



# NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## **Friendship Challenges of Children With ADHD**

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For children, the most difficult part of having Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is often the social challenges it causes.

### **Rejected and friendless**

According to Betsy Hoza and her colleagues, more than half of children with ADHD are widely disliked by their peers. This means that when researchers ask kids to name, confidentially, the classmates they like most and the ones they like least, kids with ADHD get few “like” votes and lots of “dislike” votes.

Fifty-six percent of children with ADHD have no reciprocated friendships, which is almost twice the number of typical children without friends (Hoza et al., 2005). Even when kids with ADHD do have friends, these friendships tend to be of lower quality and less stable than those of typical children. A longitudinal study (Normand et al., 2013) found that over a six-month period, one out of four children with ADHD lost their friend, while only about one out of ten typical children had their friendship end.

Children with ADHD have substantially worse social skills than other children, according to ratings by parents, teachers, and observers. Experimental studies show that children with either the hyperactive or the inattentive form of ADHD can experience rejection within hours of meeting unfamiliar peers (Hodgens, Cole, & Boldizar, 2000).

### **Social skills deficits in children with ADHD**

So, what is it that children with ADHD do that’s so off-putting to their peers? The nonstop activity, impulsive actions, and more frequent aggressiveness of children with the hyperactive or combined types of ADHD are obvious sources of annoyance to peers. They are more likely than other children to argue and start fights. But children with the inattentive form of ADHD can also have social problems. They may appear withdrawn or not interested in others. They may also make social blunders due to a lack of awareness of others’ feelings or difficulty managing their own emotions.

Normand and his colleagues (Normand et al., 2013) observed the behavior of seven 13-year-old children with ADHD and comparison children while playing competitive and cooperative games with a friend of their choosing. Compared to other children, during the competitive game, the children with ADHD were more likely to break rules and act bossy. During the cooperative game, they made more self-serving suggestions.

### **Focusing on the bright side**

And yet, kids with ADHD have an energy and zest that can be very appealing. They are often very creative and passionate about their interests. Their rapid leaps from topic to topic can be entertaining or even thought provoking. To help these children navigate the social world, we need to address the specific barriers that

prevent them from connecting with their peers.

## **Parent friendship coaching**

Helping children with ADHD learn to get along better with their peers is very difficult. Research shows that medication and reward systems can cut down on their inappropriate behavior, but these changes don't necessarily lead to greater peer acceptance or making friends.

Teaching these children social skills in isolation also hasn't proven helpful. Even when children can perform a certain skill perfectly in a clinic or home setting, it doesn't mean they'll remember to use that skill in a relevant situation at school or with a friend.

Intriguing research by Amori Mikami and colleagues suggests that "parental friendship coaching" may be an important key to helping children with ADHD address their social challenges. In a 2010 pilot study, these investigators trained parents of children with ADHD to coach their kids on how to get along by teaching social skills, organizing play dates, and cultivating a positive parent-child relationship. This led to improvements in children's social skills and friendships, as well as greater teacher-rated peer acceptance.

Of course, friendship coaching can be challenging for parents who also struggle with social difficulties. Focusing on specific relevant skills and planning interventions ahead of time can help parents feel more prepared for the job.

## **Addressing barriers to friendship**

Effective help for children with ADHD who have social problems needs to address important barriers that stand in their way:

### **1) Positive Illusory Bias**

Children with ADHD are often blind to their social problems. They overestimate their level of social skills and how well-liked they are, and they claim to be friends with kids who don't consider them friends. Research suggests that this bias is defensive.

#### **-- Possible solution: Gentle guidance and support**

Feedback is essential for learning, but telling a child with ADHD, "You're being a jerk!" is neither helpful nor kind. If we want our kids to hear our recommendations, we first need to show that we understand their concerns and believe that their intentions are good, even when they mess up.

Getting criticized in front of others is likely to make kids feel ashamed. Encourage parents to pull their child aside for a private conversation, if they need correction. Parents need to acknowledge their child's feelings before offering any observations about difficulties. For instance, they could say, "It's frustrating when the game isn't going your way..." or "You don't like it when she does that..." Then, with the tone of someone sharing information with an ally, they can explain the impact of the child's behavior on others. "She's starting to get annoyed..." "He might think you don't care..."

### **2) Negative reputations**

Reputations are slow to change. When children have a history of social misbehavior, their peers are likely to expect continued misbehavior. They may focus on mistakes, overlook positive changes, and refuse to give a second chance.

#### **-- Possible solution: Focus on individual friendships**

It's easier to win over an individual child than a whole group. One-on-one play dates are an important way that children build and deepen friendships. Parents can help their child choose other kids to invite over who might be open to friendship. Kids make friends by doing things together. Suggest to parents that they work with their child to plan a fun activity to do with a friend and keep the play date short—between one and two hours—so it ends on a high note.

### 3) Problems applying what they know

Even when children with ADHD understand what they ought to do, they may not remember to do it in the heat of the moment or in a different context.

#### -- Possible Solution: Prompting and redirection

Talking with children *before* they enter a challenging situation brings important information to the front of their mind. Kids with ADHD are masters at appearing to listen when they're not. So rather than lecturing, parents can ask questions such as "What do you need to remember to do?" or "What will you do if that happens?" to help children think through strategies to avoid or handle potential rough spots.

During a play date, parents should stay within earshot of their child. If they hear sounds of arguing or boredom, that's their cue to step in casually to head off growing tension. A timely "Who wants a snack?" can give children a chance to regroup and try again.

### Balancing coaching with acceptance

Social challenges can be crushing for kids with ADHD. For children who are struggling to get along with peers, parent coaching about friendship skills can be very useful. But it's also important for parents just to enjoy their child's company. When peer relationships are difficult, warm acceptance from parents can be very comforting to kids.

*Eileen Kennedy-Moore, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, author, and mom of four, based in Princeton, NJ. Her newest book is Growing Friendships: A Kids' Guide to Making and Keeping Friends (for ages 6-12). She has also written two books for parents, Smart Parenting for Smart Kids and The Unwritten Rules of Friendship, plus an audio-video series from The Great Courses®, Raising Emotionally and Socially Healthy Kids. Her book for mental health professionals is Expressing Emotion: Myths, Realities, and Therapeutic Strategies. A trusted expert on parenting and child development, Dr. Kennedy-Moore serves on the advisory board for Parents magazine and blogs for Psychology Today, PBS Parents, and US News & World Report. She is also the creator of a funny and educational website for kids, www.DrFriendtastic.com. Her main website is www.EileenKennedyMoore.com.*

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