

How to Help Your Child Make Friends

An Introduction to Social Skills

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SOCIAL SKILLS

- Skills that allow a person to interact and act appropriately in social contexts. Skills include communication, assertiveness, coping, and making friends.

Examples of Social Skills

- Eye contact
- Greetings
- Reading body language/tone of voice
- Initiating and exchanging conversation
- Demonstrating flexibility
- Listening
- Taking Turns

Effects of Poor Social Skills

Every interaction requires social skills. When a child has social deficits the effects can be far reaching. Beyond school these deficits can affect professional job opportunities by compromising the person's ability to work effectively with bosses, clients, and co-workers. Social deficits continue to affect personal relationships into adulthood including friendships and marriage.

Kids More at Risk for Social Skills Problems:

Children with social anxiety (not just shy)-In some children and teens, this social anxiety may eventually lead to depression, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in social encounters.

Other children may struggle socially because of disruptive, impulsive, or aggressive behaviors.

Some children have difficulty making or keeping friends due to overly exuberant, hyperactive tendencies, such as those with ADD/ADHD. These children may interrupt conversations, have difficulty waiting their turn, or intrude on others' play. They may also become frustrated easily and have a hard time calming themselves down, resulting in tantrums or aggression.

Gifted/highly intelligible children

Children on the Autism Spectrum

What's the Good News?

- Social Skill instruction can help your child learn to act appropriately, interact with others, and develop friendships.
- Practice, Practice, Practice. The only way to learn how to act is to practice these skills with peers.
- Social skill groups provide the opportunity for practice through direct instruction, role play, video modeling, social stories etc.
- * Parents play a big role in teaching their children how to make friends.

Unwritten Rules

- Every social interaction is governed by Unwritten Rules. These rules explain how to interpret social cues and how to act appropriately in social situations. Unwritten rules are commonly referred to as the “hidden curriculum.”
- These Unwritten Rules guide us through every social situation.
- Rules are rarely stated but most people have an intuitive understanding of them. Children with social deficits do not!

Examples of Unwritten Rules

- Greet people you know.
- Standing too close to someone when talking makes the person feel uncomfortable.
- When riding on an elevator, always face the doors.
- Never ask an acquaintance how much money she earns.
- Bathroom humor might be acceptable with your buddies but not your teacher.

Examples continued

- If the person you are talking to keeps looking at his watch, he may not be interested in what you are saying.
- If you receive a gift and it is something you already have, just say thank you.
- Picking your nose is impolite.

Guidelines for Parents

Talk with your child's teacher

- If your child is having social problems at school, it is wise to get an objective opinion from the child's teacher about what they are observing in and out of the classroom.

Provide opportunities for Socializing

- It is not as easy to learn social skills as it was in previous generations. Kids do not play outside unsupervised anymore due to safety concerns. It is important to give children hands-on experience relating to peers.

Open Your Home to Your Child's Friends

- * If your child is young, invite her friends over for a play date. Be sure to have a couple of activities in mind as younger children need direction. Activities might include a box of dress-up clothes or a plan to make cookies, depending on your child's interests.

Parent Guidelines continued

Share your Confidence

- Help your child to see the bigger picture. When your child comes home upset it is important to listen and empathize. However, express confidence that your child, with help, will be able to handle the situation.

Emphasize Kindness

- The “Unwritten Rules” are essentially about kindness and civility. These rules emphasize talking, listening, respect, caring, and helping one another and are fundamental in developing social relationships.

How Can Parents Help Teach Their Children to Make Friends?

- 1) Be an “Emotion Coach”**- Everybody has negative emotions and selfish impulses. But to make friends, we need to keep these responses under control. Children develop better emotional self-control when their parents talk to them about their feelings in a sympathetic, problem-solving way vs. trivializing their feelings (“You’re just being silly”) or punishing them (“Go to your room and cool off”).

2) Practice authoritative (not authoritarian) parenting

Authoritative parenting is when parents set limits and demand maturity from their kids but also relate to their kids with warmth, and attempt to shape behavior through rational discussion and explanation of the reasons for rules.

Authoritarian parents discourage thoughtful discussion and attempt to control behavior through punishment- kids subjected to harsh punishments tend to show more hostility and aggression.

3) Teach kids how to converse in a polite way

Parents who showed high levels of reciprocity (give and take in conversation) in their communication with children had kids who developed more social competence and better negotiation skills over time.

Parents can help practice the art of “trading information.” Tips to pass onto kids include:

- When starting a conversation with someone new, trade information about your “likes” and “dislikes.”
- Don’t be a conversation hog. When engaged in conversation, only answer the question at hand. Then give your partner a chance to talk, or ask a question of your own.
- Don’t be an interviewer. Don’t just ask questions. Offer information about yourself.

For kids struggling to make friends, avoid competitive games and other situations that can provoke conflict or discourage cooperation

Several studies suggest that kids get along better when they are engaged in cooperative activities—i.e., activities in which kids work toward a common goal.

It is recommended that parents steer kids away from competitive games, at least until kids develop better social skills. Got a play date? It is recommended that parents plan ahead and put away toys that discourage social interaction or provoke fighting. That means putting away toy weapons. It also means putting away toys designed for solitary play or which inspire self-absorption, like video games.

4) Foster empathy and sympathetic concern for others.

Research also suggests that empathy is a complex phenomenon involving several component skills:

- A sense of self-awareness and the ability to distinguish one's own feelings from the feelings of others.
- Taking another person's perspective (or, alternatively, "putting oneself in another person's shoes").
- Being able to regulate one's own emotional responses.

Teaching empathy tip #1: Address your child's own needs, and teach him how to "bounce back" from distress

Studies suggest that kids are more likely to develop a strong sense of empathy when their own emotional needs are being met at home.

When kids have secure attachment relationships (so that they know they can count on their caregivers for emotional and physical support) they are more likely to show sympathy and offer help to other kids in distress.

Teaching empathy tip #2: Be a “mind-minded” parent

Treat your child as an individual with a mind of her own, and talk to her about the ways that our feelings influence our behavior.

Observational studies reveal a link between parenting and “theory of mind”—i.e., what kids understand about the goals, desires, and beliefs of other people.

Teaching empathy tip #3: Seize everyday opportunities to model—and induce—sympathetic feelings for other people

By modeling empathic behavior--and pointing out situations that call for empathy—parents can generate sympathetic responses in their kids. For example, if you and your child see someone being victimized (in real life, on TV, or in a book), talk with your child about how that person must feel.

Teaching empathy tip #4: Help kids discover what they have in common with other people

Experiments suggest that kids are more likely to feel empathy for individuals who are familiar and/or similar to them.

So it's probably helpful to make kids aware of the similarities they may share with other people. The more we can humanize the victims of distress or tragedy, the better kids will be able to respond with empathy.

Teaching empathy tip #5: Help kids explore other roles and perspectives

Stories—from books or television—are opportunities for kids to practice perspective-taking skills. What do the characters think, believe, want, or feel? And how do we know it?

When families discuss these questions, kids may learn a lot about the way other people's minds work.

Teaching empathy tip #7: Help kids develop a sense of morality that depends on internal self-control, not on rewards or punishments

Kids are capable of being spontaneously helpful and sympathetic. But experimental studies have shown that kids become less likely to help others if they are given material rewards for doing so.

5) Help kids “read” facial expressions.

You might think that interpreting facial expressions is a “no-brainer,” but experiments suggest that elementary school children can benefit from practice.

Research suggests that kids who have more trouble identifying emotion in faces are more likely to have peer problems and learning difficulties.

Children with stronger face-reading skills may achieve more popularity at school.

Collect photographs of people making different facial expressions. To make your own, get some models and ask them to do a little method acting, recalling a situation when they felt the target emotion and then making the corresponding expression (e.g. happy, sad, fear, anger, disgust, surprise).

6. Coach kids on how to cope with tricky social situations.

- Before making your approach, watch what the other kids are doing. What can you do to fit in?
- Try joining the game by doing something relevant. For example, if kids are playing a restaurant game, see if you can become a new customer.
- Don't be disruptive or critical or try to change the game.
- If the other kids don't want you to join in, don't try to force it. Just back off and find something else to do.

Parents can spend some time before playdates reviewing social cues with their children. Some activities for playdate-prep include:

Talk with your child about what it means to be a good host. What will your child do to make her guests feel comfortable?

Have your child pick out a few games in advance. How will your child know when it's time to move on to the next game?

Ask your child how she will know if her guests are having a good time. Are they smiling? Laughing?

And when you review how it went, focus on the good behaviors you want to reinforce. For example, instead of 'good job,' say, 'you shared very well with your friend.'"

7. Monitor kids' social life

Studies in a variety of cultures suggest that children are better off when their parents monitor their social activities.

This doesn't mean hovering over kids or getting in the middle of every peer interaction, but it does mean supervising where kids play and helping kids choose their friends. Primary school kids who named more aggressive peers as their friends were more likely to develop behavioral problems over time and kids with behavior problems are more likely to get rejected by their peers.

8. When possible, let kids try to work things out on their own

Young toddlers need to be closely supervised. But as kids get older, parents need to back off. Parents who hover over their kids are robbing them of the chance to develop their own social skills.

9. Watch out for bullying

These victims may not be in a position to “work” anything “out,” and they may suffer long-term consequences. Kids who get bullied are more likely to suffer from clinical anxiety, depression, and feelings of social isolation. They are more likely to avoid school, and the chronic stress makes them physically ill. As adults, they are 3-5 times more likely to suffer from anxiety, panic disorder, and agoraphobia.

7-Step Model for teaching Social Skills

1. **Set Goal**- Choose and clearly define a manageable social skills goal.
 2. **Teach**- Explain what behavior looks like and why behavior is important.
 3. **Model**- Demonstrate the desired social behavior.
 4. **Practice**- Role-play the desired behavior.
 5. **Prompt**- Prompt for a natural display of desired behavior.
 6. **Reinforce**- Reinforce group members after they demonstrate desired behavior.
 7. **Generalize**- Encourage practice of the behavior outside the group
- Role Play

Videos:

Eye Contact: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEKslkuE7tw#action=share>

Friendship Algorithm: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0xgjUhEG3U>

Sheldon's View on Social Skills: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ca7lx0NJYc>

Close Talker:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGVSlkEi3mM&index=4&list=PLlwZnliELIU24FmR5ydQNRz96MRtn8eEF>