



TEN WAYS You Can Help Your Child Succeed Socially When They Return to School

by Jeffrey Kranzler, PhD, LCSW-C

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has been hard on everyone other than people who enjoy misery. At this point, though, even *they* may be getting fed up. One of the hardest hit groups are kids who have ADHD and also struggle with social interaction.

In addition to the difficulty in reading faces that wearing masks causes, online interaction can be especially difficult as well. The lack of regular in-person contact can lead to the atrophying of previously attained social progress. As parents, the strain in all aspects of life that the pandemic has caused is overwhelming, and helping our kids with this can feel like just one more brick breaking the camel's back. (Wouldn't it be wonderful if it felt like it was straws doing that work?)

The good news is that there are some simple, concrete steps you can take to help your child function better socially during this difficult time.

1. Give yourself a break.

Even though some kids do better with online interactions that allow them to be in the safe space of their house, most will struggle. If you pressure yourself to improve your child's social functioning during this time, you are very likely going to be frustrated and disappointed. Even some steps backwards in your child's social functioning may happen and that's okay. You are doing your job even if

you can help your child not take too many steps backward. Important to remember also is that some things are beyond your control. You can do everything right, and backsliding still may happen because of the enormous disruption that this pandemic is causing.

2. Normalize your child's feelings.

Kids have a tendency to believe that they are unique, or among a select few, in dealing with their struggles. Assure your child that this is something with which many kids AND adults are struggling.

3. Schedule Zoom calls with people with whom your child is comfortable.

Interacting with peers can be stressful, and regular interaction with anyone at all is important for maintaining social skills. Even regular contact with Grampa and Grandma helps. Peers who are relatives and may feel less threatening for a socially anxious youth provide a great way to practice social interaction.

4. Plan a safe, socially distant interaction.

Simply getting together to talk simply won't work, especially if kids struggle socially. Finding others with similar interests as your child and creating an opportunity to do a shared activity while adhering to CDC guidelines for safety is something that can help. You are not alone in worrying about your child's social health and reaching out to likeminded parents may produce collaboration and enthusiasm.



5. Make a plan.

Help your child identify which peers at school are the easiest for your them to talk to and make a plan for your child to approach one of them. Kids can be overwhelmed by the thought of needing to interact with many people and anxiety can lessen when they realize that getting into the groove socially can occur in a smaller and easier way.

6. Come up with a list of conversation starters.

Starting conversations can feel daunting, especially when kids have not had extensive opportunities for in-person social interactions for months. Creating a small set of simple conversation starters that your child can remember may build their confidence in initiating social interactions.

7. Role play social situations.

Rehearsing a successful response to an anxiety provoking situation is especially powerful in reducing worry. Have your child role play being a specific friend and act out the role of your child, starting and keeping the conversation going. After they get comfortable, switch roles and play their friend while they play themselves and take the initiative to start and continue the conversation.

8. Socially interacting through video game play isn't ideal but can have value.

There are many platforms that allow kids to communicate while they play video games. This is never the ideal way to interact, but when options are limited it does have some value. That being said, parents need to be vigilant and intervene if they become aware of elements of bullying, violent talk, and general nastiness that can be present in these interactions.

9. Keep social skills in mind during shared media time.

Watching TV together can provide opportunities to discuss social situations. In the course of a half-hour episode, a parent could pause the show once or twice to discuss an element of the social interaction occurring between characters.

10. Don't make things worse by pushing.

Sometimes, pushing our kids to practice or talk about social struggles can backfire and actually make them more anxious. Giving your child books that have characters who struggle with social situations and overcome them, and then discussing them, can really help.

It's never easy helping our kids navigate social difficulties, but COVID-19 takes the challenge to the next level. We will be successful in helping our kids as long as we remember that: We don't have to be perfect, our kids don't have to be amazing at social skills, we can do small things to help them, and we need to be careful about increasing their anxiety by harping too much on the struggles or pushing them to engage in skill building and socializing when they aren't ready. Parents of kids with ADHD have always been the parents best able to deal with the unexpected and triumph over adversity. Challenges presented by COVID-19 will only make this even more clear. **A**

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