

Why ADHD Children Have a Hard Time Making Friends

Learn how to guide your child through sticky social situations and make lasting friendships.

by Gay Edelman

Note: this article uses the term ADD for both ADD and ADHD.

Is anything sadder -- or more frightening to parents -- than a child with attention deficit disorder (ADD, ADHD) who has trouble making friends?

Take eight-year-old Josh, who stands alone at the edge of the playground, watching the other kids play. He'd like to join them but has no idea how.



Eleven-year-old Tina sits on the porch steps in tears. From the next block, she can hear the sounds of a birthday party to which she wasn't invited — even though she thought the birthday girl was her good friend.

Fourteen-year-old Tom spends all his free time alone, on his computer. No one calls him, and he calls no one.

“Parents fall apart crying about their child’s situation,” says Richard Lavoie, a special-education consultant in Barnstable, Massachusetts, and the author of *It’s So Much Work to Be Your Friend*. “And it’s never about academics. It’s always about the pain of social isolation their child is facing.”

It’s hard to overstate the importance of friendships. Mary Fowler, the Fair Haven, New Jersey-based author of *Maybe You Know My Teen* and the mother of an son with ADD, says that having close childhood friends can make “the difference between things going well, or becoming a hard-to-manage teen, dropping out, abusing substances, and being in trouble with the law.” Experts say that having positive social relations in childhood is a better predictor of adult happiness than is I.Q. or academic achievement. “Friendships are not a luxury,” says Lavoie. “They’re a necessity.”

Missing cues, lacking skills

All parents worry about their children’s friendships. But for parents of ADD children, the concerns are especially pressing. Making and keeping friends requires *hundreds* of skills—talking, listening, sharing, being empathetic, and so on. These skills do not come naturally to children with ADD.

“They miss social cues that other kids learn by osmosis,” says Carol Brady, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in private practice in Houston. “Having ADD is like trying to watch six TV’s at once. While you’re deciding which one to pay attention to, some subtle information passes you by.”

Kids with ADD have friendship trouble for all sorts of reasons. Some simply aren't good listeners. Others drive away potential friends by their impulsivity—blurting out unkind comments, for example. A mom in Hawaii says her “mother hen” daughter alienates other children by trying to micromanage their lives. In some cases it's unclear what the precise problem is. “I just think some kids have an air around them that other kids pick up on as a target,” says one mother, worn out from years of worrying about her child's awkwardness and social isolation.

Big kids have big problems

For young children, a lack of social skills may not be a serious problem. If a six-year-old says or does something untoward, for example, other children may ask why but are unlikely to take offense. What's more, young kids typically have a hands-on “social director”—a parent or caregiver who solicits not only play dates but also stays on hand to make sure they go smoothly.

But as children get older, social interactions become more complicated—and children with AD/HD fall behind. This was certainly true for Jay Edmond, a 15-year-old from Burlington, North Carolina. Jay's mother, Jodi, says that his odd comments and disruptive behavior became too much for his peers. “Kids he had been friends with started steering clear,” she says. “By middle school, he was a marked kid. The more the kids pushed him away, the more outrageous his behavior got.”

What about teenagers? “By high school, parents of all kids need to be backing off and letting them manage their own relationships,” says Rick Zakreski, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Shrewsbury, New Jersey. “In high school, there usually are so many possible activities that they're likely to find a niche. Keep an open mind. Don't judge his group by appearances. Goth kids may look scary, but they may actually be less into drugs than the more clean-cut kids.”

But don't back off too far: A recent study of nearly 12,000 seventh- through twelfth- graders discovered that teens who have warm relationships with their parents—where they share activities, talk often, and are affectionate with each other—also tend to have good friendships.

Parental involvement is key

Parental involvement is essential if kids with ADD are to make and keep friends. That can mean something as simple as helping your child initiate conversations and “supervising from the window,” as one parent puts it. It can mean making the effort to drive your child to another town to visit a potential friend. It can mean attending a parents' workshop given in conjunction with your child's friendship class, or talking to your child's therapist.

“Some of the hardest work I do is with the parents of children with ADD,” says Avie Lumpkin, an AD/HD coach in Alameda, California. “They are good parents, and they have worked hard, but they may be trying all the traditional parenting things, which don't work with these children.” Kids with ADD often have little sense of how they're perceived by their peers, and they commit social gaffes without realizing they've done so. Another kid will give them a shove, and they'll fail to realize that calling the kid a “jerk” a moment ago had anything to do it. Or they'll have no idea that a game broke up because they kept ignoring the rules.

To help these children, Lavoie urges parents to conduct what he calls “social autopsies.” These are meetings in which the parents and child discuss what went wrong, why it happened, and what

the child could (not should) do differently next time. Be as sensitive and as tactful with your child as you would be with a close adult friend; too much negative feedback can damage your child's self-esteem. Of course, if your child has had a successful interaction, be sure to congratulate him.

According to Michael Thompson, author of *Best Friends, Worst Enemies*, one of the most effective things parents can do is to set a good example. In addition to socializing frequently with friends and relatives, that means making an effort to forge friendships with the parents of your child's peers. Thompson also recommends enlisting the support of your child's teachers, and staying connected to the community through clubs, religious communities, and so on.

Medication's role

If impulsive behavior—dominating play, interrupting, jumping from one thing to the next—keeps other kids away, medication is probably necessary. In fact, your child may need to be “covered” by meds even after the school day ends. “Kids who are having trouble with social skills may need meds all day, every day,” says Carole Watkins, M.D., a Baltimore psychiatrist.

Puberty may occasion a new look at medication or dose. Lumpkin says, “When hormones start changing, what's worked up until that point will probably need to be changed.”

Groups and teams

Stephanie Bixler's son, Matthew, now nine, struggled with friendships for years. “He pushed away every kid who tried to be his friend,” says Bixler, a resident of Lemoore, California. “His play was so chaotic that others had a hard time wanting to be around him. He was also greedy with his toys.”

She credits team sports with much of Matthew's recent success. “He started to realize everything wasn't about him,” she says. “As the team concept sank in, it overflowed into his play. After two seasons of baseball and two seasons of football, we are now seeing him develop healthy friendships.”

But if your child expresses an interest in Little League or another structured athletic organization, proceed with caution. Call the coach before the first practice, and discuss whether your child would fit in. If you decide to take the plunge, accompany your child to meet the coach or another child who will be on the team *before* the first get-together. Remember, transitions are hard for kids with ADD.

For many kids with ADD, getting involved with a “friendship group” may be a better option.

Patience and perspective

Most socially isolated children find their way—eventually. They get a better handle on their behavior, along with a broader perspective on the dynamics of friendship. And once kids hit adolescence, they tend to act on the powerful urge to “fit in.” As Zakreski puts it, “By high school, the vast majority of kids with ADD do end up fitting in somewhere.” Goth kids may look scary, but they may actually be less into drugs than the more clean-cut kids.

The same experts who urge parental involvement (and who urge counseling for kids who seem stuck in the “lone wolf” role) say it's important that parents not worry *too* much about a socially isolated child.

A child doesn't need to be in the "in" group or get invited to lots of parties. In fact, studies show that having even a single close friend is all it takes to develop social self-confidence. This friend doesn't even have to be a peer. "It can be a neighbor, a teacher, a grandparent," says Lumpkin. "Once that connection is made, it can become the vehicle for kids to listen and make some changes in their lives."

Teasing and playful banter are an inevitable part of childhood, but kids with ADD often don't know how to respond. Parents should encourage their children to stand up to teasing without overreacting, which might escalate the problem.