

Social Relationships

A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org



Social Relationships: **A Parent's Guide by Schwablearning.org**

Children with learning and/or attention problems often experience frustration and miscommunication in their relationships with peers and adults. This guide includes exclusive SchwabLearning.org articles and interviews featuring experts who explain why this occurs and what you can do to help your child improve her social skills. You'll also find a list of suggested resources on this topic.

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A Parent's Guide to Social Relationships

Dr. Betty Osman on Nurturing Social Competence in a Child with LD

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Research has indicated that children with learning disabilities (LD) have more difficulty making and keeping friends than young people without these problems. Adolescents with LD have been shown to be less involved in recreational activities and to derive less satisfaction from their social interactions than their peers without LD. What is the nature of these social disabilities among children with LD, and what, if anything, can parents do to help their children and adolescents “fit in”?

Betty Osman, Ph.D., Answers:

Learning to successfully interact with others is one of the most important aspects of a child's development, with far-reaching implications. Although most children acquire social skills by example, and possibly osmosis, research clearly suggests children with learning disabilities (LD) may have difficulty making and keeping friends. Adolescents with LD have also been shown to interact less with their peers and to spend more leisure time alone, addicted to TV, computer games, and the Internet.

Parents devote much time and effort trying to impart the information and values they consider important. Yet, the development of children's social skills frequently is taken for granted. It goes without saying that it is painful for parents to see a child rejected by peers. In a sense, it becomes their rejection. Some parents relive their own unhappy social experiences as children, while others have expectations or dreams for their children that, not realized, become a source of disappointment and frustration.

Certainly not all young people with learning disabilities experience social problems. Typically, the good athlete, class comedian, resident artist, or owner of the most magic cards, is likely to be accepted regardless of his learning issues. Then, too, some children, with or without LD, seem born to make life easy for parents — and for themselves as well. They appear to develop social awareness early in life and, as they grow, display innately good “people skills” — a sense of humor, a positive attitude toward life, and empathy for others, qualities guaranteed to win friends.

But for many children and adolescents with LD, the lack of peer acceptance can become the most painful of their problems. Computers and calculators can help children with writing and arithmetic, but there is no similar technology to help them handle a lonely recess at school, a family outing, or a date. These require social competence.

“**Social competence**” in this context refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are socially valued and are likely to elicit a positive response from others.

Lack of these behaviors, though, does not represent a simple or unilateral problem. Rather, social disabilities might be conceptualized as occurring on three levels:

- The first is a **cognitive deficit**, i.e., lack of knowledge of how to act in a given social situation—knowing not to shout out in church, or when it is appropriate to offer assistance to a stranger.

“‘Social competence’ refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are socially valued ...”

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Intervention on this level consists of teaching the requisite skill in much the same way as a new math concept or social studies lesson might be presented.

- The second might be referred to as a **“performance deficit”** and can be seen in children or adolescents who understand both appropriate behavior and what is expected, but their own needs interfere with their cognitions. Some children who understand the concept of fair play and know they shouldn't cheat, simply can't tolerate losing, so they cheat to make sure that they win. The children have the skills but are unable to apply them.
- Still others with social difficulties know how to act and can suppress their needs appropriately, but they **lack the ability to evaluate their own or others' behavior**. They don't understand the effect of their actions and, therefore, have no means of monitoring what they do or say. Each experience is a new one, with little transfer or generalization taking place. Anticipation and cause and effect are non-existent.

“Although each young person is unique, all have the same needs — acceptance, approval, and a sense of belonging.”

In sum, young people with social disabilities frequently are less able than others their age to figure out how to behave in social situations and less aware of how others respond to them. Therefore, they act without knowledge or regard for social consequences. Most, though, tend to be unaware of their role, perceiving themselves as the victims of others' mistreatment. Therefore, they take little responsibility for their actions, blaming others or simply “bad luck” for events in their lives. What they do feel, though, is an overdose of criticism from peers and adults alike.

To help young people with social problems, it is important to understand on what level they are having trouble and how their social disabilities relate to their learning disabilities. The immaturity of many children with LD transcends academic areas, affecting their social adjustment as well. Communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, also have social implications. Children who don't “read” body language and facial expressions well are likely to miss important signals in life that are apparent to others.

Parents cannot afford to ignore their children's social difficulties. The consequences are too great for the child and the family. I view the social domain, along with academic instruction, as within the realm of educational responsibility at home and at school. Education, after all, is not confined to the classroom but occurs in all aspects of life.

To help children/adolescents develop social skills and promote social acceptance, parents might consider these techniques:

- Listen to children with the “third ear,” i.e., active listening, not only to the words they say, but the feelings they are expressing.
- Initiate and practice pro-social skills at home, including:
 - o How to initiate, maintain, and end a conversation
 - o The art of negotiation — how to get what you want appropriately
 - o How to be appropriately assertive without being overly aggressive
 - o How to give and receive compliments

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- o How to respond to teasing by peers
- o Practice how to accept constructive criticism

If there is a social support group in your area, encourage your child to participate. Sharing concerns, problems, and social experiences can facilitate social skills and peer acceptance.

Although not all children and adolescents with learning disabilities incur social difficulties, those who do require special understanding, not only in terms of their current functioning, but for the people they are capable of becoming. Although each young person is unique, all have the same needs — acceptance, approval, and a sense of belonging. To truly help them, we must go beyond the 3 R's to include the 4th R — Relationships.

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About the Author

Betty Osman, Ph.D., is on the staff of the White Plains Hospital Center, Department of Behavioral Health, Child and Adolescent Service. She has authored several books, journal articles, and videos. Dr. Osman serves on the Board of Directors of the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

A Parent's Guide to Social Relationships

Learning Difficulties and Social Skills: What's the Connection?

Most of us understand that kids who have learning difficulties struggle with academics. What many parents and educators don't realize is that having a learning problem can also impair a child's social skills and prevent him from having successful relationships with family members, peers, and other adults. The extent and impact on social skills varies with the child, depending on his basic temperament and the nature of his learning problem. Getting along with others is as important as getting along in school, so it's critical for kids with learning issues to develop good social skills (social competence).

What is Social Competence?

Social competence refers to a person's interpersonal skills with family, friends, acquaintances, and authority figures, such as teachers and coaches. Here's how two noted learning experts describe social competence:

"Social competence refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are socially valued and are likely to elicit a positive response from others."

— Betty Osman, Ph.D.

"Social skills are all the things that we should say and do when we interact with people. They are specific abilities that allow a person to perform competently at particular social tasks."

— Michele Novatni, Ph.D.

“A learning problem can also impair a child's social skills and prevent him from having successful relationships with family members, peers, and other adults.”

How Do Learning Difficulties Affect Social Competence?

If a child has a learning problem, such as a language processing disorder, he may have difficulty understanding what another person says or means.

He might also have trouble expressing his ideas in speech. Either of these problems can interfere with interpersonal communication.

A child who has Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) may be inattentive, impulsive, hyperactive — or any combination of these. **If he's inattentive, he may have a hard time paying close attention to other people's speech and behavior; his mind may wander, or his attention will be drawn to something else going on nearby.** If he's impulsive and/or hyperactive, he may interrupt others when they're speaking and may find it difficult to wait his turn. While such a child doesn't behave this way on purpose, others will likely be frustrated or offended by his behavior.

The Three Elements of Social Interaction

Before you assess your own child's social skills, it's helpful to think of social interaction as consisting of three basic elements:

- **Social Intake** — noticing and understanding other people's speech, vocal inflection, body language, eye contact, and even cultural behaviors.

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- **Internal Process** — interpreting what others communicate to you as well as recognizing and managing your own emotions and reactions.
- **Social Output** — how a person communicates with and reacts to others, through speech, gestures, and body language.

Social intake: Reading social cues

Social interactions require a child to interpret, or “read,” what other people communicate. **Picking up on spoken and unspoken cues is a complex process. A child with learning problems may misread the meaning or moods of others.** Janet Giler, Ph.D., outlines three potential problem areas for such kids:

- Inability to read facial expressions or body language (kinesics)
- Misinterpreting the use and meaning of pitch (vocalics)
- Misunderstanding the use of personal space (proxemics)

“Help your child rehearse his behavior in ‘pretend’ situations. With your guidance, he can practice and improve specific social skills.”

If your child struggles with these issues, ask yourself if his particular learning difficulty could be causing the problem. Is he inattentive or easily distracted when dealing with others? Does he have a hard time grasping what other people say to him?

Internal Process: Making Sense of It All

Having read another person’s social cues, a child must next process the information, extract meaning, and decide how to respond effectively. Thomas Brown, Ph.D., calls this ability “emotional intelligence” which he explains “is a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor feelings and emotions in self and others; discriminate among feelings; and use this information to guide thinking and action.”

If your child misses or misinterprets another person’s words, meaning, or mood, he’ll end up processing incorrect or incomplete information. This can lead him to inaccurate conclusions and inappropriate reactions. And if your child is impulsive, he may react before processing all the social cues and deciding on an appropriate response.

It’s difficult to observe exactly how your own child processes social cues internally. But if you’re concerned about how his internal “gears” process social data, you might gently probe by asking him how and why he decided to respond to someone in a particular manner.

Social Output: Responding to Others

After a child interprets and internalizes social cues from other people, he then responds. This behavior, social output, is easy to observe. But it can be painful or frustrating to watch if the child’s response isn’t appropriate.

Inappropriate responses can take many forms. If the child didn’t understand a question or comment, his response may seem silly (such as nervous giggling) or unintelligent (an irrelevant answer). Another child may overreact with angry words or actions. Finally, if a child has really tuned out, he might not react at all, even when a response is required or expected from him. Understandably, such responses can cause problems and confusion with family members, friends, classmates, and teachers.

Learning Difficulties and Social Skills: What's the Connection?

Teaching Social Skills: How Parents Can Help

If you realize your child's learning difficulty is hampering his social interactions, there are many ways you can guide him toward better social skills. Try practicing the three R's: Provide social skills instruction that is relevant, deals with real-life, and delivered in real-time. That means watching for teachable moments to coach your child in his interactions with others and doing so right away (or soon after).

Focus on specific behaviors. Offer prompts before your child acts, and praise him for positive interactions. Additional suggestions:

- **Model appropriate behavior** when you interact with your child and other people.
- **Encourage role playing.** Help your child rehearse his behavior in "pretend" situations. With your guidance, he can practice and improve specific social skills. He'll then be better prepared to apply those skills in real-life situations.
- **Promote generalization.** Help your child learn how and when to apply specific social skills to different situations. For example, once he learns to take turns playing a game with his sister, help him relate that to waiting his turn in line at the ice cream store.

Social Competence Builds Confidence

Kids with learning problems are at risk for low self-esteem. Helping them become socially competent can go a long way to bolster their self confidence. Furthermore, **a child with good social skills will have an easier time advocating for himself — whether he's asking a teacher for specific help or deflecting teasing from a classmate.** We all face social situations around the clock — at home, school, and in other settings. Helping your child overcome his social challenges is a gift he will benefit from throughout his life.

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About the Author

In her role as Writer/Editor for Schwab Learning, **Kristin Stanberry** provides information, insight, strategies, and support for parents whose children have LD and AD/HD. She combines a professional background developing consumer health and wellness publications with her personal experience of coaching family members with learning and behavior problems.

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How to Help a Child with Learning Disabilities Who Is Lonely

Children with learning disabilities (LD) are more likely to be lonely than kids without LD. A growing body of research shows that many children with LD face considerable challenges in making and keeping friends. Fortunately for parents of children with LD, research studies also offer some guidance about effective approaches to help children cope with or avoid loneliness.

In this article, the second of two on the topic of loneliness among children with LD, we present the research findings of Dr. Malka Margalit, Head of the Constantiner School of Education at Tel-Aviv University in Israel, who has studied loneliness among children with LD for more than 20 years.

The first article, "Loneliness among Children with Learning Disabilities," addressed the questions:

- Why are children with LD more likely than their peers to be lonely?
- How do children with LD experience loneliness?
- What are some particular social and emotional characteristics of lonely children with LD?

In this article, we summarize some of Dr. Margalit's research on:

- Loneliness among elementary school kids and adolescents
- Characteristics of kids with LD who are not lonely
- Effective approaches to helping the child with LD cope with or avoid loneliness.

Loneliness among Elementary School Children with LD

When researchers study popularity and friendships in school settings, they often ask children to name several kids in their class they like and several they dislike. When two children name each other as a person they like, researchers refer to them as "identified friends." Likewise, two kids who name each other as a person they dislike are termed "identified enemies."

Using the identified-friend/enemy survey, Dr. Margalit's research¹ revealed that, within the group of **children with LD**, those who had at least one "identified enemy" in the class felt lonelier than kids with LD who had no identified enemies. However, among the **kids without LD**, those with an identified enemy did **not** feel lonelier than kids without an identified enemy. This finding reveals, Dr. Margalit says, the social and emotional vulnerability of students with LD, who, because they often have such limited social networks, attach greater importance to the negative attitudes of other kids toward them. In general, research shows that children with LD are more likely to experience social stresses such as loneliness, and are less likely to have the internal resources to cope effectively with them.

Interestingly, one of Dr. Margalit's studies indicated that computer use predicted lower levels of loneliness for kids with LD. "We need to look more closely at whether children's use of the Internet will challenge our traditional views of understanding what loneliness and friendship are," Dr. Margalit

“When parents share with children the challenges they face in cultivating and maintaining friendships, children gain the hope and motivation they need to cope with their own social difficulties.”

— Malka Margalit

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commented. "Sometimes we are biased against technology, worried that children may neglect their face-to-face friendships in favor of virtual connections. I would like to encourage parents to think differently about e-friends and Web peers, since they may expand children's social networks, enable them to try out their social skills, as well as give them a different sense of their social status."

Loneliness among Adolescents with LD

Dr. Margalit conducted another study² to determine whether social environment would have any impact on the prevalence of loneliness among teenagers with LD. She and her colleagues compared rates of loneliness between a mixed (with and without LD) group of teens living in an urban environment, and a comparable group of teens living on an Israeli kibbutz. Because the kibbutz is a highly communal living arrangement, some researchers predicted that kids with LD in this environment would be less likely than the urban kids with LD to experience loneliness. This was not the case. In fact, this and other studies showed that, across age and social setting, teenage kids with LD consistently reported higher levels of loneliness. They were also rated by their teachers as less socially adjusted, and by their peers as less accepted.

Not All Children with LD Are Lonely

In several studies of loneliness among children with LD, according to Dr. Margalit, a small group of kids with LD was identified who were not more likely to view themselves as lonely or socially distressed than were their peers without LD. Using a research approach that emphasizes identifying kids' strengths, Dr. Margalit identified two characteristics common to the children with LD who were not lonelier than their peers without LD:

- They had age-appropriate social skills.
- They had average scores on a survey that measures "sense of coherence."³

A child with a strong sense of coherence views the world both within and outside himself as ordered and predictable. When this child faces a problem, such as feeling isolated and out of touch with classmates, he is able to assess the problem and choose, from among a repertoire of social skills, an appropriate strategy to address it. For example, he might strike up a conversation with a classmate, using the strategy of identifying a mutual interest such as a recent movie, a television program, or a new computer game. Or the child might develop social relationships outside school, either in his neighborhood or through a hobby or a leisure activity that involves contact with other children.

Helping Children with LD Overcome Loneliness

Dr. Margalit cautions that parents may sometimes feel anxious while trying to help their child cope with loneliness. A child's despair may bring back unpleasant memories of their own childhood experiences of loneliness. Dr. Margalit encourages parents to be aware of two important things:

- Because they are role models for their child's social behavior, they should reflect on and converse with their kids about their experiences in current and childhood friendships.
- Parents can also model self-awareness and reflection on the positive and negative emotions associated with friendships.

"When parents share with children the challenges they face in cultivating and maintaining friendships," Dr. Margalit says, "children gain the hope and motivation they need to cope with their own social difficulties."

Effective approaches to helping children with LD to overcome loneliness, according to Dr. Margalit, require both a carefully structured social environment and close attention to each child's particular social skills and challenges. With the overarching goal of empowering the child with LD to improve his social

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relations with peers, Dr. Margalit emphasizes that successful interventions rely on a combination of approaches. Among these are:

- Becoming knowledgeable about your child's social life. Observe your child's social behavior to determine specific strengths and weaknesses. For example, you might compare your child's behavior in initiating and maintaining social contacts with those same behaviors among his peers. You might want to check your observations against those of your child's teacher or coach, as well.
- Structuring the environment to promote friendship and satisfactory relationships among kids, to provide them opportunities to experience social competence. For example, you might set up an opportunity for a lonely child to work collaboratively with another child on a task or project, being careful to select a child who is likely to work well with your child, and a task that they can successfully complete. Let your child's teachers know that you are working with your child on friendship skills. The teacher can then structure the classroom environment to support his efforts to form satisfying social connections with classmates.
- Providing training and intervention to promote children's competence and sense of control. During Dr. Margalit's study, children had the advantage of practicing social skills in the context of carefully structured training activities. To help children "transfer" these skills from the training sessions to the "outside" world, adults engaged children in conversations about how the social situations they faced in the training were similar to those in their lives. Individual children were asked to try out a particular social task in a real-life situation and report back on how it worked. The results were "quite promising," Dr. Margalit says. Children became more active in initiating social contacts and planning social activities, and became less impulsive and less rejecting during social exchanges. Different types of social skills training were found to be effective:
 - o Modeling
 - o Peer tutoring
 - o Role-playing
 - o Problem-solving exercises

Problem-solving exercises were based on typical social scenarios that researchers developed based on children's own reports of social challenges and disappointments. For example, "Dan sees his friends heading for the computer lab to play games, but Dan is not invited." Children were asked, "If you were Dan, what could you do?" Children were asked to map out different options, evaluate the pros and cons of each, and choose one course of action. Predictably, some children suggested aggressive responses ("Yell at the kids!"), and others suggested passive responses ("Just don't talk to them."). Some kids suggested age-appropriate strategies such as inviting the group of kids to play a new computer game, or getting together with another child who wasn't invited to join the activity.

- Nurturing a child's belief in his ability to develop better friendship skills.⁴ For a child to cope effectively with stressors in his life such as loneliness, he requires ongoing empathy, encouragement, and problem-solving support from adults in order to:
 - o View friendships and satisfying social relations as important.
 - o Develop the hope and motivation to persist in making friends.
- Maintaining a positive attitude and accepting that kids may vary in the way they form friendships. You may feel sometimes that the social relationships your child is developing are childish or superficial or that your child's friends are too young or not really a good match.

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By understanding that friendship skills take time and practice, you will be able to give your child the encouragement and support he needs to build these skills in his own way and at his own pace.

Loneliness is distressing for anyone. For a child with LD, loneliness may become an ongoing struggle, resulting from a lack of social skills, or a belief that he cannot make and keep friends. As a parent, you can play an important role in identifying your child's specific social strengths and challenges, and helping him understand that friendships require effort and skill. By doing so, you support his hopes for closer friendships and more meaningful social networks in the future.



Featured Researcher:

Malka Margalit, Ph.D., Head of the Constantiner School of Education at Tel-Aviv University, is professor of education and an internationally recognized expert on loneliness in children, and on the empowerment processes of children with learning disabilities. In her research she examines emotions, motivation and adaptive development. She serves on the editorial boards of several journals, among them the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* and *Exceptional Children*

This article is based on excerpts from: Margalit, M. & Al-Yagon, M. (2002). "The loneliness experience of children with learning disabilities." In B. Y. L. Wong & M. Donahue (Eds.). *The social dimensions of learning disabilities* (pp 53-75). Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey.

References

Full citations of the following studies referenced in our article appear in the book chapter (cited above) on which the article is based (Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002).

1. Margalit, Tur-Kaspa & Most, 1999
2. Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995
3. Antonovsky, 1979; 1987
4. Rizzo, 1988

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About the Author

Linda Broatch, Writer/Editor, has an MA in Education, with a focus in Child Development, personal experience in supporting those who have learning difficulties, and has worked for many years in nonprofit organizations that serve the health and education needs of children.

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Helping Kids with Learning Disabilities Understand the Language of Friendship

While children with learning disabilities may know how to initiate friendships, many of their relationships fail because they don't know how to sustain them. **Children with learning disabilities often end friendships because they have been unable to work out conflicts.** While they may hear their friend's words, they often don't take the communication (e.g., joking and teasing) the way it was intended, often attributing negative intentions when they were not present. Because of their difficulty processing language, many children with learning disabilities are poor listeners. Whether it is because of their problems comprehending verbal and nonverbal communication, or because of their desire to make the information easier to grasp, they often put information into simple, "black and white" categories (e.g., good or bad). Instead of understanding manners, building rapport by checking (asking questions), or understanding that the person may have said something without really thinking of its impact and was unintentionally hurtful, **unresolved misunderstandings can escalate into conflicts that can end friendships abruptly.**

Listening vs. Comprehending: Do They Understand the Nonverbal Message?

For many kids with learning disabilities, the problem isn't with listening but with understanding how nonverbal and verbal communication fit together. Many children assume that if they understand a friend's words, they don't need to pay attention to his body language. Unfortunately, that isn't true since body language, tone, and other nonverbal expression are often more relevant to understanding what the person intends to say than the actual spoken words. **A child with learning disabilities may work so hard to understand a friend's verbal message that he misses the more subtle messages** or the way the nonverbal behavior complements or contradicts the verbal message.

“For many kids with learning disabilities, the problem isn't with listening but with understanding how nonverbal and verbal communication fit together.”

When someone's words and body language disagree, kids with learning disabilities may misinterpret the communication if they:

- miss the difference between good manners and genuine communication.
- hear criticism when none was intended.
- assume friendly joking is really unfriendly criticism.
- put communication into "black and white" categories, either too positive or too negative.

One problem children often have is taking the words a friend or classmate says too literally. While children may have been taught how to read, how to listen, and even how to read body language, they haven't been taught how to interpret the message when someone's body language contradicts his words. **The most important concept to keep in mind is that if a person's words and body language disagree, one should pay more attention to the nonverbal message than the actual words.**

Helping Kids with Learning Disabilities Understand the Language of Friendship

Nonverbal messages are conveyed in one's tone of voice, facial expressions, and body posture and are more accurate indicators of how the speaker really feels. **People often find it is easier to say what is expected, but if their feelings are not consistent with what they are saying, their body language usually will contradict their words.** For example, they may avoid eye contact, use a strained tone of voice, or have an unfriendly facial gesture or posture that contradicts their words. When such a conflict exists, the nonverbal message can negate the verbal message. For instance, if your Uncle Charlie says "I love you" but his tone is harsh and he avoids eye contact or looks away when he says it, you'd probably realize something is amiss. While many people understand that the nonverbal message in some way belies the verbal message, it isn't always apparent to children with learning disabilities how to interpret such a contradiction.

Teaching Children to Understand Nonverbal Communication

Children usually respond well if they are given specific lessons in how to read body language and if they practice it with their friends and family. To become better at understanding body language, it's important to look for consistency. Here are some questions a child can learn to ask himself about the person speaking to him:

- Does her tone of voice match what her words say?
- Does she maintain eye contact, look away, or look nervous?
- Does she seem comfortable?

“Since many children with learning disabilities are hypersensitive to criticism, they often take teasing as an insult rather than in jest.”

When the words and body language disagree, there are many ways to interpret the “real” message. One possibility is that she is trying to avoid a direct confrontation. **Most of us use manners or conventional expressions to avoid feeling uncomfortable or to avoid hurting someone's feelings.** The theory is that it is better to be evasive or indirect rather than to refuse someone outright. Since most of us want to avoid discomfort, we've adopted indirect general phrases such as “that sounds good...let's see...I'll call you later...etc.” Such expressions are often confusing for a child who doesn't realize a friend doesn't really mean to call him later. The real message is conveyed in the person's body language that may have lacked sincerity or was demonstrated by an avoidance of eye contact.

However, the subtlety eludes many kids with language processing problems. They would prefer a direct answer such as, “No, I don't want to play” to an indirect “Maybe.” While a child's best friend might be willing to be this direct, casual acquaintances are more likely to be indirect when refusing an invitation.

Accepting Joking and Teasing with Humor

Understanding joking and teasing also relies on a child's ability to interpret the more subtle messages in another person's nonverbal behavior and to accept hurtful actions as being unintentional. Kids often joke or tease by commenting on an existing characteristic, trait or, mannerism — either theirs or yours. Instead of being offended by it, one is usually expected to laugh and understand that it is meant to be funny, not hurtful. Since many children with learning disabilities are hypersensitive to criticism, they often take teasing as an insult rather than in jest. Instead of perceiving the remark as a joke, the child often feels wounded and may retort with a hostile remark. This is especially true of a child with AD/HD who's impulsive and might speak before thinking. Instead of being a playful interaction, a joke can create hostility which can lead to an argument or an abrupt ending to the friendship.

Helping Kids with Learning Disabilities Understand the Language of Friendship

Learning Conflict Resolution Skills

Conflict resolution often relies on differentiating between a person's actions and his intentions. Kids often say or do things without any conscious intention of being hurtful. **Many children with learning disabilities, out of a desire to protect themselves from further pain, project negative intentions on other children;** they often react to criticism when none was intended, or take a joke or a friendly tease seriously. This can have negative social consequences. Instead of considering that the person may have said something without really thinking of its impact and was unintentionally hurtful, a child with learning disabilities often over-reacts with anger or withdrawal. Instead of trying to figure out the person's intentions, the child may prematurely end the relationship instead of using better listening or conflict resolution skills.

Children with learning differences can become better listeners if they:

- learn the subtle rules of manners.
- pay attention to nonverbal messages.
- take joking and teasing with humor.
- practice conflict resolutions skills.

One of the most important skills in listening and resolving conflicts is to attribute a good intention to one's "friend." **Many children with learning disabilities benefit from social skills classes that include conflict resolution, or by therapy that helps them work through the trauma that comes from being teased and being different.** Whatever method you choose, building a network of support that values your child for his unique contributions can go a long way toward sustaining him through the difficult developmental years.

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About the Author

Janet Z. Giler, Ph.D., M.F.T. is a licensed family therapist, educator, author, and public speaker. She specializes in teaching children — including those with learning difficulties — effective social skills.

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“Wanna Come Over to My House and Play?”

Tips for Helping Your Child with Play Dates

A friend of mine has a son, Tom. He is ten and has significant learning problems. Tom's older brothers often have their friends as guests for “play dates.” Whenever Tom tries to arrange a play date with one of his classmates, it doesn't work out. Most times Tom retreats to his room before his guest's scheduled departure... or the guest asks to leave early. Tom's dad asked me for some advice; below are the tips I shared with him.

General Tips for Parents

Planning the Play Date

- **Play dates should generally only involve two children: your child and his guest.** To invite two guests is to court disaster! A grouping of three children invariably deteriorates into a two-on-one situation... and the child with the least social competence is generally the odd man out.
- You will also want to **be mindful of the length of the proposed play date.** The initial sessions should be relatively brief. The allotted time can be lengthened as the relationship solidifies.
- Prior to the arrival of the visitor, **assist your child in straightening out his room or the play area to make it as attractive and appealing as possible.** He is anticipating the arrival of a guest and it is socially acceptable and desirable to make such preparation. These preparations should be a pleasurable experience. Don't threaten to cancel the play date if your child does not cooperate. A child should not have to earn the right to play with a friend.
- If your child has a particular toy or possession that is unusually valuable or breakable, you may want him to put it in a closet to prevent conflict if his guest wishes to play with it. Explain to him that **any toys that are in the area must be shared.**
- **Establish “House Rules” for play dates** (e.g., No visitors are allowed to go into Grandpa's workshop). In that way, your child can avoid conflict with a guest by citing the rule (e.g., “Yeah, I know that the shed looks like it would be a neat fort, but my Mom doesn't allow us in there when we have visitors. All of my grandfather's tools are in there.”).

“It may seem strange ... to invest so much planning in a routine social activity. But, ... it is necessary ... to ensure the success of the event.”

During the Play Date

- **A successful play date must be supervised.** This does not mean the parent must (or should!) be an active participant in the activities, but you must be available to provide counsel, assistance, and refereeing when necessary. Remember, your child is the host. You should greet the guest warmly, make small talk, then move to the background.
- Be aware that your child will doubtless be anxious during the play date. As a result, he will be particularly sensitive to criticism from you while his visitor is present.

“Wanna Come Over to My House and Play?”

Avoid confrontations with your child during play dates. Never threaten to punish your child during a visit. Deal with the consequences after the visitor has departed.

Following up After the Play Date

- You should attempt to **establish a relationship with the guest's parent(s)**. By doing so, you present yourself as a responsible and involved adult who will provide a safe and secure environment for the child to visit. It is always advisable to compliment and commend the visitor when speaking to his parents. (“Bill was a perfect gentleman while he was here. He even helped Tom’s grandfather bring in the groceries.”) Nothing is more appreciated by a parent than to hear her own child praised!
- **When the play date is finished, discuss the visit with your child.** What parts went well? Why? What parts went poorly? Why? These conversations will enable you to remediate your child’s problems, reinforce his positive behaviors, and demonstrate your interest in him and his social life. These data will also assist you in planning future play dates.
- **Your child should have had several successful “at home” play dates before you allow him to go to another child’s home for a date.** When you retrieve your child from his first “away” dates, ask the host’s parents for specific input regarding your child’s behavior during the visit. Don’t expect the parent to volunteer the information if you don’t solicit it...particularly if the visit has not gone well. Most parents will prefer to “suffer in silence” and merely not invite your child for another visit. But you will never learn the specific problems that your child experienced and you will be unable to assist him in improving his behavior. Tell the host parent that you would appreciate honest and candid input.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Unsuccessful play dates are generally sabotaged by boredom**, particularly if both children have social skill deficits. This pitfall can be avoided by careful planning of the event.
- **A second pitfall is the parents’ failure to consult with the child regarding the selection of a playmate.** When play dates are arranged exclusively by the parents, with no input from the children, both children feel “trapped” and are seldom willing to invest themselves in making the date succeed.
- Another common cause of play date failure is the involvement of the host child’s siblings. **The presence and participation of a sibling can negatively impact the dynamic of the play date.** The visiting child may find the sibling more appealing and your child may be rejected. This will cause hostility and understandable resentment from your child regarding his brother. To avoid this, include guidelines for siblings in the “House Rules” for play dates. These may include making your child’s room off-limits to his siblings whenever he has a visitor.

Helping Your Child be a Good Host

- It is always a good idea to **include snacks in a play date**. Ask your child to participate in selecting — or even preparing — these snacks. Again, his playmate is a guest and should be treated as such. It is part of your child’s “social contract” to make his guest feel welcome and comfortable.
- Basically, in a guest/host relationship, **the guest is always right and the guest always goes first.** Again, this concept may run contrary to your child’s belief that “this is my house and we’ll do things my way.” By establishing this rule, you will solve most conflicts before they occur.

“Wanna Come Over to My House and Play?”

When a disagreement arises, it is easily defused by citing this rule! If a guest takes unfair advantage of these gracious guidelines, you may want to reconsider a future invitation.

- Be sure to **review and reinforce the “Host Rules” immediately prior to each play date**. If a conflict occurs during the visit, cite the specific rule when you intervene (“I know that you are tired of playing checkers, but Chip wants to finish the game. He’s the guest... so he’s always right, remember?”).
- Explain to your child that he should **plan to have only interactive activities during the play date**. Merely watching TV or using the computer are not desirable or effective play date activities. Again, boredom will set in easily and quickly with these passive activities. In addition, these activities provide little opportunity for social interaction or conversation.
- Your child should be instructed in **appropriate ways to change an activity that he may find boring or unexciting**. These skills can be used whether your child is the guest or the host. Basically, he should be told that it is impolite to criticize the activity (e.g., “This is boring,” “This game stinks.”). Rather, he should politely suggest a modification in the activity. (“Can I use the steam shovel for a while?”) or — better yet — suggest an alternative activity (“Hey, do you want to see the pictures of Fenway Park that my dad took last week?”).
- It is highly unlikely that you would criticize an invited guest in your home. Similarly, your child should be told that **it is inappropriate and unmannerly to criticize his visitor** during a play date.
- Fred Frankel, in his extraordinary book, *Good Friends Are Hard to Find*, emphasizes **the importance of loyalty in a play date situation**. If your child abandons his visitor by retiring to his bedroom or joining a more attractive group of children during the play date, it is highly unlikely that the guest will wish to return for a second time. It is part of your child’s “social contract” to remain with his visitor for the duration of the visit.

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About the Author

Richard D. Lavoie, M.A., M.Ed. is a recognized authority on learning disabilities. He has spent more than thirty years working with kids who struggle to learn, as well as with their parents and teachers.

Resources

Dr. Betty Osman on Nurturing Social Competence in a Child with LD

Books

No One to Play With

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0878796878/schwabfoundation/>

By Betty B. Osman, Ph.D.

Helping Kids with Learning Disabilities Understand the Language of Friendship

Books

Good Friends are Hard to Find: Help Your Child Find, Make and Keep Friends

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/096220367X/schwabfoundation/

By Fred Frankel

Socially ADDept™: A Manual for Parents of Children with ADHD and/or Learning Disabilities

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0966696921/schwabfoundation/>

By Janet Z. Giler

On the Web

Janet Z. Giler's Website:

<http://www.addept.org/>

"Wanna Come Over to My House and Play?"

Books

Good Friends are Hard to Find: Help Your Child Find, Make and Keep Friends

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/096220367X/schwabfoundation/>

By Fred Frankel

Video

Last One Picked, First One Picked On

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_store/lavoie_lastone.html

By Rick Lavoie


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