

Picking the right friends



Cara Loren with her children Sarsha, 3, and Christian, 5 Picture: Rohan Kelly

EXCLUSIVE
BRIANA DOMJEN

PARENTS should “socially engineer” who their children play with to stop them falling in with the wrong crowd, according to leading child psychologists.

They should take on the role of social secretary for their kids, targeting playmates they deem to be a good influence and avoiding friendships with those who are bad news, child psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg said.

By screening who their children spend time with, he believes parents can reduce their exposure to unhealthy, dangerous or risk-taking behaviour.

“I think it is absolutely perfectly OK for parents to act as the social secretary of their child,” Dr Carr-Gregg said. “You have a duty of care as a parent to optimise the developmental trajectory of your child and one way you can do that is to make sure you minimise exposure to negativity.”

But child and educational psychologist Andrew Greenfield said while he agrees parents should be

mindful of who their kids associate with, children need to be responsible for choosing their friends.

“It is natural for parents to want to protect their kids and to want them to interact with well-behaved children,” Dr Greenfield said.

“Parents do try to sway their kids to hang out with particular children and most of the time there are good intentions there.

“But it is also important for kids to be able to interact with other kids they don’t always get along with. “You don’t want them to get used to their parents making every decision for them.”

Cara Loren admits to cutting off bad friendships in a bid to stop her son Christian, 5, from playing with kids she deemed a bad influence.

“He has come home and told me there are kids who, for example, steal his lunch-box, or they say words like poo-poo — it sounds ridiculous but it is not something you want your kid to walk around saying,” Ms Loren, 28, said.

“So I got him to show me who these children were, and my husband and I told him we would

prefer that he not socialise with these children at lunch time and if they did try to play with him to just go play with someone else.

“We don’t know if that is the best thing to do but we want to show him that you can choose who you want to hang around with and that you need to look for people in life that build you up rather than introduce poorer qualities.”

Youth engagement specialist, Giorgia Castello said parents need to understand that kids picking up negative behaviour from other adolescents is all part of their development.

“I can understand parents wanting their kids to spend time with children who have similar values to them, however learning how to build your own relationships is a critical skill of child development. It is how we learn who we are and how relationships work,” she said.

“My advice to parents would be to keep them safe, keep them on track, but don’t rob them of the opportunity to learn about relationships as they choose who they want to be friends with and who they don’t.”

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