

Parenting Together

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Making Friends

Children today are living their lives during a very unique time. Currently, they are more isolated than ever before, but when life returns to "normal" they will be busier than ever with school, sports, and other classes & activities. Some will have no problem jumping right back into social situations, while others may struggle a bit.

What if you notice that your child isn't a social butterfly? What if you see they seem to be spending time alone even when with other children in group settings? As a parent, there are some ways you can help. Read on for tips to help you offer your child a boost of confidence in approaching social situations.



Depending on what behavior you see, you can then decide where to focus your attention, what skills need building and how you can contribute.

"Trust your instincts, because you know your kid best."

-Dr. Eastman

1. Observe

Pediatric behavioral health specialist Kristen Eastman, PsyD recommends starting with the "fly on the wall" approach. Attend a few activities at school (or sports after school) and pay close attention to how your child interacts with others. Do they behave differently than their "norm" at home? Have a hard time starting conversations? Avoids large groups? Prefers to keep to themselves?

2. Model positive social behavior

Children really do learn by example, so be mindful of how you interact with others - they are watching! Every time you strike up conversations with friends or neighbors, or even the check-out person at the grocery store, your child is aware. Almost every scenario becomes a learning opportunity, allowing your child to see how you join in, negotiate and problem-solve.

3. Role play at home

This tip can be helpful for some younger children, but tends to be especially beneficial for pre-teens and teenagers.

If your child finds it difficult to start conversations at school (at lunch, breaks/recess, etc), sit down and practice at home. Discuss what topics interest them that they might talk about with other children. Test different options until they find something that comes naturally.

4. Give your child a head start

Say your child wants to play baseball/softball, but is reluctant to start. Visit the field with them and throw the ball around so they can



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get acclimated ahead of time. Go early to the first practice so you arrive before others start showing up and the scene gets more chaotic.

Another example: if they want to take swimming lessons, if possible, spend time practicing together first before joining a full class, so they'll already have built up some confidence.

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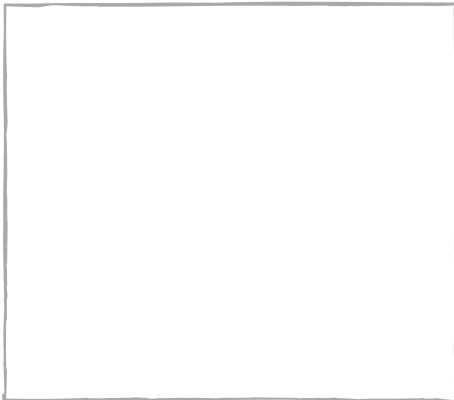
5. Reinforce and praise

Make it exciting and rewarding to practice trying new things. Even when your child is only making slow progress, make sure to reinforce their efforts. Acknowledge each small success, and tell your child how proud you are that they keep trying.

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6. Get the ball rolling

For smaller children, setting up a play date with just one other child is often a good idea. If your child is older, you might open up the house by inviting the baseball team over for pizza and a movie.



“Especially in the beginning, the goal is to help your child feel comfortable socializing and make it a positive experience.”
-Dr. Eastman

7. Don't avoid the problem

If social situations are difficult for your child, you might rather avoid or ignore the problem. But your child won't learn to improve relationships by always sitting at home with you. One recommendation is to gradually push your shy child slightly beyond their comfort zone into new situations, with gentle coaching & encouragement.

"Don't throw them off the diving board, but ease them toward the deep end." -Dr. Eastman

The Book Nook

Llama Llama Time to Share
by Anna Dewdney

¿Somos amigos?
by Anabel Fernández Rey

Strictly No Elephants
by Lisa Mantchev

8. Never compare your child to yourself, siblings, or other children

Be realistic about your child's unique personality and temperament, which will guide how much social interaction they seek. Just because you have dozens of friends doesn't mean your child will, too. It doesn't necessarily mean there is a problem. Some children who take time to warm up to others prefer to have a few really good friends rather than lots of more casual friendships.

“It's tough when a parent's normal doesn't line up with a child's normal,” Dr. Eastman says. “As long as they are doing things they want to do and are happy and well adjusted, that's good.”

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References

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<https://www.parentingscience.com/kids-make-friends.html>

Kids Who Need a Little Help to Make Friends
<https://childmind.org/article/kids-who-need-a-little-help-to-make-friends/>

Help Your Child Make Friends in School
<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/8-ways-help-child-make-friends-school/>

Preschoolers making friends
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/behaviour/friends-siblings/preschoolers-making-friends>

