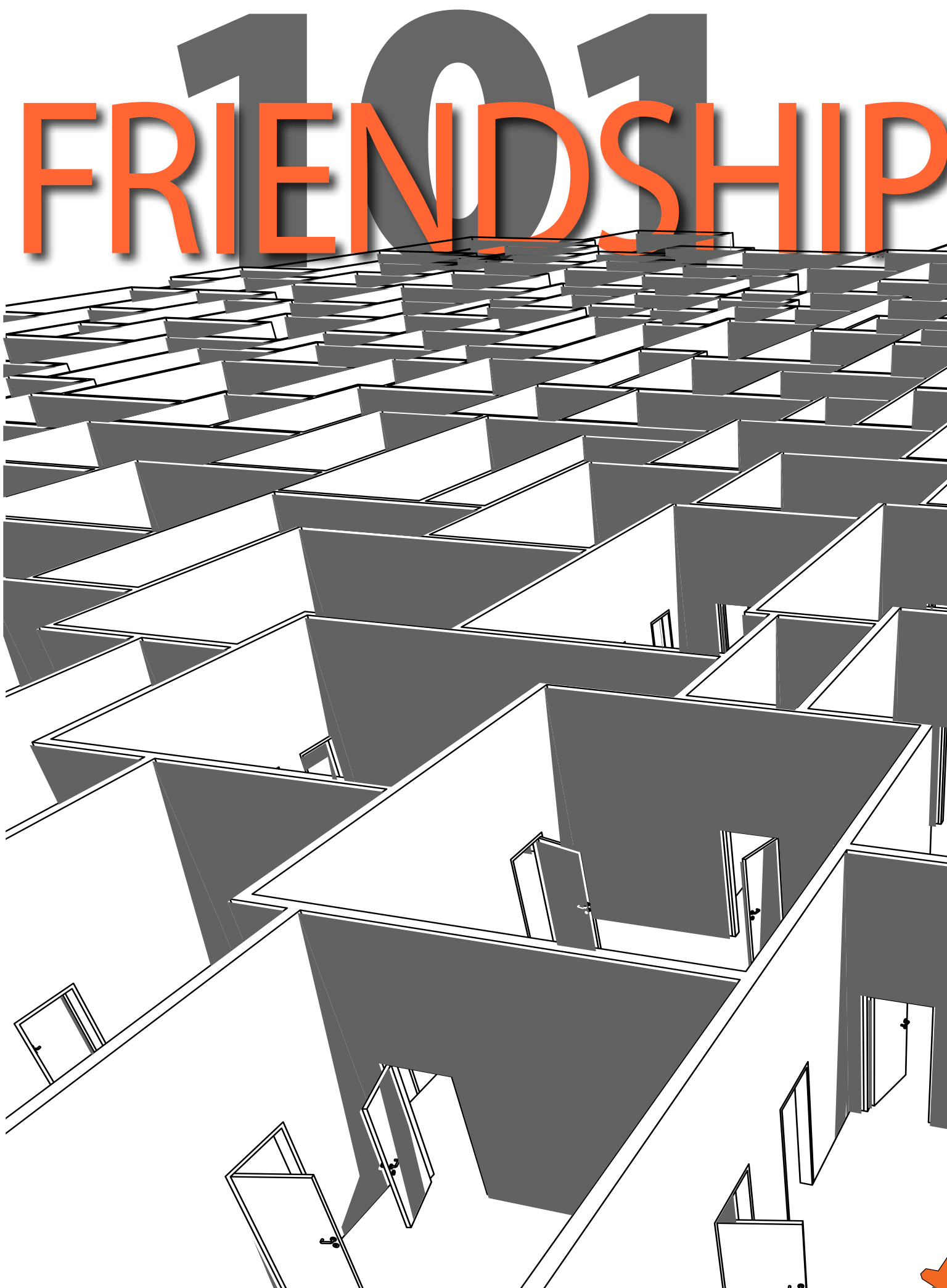
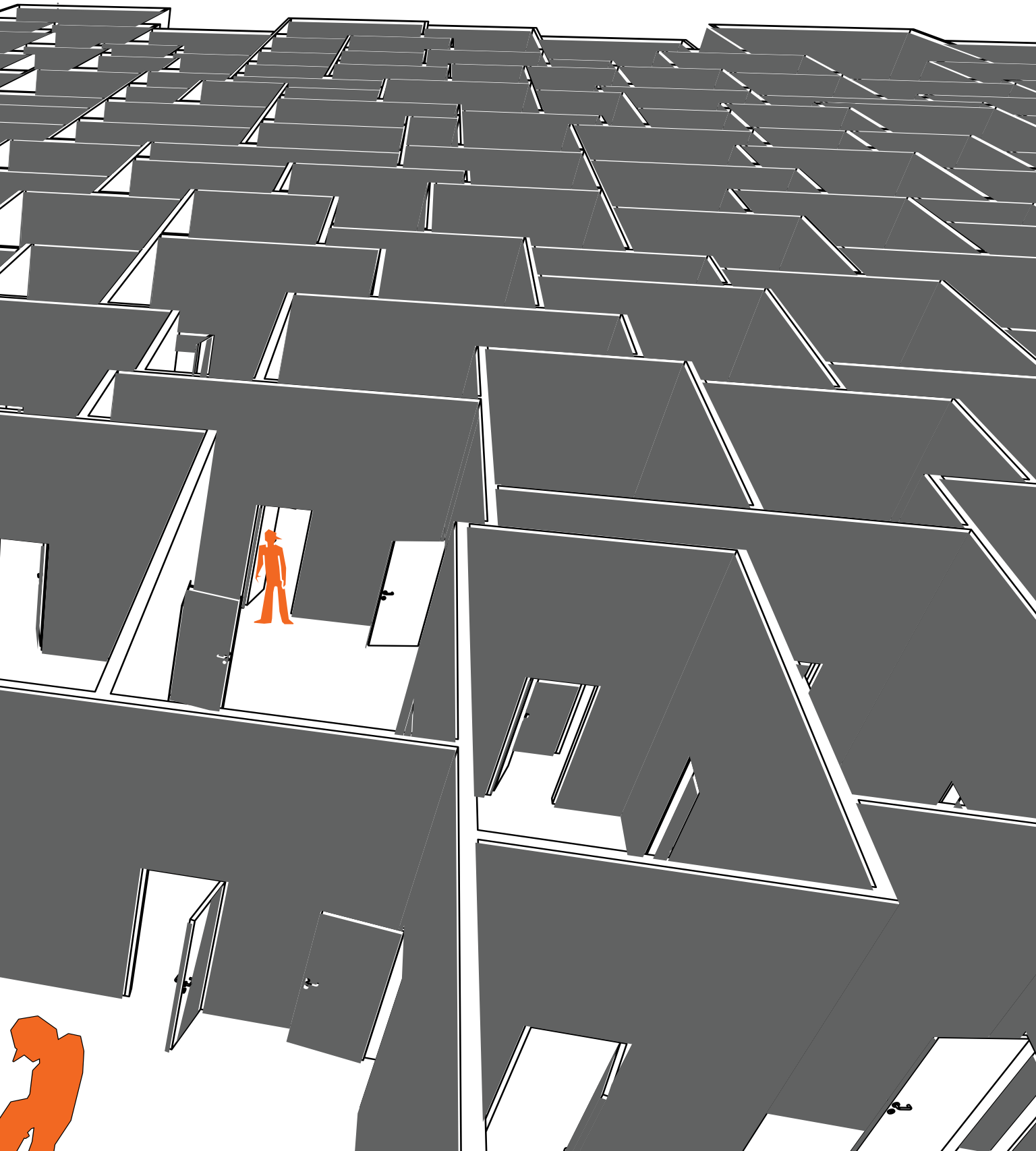
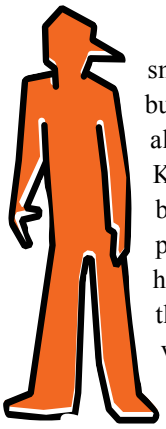
FRIENDSHIP 101



Making friends can be difficult for anyone, but gifted youth and adults have unique hurdles. Here's how to soar over them. By **Lisa Van Gemert** and **Patti Bear**





In the iconic commercial, the happy, smiling mom gazes around her backyard bursting with neighborhood children, all thrilled to be there because she has Kool-Aid. The phrase "Kool-Aid Mom" became synonymous with perfection in parenting, and it's not just because she has an anthropomorphic pitcher bursting through the fence. The secret hope of virtually every parent is that his or her child will have friends and be liked, as represented in the commercial by the busy backyard. On television, all it takes to have a bevy of friends is a flavor packet and a cup of sugar. In real life, it's a little more complicated, both for kids and adults.

Friendship is more than a popularity contest. Dr. Dan Peters of the Summit Center in California explains, "Kids need to be mirrored—they need someone else who gets them, who values them, and who enjoys them for who they are." This need isn't limited to youth. The same parents who want their backyard full of rambunctious children may want their home full of cheerful adults with cocktails in the evening—or at least one.

Research by John Cacioppo at the University of Chicago reveals a lack of friendship and social engagement can lead to higher perceived levels of stress, have a negative effect on sleep, and even reduce the quality of medical care you may get from a physician. That's right, your doctor may be less inclined to treat you well if you have no support group. Many long-term studies of adult health have shown a high correlation between health and a strong support group. Loneliness, Cacioppo says, involves a series of "slowly unfolding pathophysiological processes." Simply put, humans are designed for connection with each other, and we function best when that need is met.

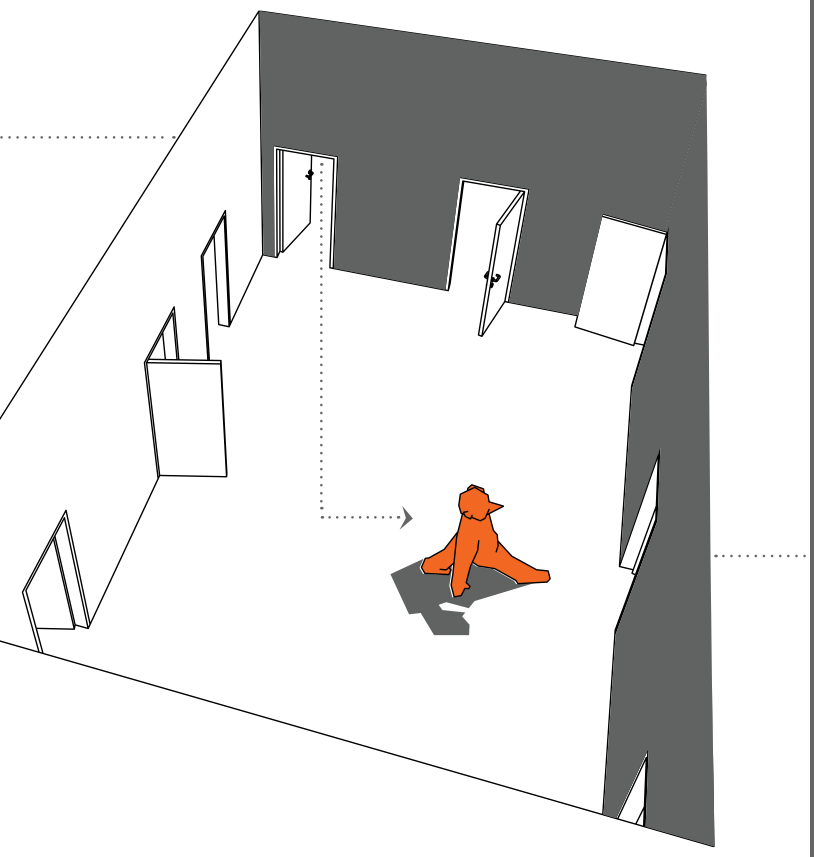
Often, our friendship-building patterns are set during childhood, and gifted adults frequently find the struggles they had as youths follow them to adulthood. Gifted adults who did not have support for creating friendships as children may continue to feel that they just don't fit in, and therefore they give up on trying to find a compatible social circle. The irony of this is that adults have a lot more freedom and choice available to them in creating their social network than children do, and it's actually easier as an adult to engineer one's environment to increase the chances of social connection. Gifted adults who struggle with friendships need to examine the messages they carry with them from childhood and then adapt the friendship strategies below to their particular circumstances.

Nearly everyone struggles with making friends, but there are a few reasons gifted individuals may appear to struggle with friendships more than others. Gifted kids (and adults) often have different challenges than their typical learner peers. All kids struggle with fitting in and finding their niche, and for most kids this is about wearing the right clothes or watching the popular movies and TV shows so they can be like other kids. While gifted kids may not care about those things, they do care about fitting in. The tricky part is that they don't necessarily want to fit in with the "in crowd." Instead, they want to fit in with other kids who are like them. When a gifted child complains that he doesn't fit in, parents or teachers may mistakenly believe that the child wants advice on how to be like the crowd, when what the may really want is to be directed to other children or adults who share his interests.

This leads to the second reason gifted kids may have difficulty making friends: they have esoteric interests. Often, people of high intellectual ability hyperfocus on a single topic or two, say string theory or the Redwall series. The truth is, all kids are hyperfocused on their interests; it's just that most children hyperfocus on something more common, say iCarly or football. When the hyperfocus is shared by most of their peers, whether youth or adult, it doesn't seem so unusual.

So what highly intelligent people need is a place to meet people who share their personal interests. Cue Mensa. It can often be difficult for youth to find a group of age-peers who share their interest, and so parents, teachers, and even the child might despair of making friends. This is a good reason to broaden our definition of friends for our children to include people who may not be the same age—or not even close.

Sometimes, personality traits erect barriers to making friends. "These are just generalities, but often gifted kids are more sensitive and intense in presentation," says Peters. "They can be more committed to a sense of fairness and justice, and in the context of relationships, this can cause problems. They can be very loyal and more sensitive to slight, and combined with a strong memory, less forgiving. They hold friends to high standards (often exceedingly high), are aware of hypocrisy and superficiality, and are less



good at playing the games and niceties of relationships. They can be more overwhelming and too intense for age-group peers."

Adults continue to have high standards for themselves, to have a strong memory for slights, and to be even more sophisticated in their interpretations of others' behavior—leading to enhanced detection of inadequacies—which may limit their ability to consider someone as a potential friend. This makes it difficult for gifted adults to make new friends, but the flip side is that they are extremely loyal and tend to have long-term friendships once they have made a connection. In some ways, this sounds like highly intellectual people are some form of highly evolved border collies—smart *and* loyal—but that's an oversimplification.

Recent research by Dr. Julie MacEvoy at Boston College indicates that Peters' observations about gifted kids may have more bearing on friendship than we previously recognized. According to MacEvoy, friendship is strongly impacted by the way the friends deal with "slights"—those annoying little things that happen in any relationship. In her research, she found there was a strong difference between males and females in how they responded to slight, and the implication for the gifted is clear: The sensitivity to slights may make keeping friends more difficult.

Many parents wonder whether they should intervene to assist their children in making friends. Peters explains that, "Kids who are more extroverted have a deep desire to connect with many people, and when they can't it causes

HOW TO FIND FRIENDS

PLACES TO LOOK

- If you have a friend, look at her circle of friends. The same thing that attracted you to the friend you have may be found in those she likes as well.
- Reconnect with people you used to be friends with.
- Join a club focused on an interest. You're guaranteed to meet people with at least one thing in common with you.
- Volunteer. There is nothing that builds camaraderie like serving alongside someone.
- Start with a pen pal. Try www.postcrossing.com.
- Keep it in the family. Dr. Dan Peters recommends cousins. "Cousins have a great potential to be a bridge to developing relationships outside the family. They share the same gene pool, and they have some of the same built-in characteristics, the same environmental exposure."

WAYS TO BEHAVE

- Accept invitations, even if you're not sure you'll like the activity. Part of being a friend is not always having it your way.
- Practice extending invitations ahead of time. It can be nerve-wracking to risk rejection, so practice how you will extend the invitation, as well as how you will respond to every possible reply.
- Practice "small talk." Practice talking about the mundane things that people talk about to make conversation as they are exploring if they want to get to know the person better.
- Decide on a place to go or something to do ahead of time so you have a specific invitation to extend.
- Get help. If children are struggling socially, parents can try to locate social skills groups that work on perspective.

KEEPING FRIENDS

- Understand reciprocity. If you do something you chose one time, let your friend choose the next time, and don't pout the whole time, either.
- Manage jealousy. Recognize that being your friend doesn't mean the person has to abandon all other friends and interests.
- Don't push friends away. Evaluate behaviors you may have or words you may use that alienate others.
- End on a high. Don't wait until you're sick of each other and fighting to end the time together.

a lot of pain. There is more of an immediate need for intervention when there are repeated experiences of pain and frustration." The parent should consider intervening if the situation is causing difficulty for *the child* (not the parent), and the purpose should be to teach the skills of friendship. "If a parent recognizes that his child is experiencing this kind of difficulty, it's time to intervene," he says. "If a child is in pain and does not have the tools to be successful, a parent needs to intervene because to just tell a kid to keep trying without the tools is a recipe for repeated failure."

Interestingly, it doesn't take a village to befriend a child; it really takes only one person. Peters recommends, "To find this friend, gifted kids need help with their presentation, and parents may need to handpick the person in order to make sure there is a good chance for positive connections. Parents also can control the amount of time they spend together." Although it sounds like helicopter parenting with a little social engineering thrown in, it's really not. Parents aren't "hovering," he says. "They are stepping in to help children be successful."

One misconception is that having friends equals being popular, what researchers call "likeability" or "high acceptance." But a study done by Jeffrey Parker and Steven Asher found "not all highly accepted children had friends." It turns out being popular doesn't mean you won't be lonely, and not having high likeability doesn't mean you won't have friends. It looks like the Kool-Aid mom was missing a key idea: A crowded backyard didn't ensure her children true friendship.

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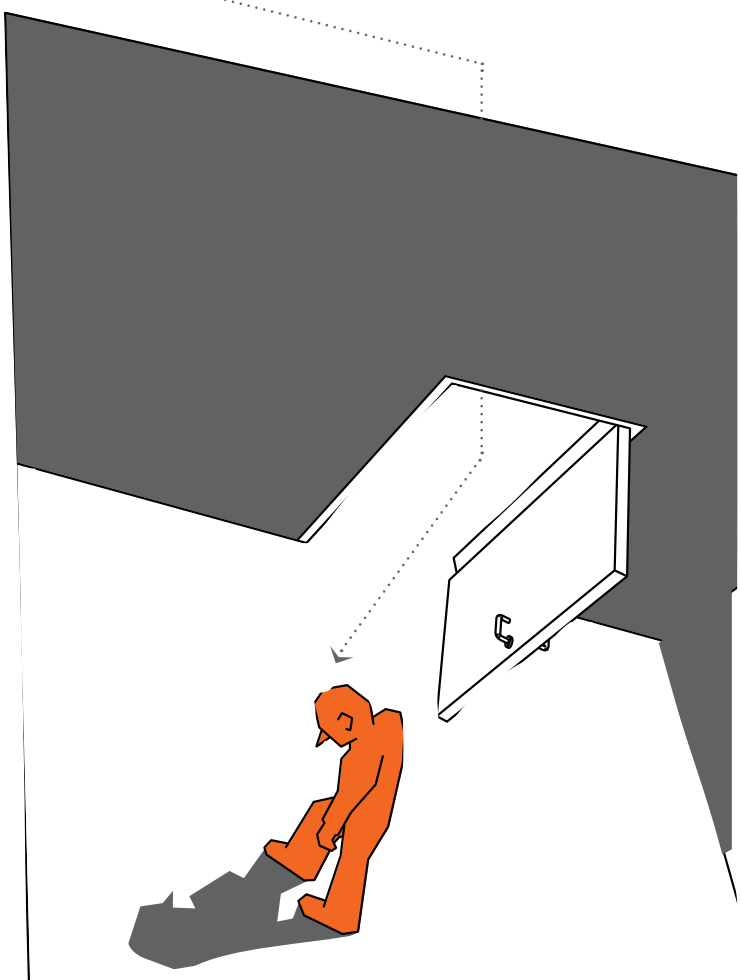

The same traits that can make it difficult for gifted youth to maintain friendships with their peers can make them wonderful friends to those slightly or much older or younger, or to the disabled. In fact, Peters argues that the only people with whom gifted youth don't get along with *better* than their typical learner peers are those who are their same age. This wouldn't be a problem except that our school and social systems stratify children by chronological age, creating sharp, false boundaries against cross-age friendships that exist at no other time in our lives. This can lead gifted youth (or their parents) to believe that the child lacks the ability to get along with people, when in fact the child may have wonderful skills hidden by the system. Parents need to be careful not to give children the message that they have poor social skills, because they may carry with themselves the idea that these skills are lacking, and an erroneous catch-22 social impact pattern may emerge.

As with beauty, friendship's role in a person's life may be in the eye (or heart) of the beholder. "Children who are more introverted do not have a strong need to affiliate," Peters says. "They may have one friend and be fine with that. Parents must be careful to allow that to develop and not assume the child needs help and wants a large group of friends, especially if the parent is by nature an extrovert."

What Peters says about gifted children applies to adults, as well. Gifted adults may have only one or

a few friends and may wonder if there is something wrong with them because of that. The essential question for adults to ask themselves is, "Am I unhappy with my friendships?" If one or two friends are satisfactory, then there is no problem. However, if there is some type of social distress, seeking help can be worthwhile. There are clinicians who specialize in working with gifted adults, and it is worth searching for someone with that expertise if you decide you need support.

In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* Daniel Kahneman coins the acronym WYSIATI—what you see is all there is. We are not aware of what we are not aware of, so we make decisions and develop beliefs based on what is visible to us. As parents, we may see our gifted kids spending a lot of time alone in their room, spending time on the playground reading, or spending time with only their best friend all the time. If we have a belief or expectation that our children need to be "more social" then we may worry about these things. However, our children may be spending a lot of time with the same friend because they really like and value this friend, and not because they are incapable of making other friends. They may be spending time with other friends on the playground, or they may be engaged socially during group work time in the classroom. They may be extremely social at school or at camp and just be worn out and ready to have some downtime when they get home. Spending time alone reading or writing may be very social if they have friends who share their interests and with whom they discuss their reading and writing later. It's important for parents and teachers to be clear about their own preferences for friends and be sure they're not assuming that their children have the same preferences they do.

The day of the introvert is dawning, and this is good news for highly intelligent people. The research appears to be catching up with what the gifted have known for a long time: Being popular doesn't equal being happy, and having only one friend doesn't equal social suicide. Extroverted parents (and spouses) need to recognize that they need not impose their own ideas about what friendship looks like in order to make sure the other person has their friendship needs met. As with Wilbur in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, it takes only one friend who thinks you're "terrific" and "radiant" to save your life.

FRIENDLY READING

Here are a few titles on friendship for kids and adults.

FOR KIDS:

- ***Charlotte's Web*** **by E.B. White**
- ***Wind in the Willows*** **by Kenneth Grahame**
- ***Holes*** **by Louis Sachar**
- ***Bridge to Terabithia*** **by Katherine Paterson**
- ***Frog & Toad*** **series by Arnold Lobel**
- ***The Tiger Rising*** **by Kate DiCamillo**
- ***Wanted: Best Friend*** **by A.M. Monson**
- ***Big Al*** **by Andrew Clements**
- ***Because of Winn-Dixie*** **by Kate DiCamillo**
- ***The Sign of the Beaver*** **by Elizabeth George**
- ***The Cay*** **by Theodore Taylor**

FOR ADULTS:

- ***Divine Secrest of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*** **by Rebecca Wells**
- ***Where the Heart Is*** **by Billie Letts**
- ***The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*** **by Mary Ann Shaffer**
- ***The Story of My Life*** **by Helen Keller**
- ***MWF Seeking BFF: My Yearlong Search for a New Best Friend*** **by Rachel Bertsche**