

# I'm Fine, Thank You Very Much!

**“M**Y DAUGHTER IS SO SASSY! I try to help her make friends, but she will not take my advice.”

Many parents of tweens and teens with ADHD struggle as they watch their child ignore overtures of friendship, cling to friends who don't treat them well, or ignore advice and make mistakes that ultimately leave them in pain... or worse.

You know something isn't right, but it's painful to acknowledge. Your child is lonely. He is not in sync with other kids, is rarely included, makes off-putting comments or jokes, chooses “friends” who get him into trouble, and is just “too much.” When you muster the courage to discuss it, he screams, “I'm okay! I don't want to talk about it!”

No, everything isn't “okay.” Social isolation is excruciating. You know that despite his claims that he has plenty of friends, he doesn't have the kind of positive friendships we want for our kids.

Especially now, during this pandemic, children aren't having nearly as many spontaneous social interactions. This loss of social engagement has impacted their ability to learn and practice social skills naturally. Asking your daughter to “reach out” may seem like a simple suggestion, but she may resist due to all the steps and time required to coordinate the invitation. Or, she may have a thin social network and fears rejection.

Usually those with the greatest needs—children and teens with ADHD—lack the social skills, maturity, executive functioning skills, and self-awareness to make friends, and therefore have fewer opportunities to socialize. This social isolation produces a more negative impact than it does for their neurotypical peers.

The good news is that social skills, just like other skills, can be developed. Here are five ways to help your child manage social relationships:

**1. Lead, don't direct.** Help your child evaluate what makes an attractive friend and which steps are required to make and keep friends. By recognizing the steps neces-



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sary to connect, you examine friendships in general, rather than singling out one friend. After all, even if that one friend is removed from the equation, the problem still remains. Ask her, “*What do you think are the different stages of friendship?*” “*Who shares your interests?*” This form of reflection allows her to recognize her involvement in a friendship, rather than feel pressured by you and ultimately reject your good advice.

**2. Explore the value of friendships.** Unless the friendship is a dangerous one, take a conversational approach by asking him about his friends without judgment or harsh restrictions. Ask openended questions, such as “*What do you enjoy doing with your friend?*” or “*What do you like about him or her?*” or “*What does he do to show you that he cares about you as a friend?*” We want children to develop lifelong positive beliefs about how they should be treated and to choose positive friends who make positive choices.

**3. Empathize.** As parents, it is difficult not to react, or even overreact, with blame, punishment, advice, and “*I told you so.*” Information is power, so regardless of what your child says—she thinks all it takes is time to make friends, she avoids lunch, or she wants to be friends with that one kid you were hoping she would disdain—take a moment to breathe and listen. The larger goal is to gain your child’s trust, which is more important than any minor rule infraction. Help your child know that she can always feel comfortable coming to you, no matter what social problems she’s encountering, now or in the future.

**4. Don’t impose your goals.** Ask and listen, don’t apply pressure or assume you know the reasons for your child’s behavior. Getting your child to feel comfortable talking to you requires waiting, listening, and showing confidence that they have the capacity to learn and grow. If you try to push your agenda, you will likely get nowhere. By truly hearing your child’s perspective, you allow her to hold a mirror up to her views about friendship and evaluate them. This takes time, but it will have better results.

**5. Reflect, clarify and be curious.** Paraphrasing what your child says and then repeating it back to him shows empathy and helps clarify your child’s concerns. For example, he might declare, “*People should invite me to play—I shouldn’t have to approach them.*” Reflect back: “*What I hear you saying is that you won’t approach anyone; they must come to you.*” By summarizing and repeating his statements, you allow your child to clarify, share more information, and to give his interpretation of the statement. This curiosity invites him to be comfortable with opening up to you.

GOOD SOCIAL SKILLS are essential for effective communication, but they don’t come easily. First help your child identify the reasons why he or she wants to improve, and then practice and practice. 🗣️

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