



Social Skills for Kids with ADD (ADHD)

"Nobody wants to play with me."

"I never get invited to birthday parties."

"The kids were teasing me today at school."

"I don't fit in."

Sound familiar? We've all heard children say these things from time to time. Comments like these usually reflect normal growing pains. In some cases, however, children say these things on a regular basis. If that's true for your child, he may be communicating a need for help.

I have spent the last ten years as a professional counselor working with children and their parents in the area of helping children make and keep friends. So many of the children I was seeing alone in counseling had the same problem - feeling that they didn't fit in with their friends and schoolmates. I recall one eight-year-old boy saying, "I feel like I live on my OWN planet, and everyone else lives on THIS one."

Feeling alone and disconnected from peers is a distressing thing for a child to experience. And it's not only the children that suffer. Many parents also feel frustrated and hopeless at not knowing how to help their children make the friends they so strongly desire.

That's why I created Stepping Stones, a social skills group training program for children aged 7 to 12 and their parents. I have found that teaching children basic social skills not only enables them to make and keep friends more easily, it gives the children a feeling of acceptance and a sense that they're not alone in their troubles. It also helps significantly improve their self-esteem.

Having a high "Social I.Q." is extremely important for children. Good social skills enable children to get along well with others. Unfortunately, children rarely have opportunities to learn good social skills. Cooperation, empathy, conflict resolution, managing emotions, and listening skills are not commonly taught in our schools. Yet somehow society assumes that children can learn how to get along with others simply by observing others. But that doesn't always happen. For many children, complex mathematics is easier than carrying on a conversation with a peer. Learning a foreign language is a snap compared to expressing anger with words rather than actions. Solving advanced computer games is a blast while listening and responding appropriately to a friend's problem is torture. The good news is that social skills CAN be taught to children, the same way you can teach a child to read or spell. Parents can learn easy training techniques to work on with their child, and the positive results are often immediate and dramatic.

A new book entitled "Raising Your Child's Social I.Q.: Stepping Stones to People Skills for Kids," offers you tips and techniques for helping your child develop the social skills necessary to make and maintain friendships. Each chapter focuses on a specific social skill. In addition to tips on skill building, there are easy practice exercises you can do with your child to make sure he can transfer this newfound knowledge into actual social situations.

Does my child need help?

The first step in raising your child's Social I.Q. is determining whether your child exhibits specific behaviors that could be causing problems with his peers. Following are some simple questions you can ask yourself to ascertain if your child might need a little help in developing social skills:

- Does your child have trouble approaching a new group of children?
- Does your child wait for an appropriate break in the conversation before saying something?
- Does your child look others directly in the eye when speaking?
- Does your child "go with the flow" of the group - try to do what others are doing, and at the speed they're doing it?

- Does your child stand too close or too far away from other children?
- Is your child able to manage his or her emotions appropriately - without losing his cool often?

Children who have difficulty with social skills can exhibit a wide variety of behaviors. For example, your child might be like Jennifer, who doesn't have a shy bone in her body. She thinks nothing of barreling into a group of children playing kickball, grabbing the ball away, and saying, "C'mon, let's play Spud." Being too pushy or trying to change the group's activities too quickly can cause other children to react negatively to your child. At the other extreme, you may have a child like Alex, who always remains on the sidelines, watching and waiting for someone to ask him to join in. When he is asked, Alex is unsure of what role to take in the game. Alex would like to play with others, but he doesn't know how to do so. He is more comfortable playing by himself than rising to the challenge of the social arena.

DOs and DON'Ts of Social Skills

Regardless of your child's personality type, your goal is to help your child understand what constitutes good social skills. Following is a list of DOs and DON'Ts for how to join in with a group of children and make a good first impression:

DO:

- Watch others - check out what the group is doing first and determine if it's a group that you'd like to join.
- Watch yourself - make sure you appear friendly and approachable, especially in your tone of voice and your posture.
- Think of what to say ahead of time.
- Think of when to say it - wait for a break in the conversation or the game before speaking.
- Look at others straight in the eye when speaking to them.
- Go with the flow of the group.
- Find common interests and talk about them.
- Ask a question that shows interest - this makes the other child feel very special.

DON'T:

- Tease others.
- Brag about yourself.
- Criticize others.
- Take charge and try to control the behavior of other children.
- Stand too close or too far away from other children.
- Disrupt the game.

Sit down with your child and review the DOs and DON'Ts lists. Ask your child if he can come up with other DOs and DON'Ts to add to the list. Focus on the DOs of good social skills, praising your child when he exhibits an appropriate behavior.

One way to reinforce good behavior is to role-play at home. Reverse roles often so that your child gets the chance to play not only himself, but also the role of the other person. This gives your child the opportunity to see things from another person's perspective - an essential element in a child's understanding of his behavior and its impact on others.

How Parents Can Help

Often children are unable to manage the details of running a social life on their own. With a little bit of advance planning, you can help make your child's social life more like a playground than a battlefield. The following tips will help:

- Work on **ONLY** one social skill at a time - wait until one goal is mastered before you move on to the next goal.
- Reward your child when he makes progress. Look **HARD** to find any small, yet noticeable, signs of improvement.
- Carefully arrange a supervised, time-limited, date for your child to spend with other children to practice newly learned social skills.
- Review social goals with your child **PRIOR** to social outings. For instance, "Tell me, Andrew, what are you going to do when you first get to the birthday party?" "Well, Dad, I'm going to walk up to the birthday boy and wish him a Happy Birthday. Then I'm going to walk over to where the other kids are playing and ask them if I can join them." "That's right, Andrew, you've got it!"
- Help your child nurture **ONE** or **TWO** friendships through more regular contact.
- Involve your child's teachers and guidance counselors in helping to reinforce social goals. For example, teachers can use check-off sheets to give you daily feedback on progress, as well as to encourage accountability and consistency in your child.
- Invite your child's friend to a **HIGHLY** attractive activity - for instance, the movies or an amusement park. This type of invitation is more likely to be accepted rather than rejected.
- Videotape or audiotape your child at home. Reviewing these tapes with your child allows children to see themselves as others see them.
- Encourage sibling cooperation. Sibling relationships often provide a "safer" arena in which to practice new social skills.
- Continually stress the importance of keeping promises and commitments to others.
- With gentle reminders, help your child return phone calls to friends.

With concerted effort and diligent practice, children CAN learn social skills and raise their Social I.Q. When children have good social skills, they get along better with their peers, develop positive self-esteem, and are more likely to experience both social and professional success as adults.

Resources for parents:

More information about how you can help your child develop better social skills can be found in [Raise Your Child's Social I.Q.: Stepping Stones to People Skills for Kids](#) by Cathi Cohen.

For your child to learn more about friendship, try [Phoebe's Best Best Friend](#) by Barbara Roberts.