

# The Social Executive Function Skills That Elude Kids with ADHD

Children and teens with ADHD may lose friends because of deficits in social executive function skills – the underlying processes that are involved in social skills ranging from perspective-taking to reciprocity and cognitive flexibility. Here, learn strategies that help them bolster these skills and strengthen their friendships.



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Dominating conversations. Not showing interest in others. Telling *cringe* jokes. Struggling in unstructured social situations. Children and teens with ADHD know these social struggles and misunderstandings too well. For many kids, friendship foibles like these become a source of shame over time; they question why they can't grasp what comes intuitively to their peers and may retreat socially, often into the world of "virtual friendships."

Why do kids with ADHD struggle with friendships? Navigating social interactions requires various mental processes, or executive function skills. Deficits and delays in these skills – which I refer to as *social executive function skills* – are common in ADHD, and they explain many of our kids' problems in the social realm.

Lagging social executive function skills represent a learning challenge; they prevent children from intuitively picking up on social information from a young age to the same extent as their

peers. This should not be confused with struggles stemming from social anxiety or other conditions.

Better social skills begin to take root when we understand the foundational skills that cause the most trouble – from internal dialogue and cognitive flexibility to perspective-taking and understanding context – and the strategies that effectively build and support these skills in ADHD brains.

## **Social Skills for Kids: Understanding Underlying Deficits**

Children and teens with ADHD, even if they are socially motivated, tend to have a hard time with the following skills that underlie social interactions:

- **Perspective-taking:** Understanding others' thoughts and feelings, and how you are coming across in social settings
- **Situational awareness;** reading the room and understanding what you should be doing, based on context
- **Responding appropriately to others' emotions;** you may come off as rude or disinterested if you do not respond as expected after someone has shared their feelings or emotions
- **Initiation;** difficulty with starting conversations, with asking for help, and with self-advocacy skills
- **Cognitive flexibility** for the sake of being part of a peer group, accepting others' ideas, and being able to take direction from others
- **Using humor appropriately**

Many children with ADHD have trouble with the above skills because they struggle to “hear” their internal dialogue (which I refer to as their “Brain Coach” to help children make sense of this skill).

Of course, ADHD symptoms like impulsivity and inattention may also impact social interactions. Impulsivity may cause an individual to interrupt someone who is speaking or say inappropriate things, while inattention may show up as spacing out during conversation or appearing disinterested.

### **What Social Skills Struggles Look Like in Children**

Lagging social executive function skills become noticeable to same-aged peers around age 7 and well before parents start to notice. Early signs often include the following:

- **Acting bossy** and controlling with peers, especially during play
- **One-sided conversations**
- **Difficulty in unstructured social situations**, like recess
- **Difficulty keeping friends** (but can make friends)
- **“Smothering” a new friend**
- **Difficulty relating to same-age peers**, but does fine with younger children and adults
- **Not understanding how they’re coming across** to others (poor perspective-taking skills)

## What Social Skills Struggles Look Like in Tweens and Teens

As social expectations increase over time, new difficulties may emerge, also rooted in weak social executive function skills. Signs that a tween or teen is struggling socially include the following:

- **Retreating into video games/social media/the online realm** to escape the uncertainty and unpredictability of socializing
- **Inflexibility**; unable to accommodate different viewpoints, activities, etc.
- **Criticizing peers**; might call others “weird” or “annoying”
- **Only wanting to befriend “popular” peers who are not accepting of them**; may overlook peers with lower social standing
- **Little to no interaction with peers outside of school**; may say that they have “school friends” but not “outside-of-school friends,” meaning they do not understand the work it takes to build and sustain friendships – and their role in that interplay

## Social Skills for Kids: Strategies and Guidelines for Parents

Parents play the most important role in helping children improve their social executive function skills. Here is how to begin:

**1. Share your internal dialogue to model perspective-taking.** This will help your child understand what it sounds like to think about others, and thus help develop their own self-talk. Vocalizing your inner dialogue will help your child learn to pause and consider how they (and others) come across in social situations. Share thoughts like:

- “It was nice of that guy to pick up the lady’s umbrella. She’s probably grateful for his gesture, too.”
- “I’m feeling a little bored right now because you’re having a one-way conversation with me about Minecraft. I wish we could talk about something that both of us are into.”
- I’m having *cringey* thoughts right now because that person is speaking so loudly on their phone in a restaurant.”

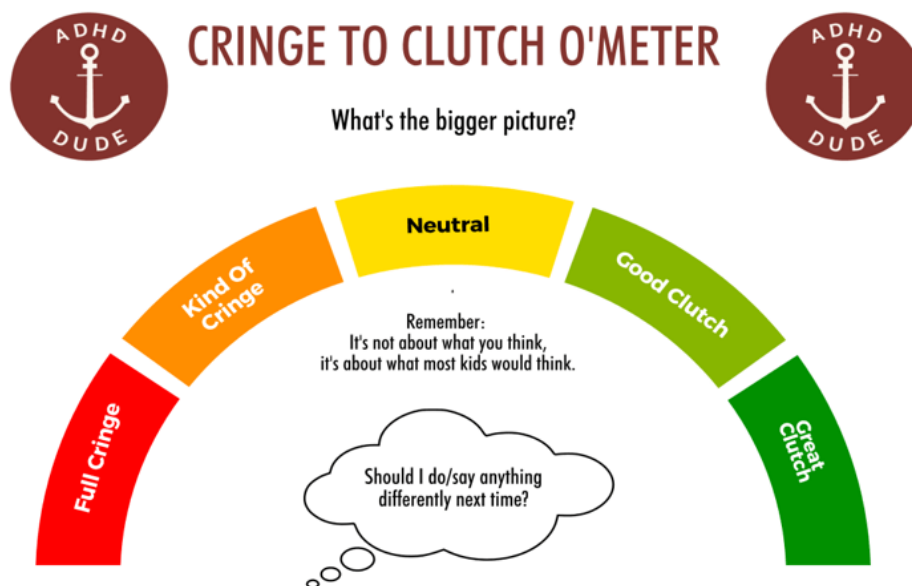
**2. Teach your child about the importance of “fake-outs.”** A fake-out (a term I use with the children I help) is when you show interest in what others are saying, even though you’re really not invested. All of us engage in this type of reciprocity. But children with ADHD don’t often understand that “tolerating” someone else’s interests, especially when that person is new to them, is an unspoken part of social interactions and crucial to building and sustaining friendships.

**3. Praise your child’s efforts.** Recognize when your child displays resiliency, flexibility, grit, and the willingness to try something new with others. Use *purposeful recognition and praise* to help your child understand social behaviors that would help their peers feel comfortable around them. **Examples:**

- Recognize your child every time they show interest in others, especially when they’re going out of their comfort zone. Say things like, “It was great of you to agree to play basketball with your classmate, even though I know you don’t really like the sport. It showed them that you like hanging out them.”
- Does your child have responsibilities at home? Household chores are a great way to teach reciprocity because it teaches them to think about the needs of others.

**Help your child understand context.** The cause and effect of our words and actions, and how we respond to what’s happening around us, fluctuate based on setting. A child, for example, might feel more comfortable sharing a joke with a classmate than with the school principal.

To demonstrate that people have a range of thoughts based on situational context, I use what I’ve dubbed the “Cringe to Clutch o’Meter” – a visual tool that helps improve perspective-taking in children. On one end is *cringe* (thoughts and feelings of discomfort and awkwardness) and on the other is *clutch* (positive thoughts and feelings). To use the tool, have your child note the context of a situation first. Then, ask for their perspective: Based on their words and actions, what kind of response do they think they elicited from others? Where does it fall on the scale?



**5. Practice “reading the field” together.** Situational awareness requires putting pieces of information together to make sense of what’s going on, no matter if we’re indoors or outdoors. (That’s why I use “reading the field” instead of “reading the room.”) Situational awareness is as much about knowing what to do at a birthday party as it is about safety awareness while walking through a busy parking lot. Everyday life offers plenty of opportunities to work on these skills in varied contexts.

So the next time you’re at the shopping center parking lot with your child, help them “read the field.” Here’s what that may sound like:

- *It’s Saturday morning. This is when most people are out shopping, so the parking lot will be busy with cars pulling in or pulling out of spaces. Reading the field involves looking at the cars to see if they have their white lights on, which means they’re backing out. We don’t want to walk too close to the cars, either. We also have to read the field to make sure we’re out of the way of drivers looking for a space. When we’re in a parking lot we do not look at our phones, because if you’re looking at your phone, then you’re not reading the field.*

**6. Extracurriculars are essential.** Whether sports, music, dance, or another interest, extracurriculars give your child a chance to spend time with their similar-age peers. Require them to participate in an after-school activity; they likely will not take the leap on their own.

**Help your child remember past social successes.** ADHD minds struggle with *episodic memory*, or recalling the emotions associated with past experiences. That means your child may struggle to recall social experiences they found enjoyable. (It’s why they may remember last year’s summer camp as “boring” even though they raved about it at the time.) Without the aid of memory, your child may be reluctant to engage in similar social opportunities as they arise. Tap into your child’s episodic memory by asking questions about their past social experiences, scrolling through photos, and reminding them of all the ways they had fun and excelled.

**8. Don’t measure your child’s social competency by how they interact with family.** Children will often act differently at home than they do in school or with peers. Many children often do not feel the need to use “good social skills” with immediate family. They feel safest with family, and they know there are no social ramifications if they use poor social skills with Mom, Dad, or siblings.

**As you help build your child’s social skills, here are some important reminders:**

- **Expect defensiveness and resistance.** Teenagers may not be eager to engage in self-reflection or listen to what parents have to say. That’s because social difficulties are a source of shame (for anyone). You might worry about hurting your child’s feelings by broaching the subject. But remember : Your child’s peers won’t be as interested in protecting their feelings. It’s better for your child to hear it from someone who loves them unconditionally, at the expense of temporary discomfort. Avoid falling into the argument vortex or trying to reason with your child about how they’re coming across to others. (Remember that because they struggle with perspective-taking, they won’t understand how others perceive them.)

- **Expect inconsistency.** ADHD is a condition of inconsistent performance. Your child may make a social breakthrough one day and appear to take several steps back the next – and that’s perfectly normal. **Be patient.** Results will come slowly and with time – not overnight.

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