

Social skills in children with AD/HD

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One of the many challenges faced by children with AD/HD is in the social realm – children with AD/HD often have social skill deficits that contribute to difficulties in relationships with peers and adults. Inattention and impulsivity interfere with a child's ability to accurately identify, imitate, and model appropriate social behavior.

One of the consequences of social skills deficits is low self-esteem. A child's self-esteem depends, in part, to the success experienced in school and in relationships with parents and peers, so it's easy to imagine how self-esteem in children with AD/HD may suffer. Children with AD/HD who are criticized by teachers and/or parents for their inappropriate behaviors may come to perceive themselves in a negative way. They may begin to believe that they are incapable of ever succeeding in relationships.

Effective communication requires the coordination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Making eye contact, maintaining appropriate eye contact, regulating the volume of one's voice, using gestures appropriately, and maintaining appropriate physical distance from others are just some of the nonverbal behaviors inherent in good communication. The nature of the disorder (impulsivity, inattention, and hyperactivity), make it difficult for children to consistently display and maintain these nonverbal behaviors. Their inattention prevents them from attending long enough to notice and interpret facial expressions and pragmatics of language.

A child with AD/HD may lack the awareness of appropriate physical boundaries, invading someone's space, eliciting irritated facial expressions from other children. Because children with AD/HD often miss social cues, they may not even notice the disparaging looks given to them by their peers, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of pursuit and rejection.

Children with AD/HD display different types of social skill deficits depending upon their type of AD/HD. For example, a child who is primarily impulsive may speak out of turn in class, or in a group of peers, causing other children to avoid contact with him or her. A child who is "hyperverbal" may irritate his teachers, parents, and peers due to their inability to develop appropriate give and take in conversation. Immature behavior, such as acting silly or childish can also cause peers to reject a child with AD/HD. Peers may feel more mature than the AD/HD child, and may not want to socialize with a child who seems immature.

A child who is primarily inattentive may be shy and remain on the edges of the social circle, never knowing quite how to become part of the group's verbal interactions. At other times, an inattentive child may appear disinterested in

developing relationships with other children because she is hyper-focused on an activity and has little awareness of the children around her. If a child's head is buried in a book or video game and doesn't look up when his peer says, "hello", he can be labeled as "rude", "weird", or "anti-social". Hyperfocusing on areas of interest can occur at all the wrong times – when children want to play, talk, or just be near one another.

Ways that parents can help children develop better social skills:

- 1) Structure social interactions for your children. For younger children, parents can arrange play dates with another child. Older children may need assistance with the multitude of steps required to develop relationships. For example, a parent may first help her child identify a list of possible friends. Next, ask your child to practice making a telephone call to a friend. Role-playing telephone conversations with a friend can be helpful in decreasing your child's anxiety. Rehearsing what to say, and perhaps even having a script available to your child may also decrease anxiety and increase the possibility of success.
- 2) Encourage your child to watch other children and notice how they behave. If you're on the playground with your son, for example, identify another child and watch him interact with his peers. Ask your son to tell you what he sees – what is the boy doing? Is it appropriate? If inappropriate, what could he do differently?
- 3) Teach the behavior you want to see. If you want your daughter to stop interrupting your conversations, be aware of your own tendency to interrupt. Parents of children with AD/HD often times struggle with the same issues of their child. Your child will watch what you do, how you communicate, and invariably model your behavior. Therefore, it's important to be aware of your own social skills or deficits, and seek out help if necessary.
- 4) Use books or movies to identify facial expressions and feelings. For example, while reading to your younger child, you could stop reading, and ask your child questions about the emotions of the children in the story? How do they feel? How do you know they feel that way? What is it about their face that tells you they feel?" For teenagers you could ask questions about how actors were feeling in a movie? Ask them to identify different types of scenes. For example, "Which scene was the most frightening to you and why?" Follow-up with questions such as, "What would you do in that situation?" The important point is that your child begins to identify the feelings of others, and learns how to interact in various situations.
- 5) Focus a social interaction through selecting a topic or activity that your child knows in advance. Children with AD/HD do much better if they have knowledge of a topic, prior to entering a group conversation. Choose a topic that you know is of interest to your child, then help your child to become more aware of social give and take while discussing your child's interest.

- 6) Look for structured social activities that your child can participate in. Often, children with ADHD function better in a structured setting where there is structure provided by an activity and by the adults in attendance.
- 7) Help your child engage in activities with children who share their interests. Shared interests can be the glue that holds a relationship together while social skills are being developed.
- 8) Be realistic about your child's social abilities and try to avoid placing your child in a social setting that is likely to trigger and intensify social problems. For example, if your child is shy, he will be uncomfortable in an unstructured group setting where each child must initiate interaction in order to become part of the group. If your child tends to become impulsive and over-excited in highly stimulating environments, such social occasions should be avoided.
- 9) As you work to help your child develop better social skills, think about the particular children and the particular social situations in which your child will be most likely to succeed. Success builds upon previous success – so create situations in which your child is likely to succeed. Then praise her success and look for another occasion in which she can succeed. Save the most difficult social situations for later, after your child has developed new social skills and new confidence.
- 10) Practice, practice, practice. With any skill, practice is a prerequisite to success. Your child may not necessarily generalize what he or she has learned to another setting, so be sure to allow him or her opportunities to practice a skill in multiple settings.