

Friendships, Social Skills, and Adoption

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In our practice we see a unfortunate number of children with friendship problems. It can be one of the more painful issues that arises for our clients. But there is also hope - some good resources are available to help children with social skills difficulties, and there is much that parents can do to help.

What we hear from some of our families is that their children “feel” younger than they are, and gravitate towards younger children, or are more drawn to adults than peers. It can be hard for them to “share” conversation; they may divulge too much personal information, or have difficulty finding interests in common. They may have trouble joining their classmates in play. They often lack a sense of how to be a good host when having friends over (controlling the play, etc). Boys may take things too far, getting too rough or out of control. Girls may be clingy or bossy. Children may not get invited to play-dates or parties, and may lack a good friend.

Childhood friendship problems is a topic that raises strong feelings in many adults. I don't know anyone that had a perfectly socially successful childhood, and just reading the previous paragraph can bring up memories of loneliness and rejection. When we see our children having such difficulties it's truly challenging to stay present and clear-minded about what's going on. But it is important to find a balance of appropriate concern and involvement. Blaming the peer group, assuming things will be better in another school, or otherwise neglecting the issue isn't helpful; neither is overreacting, anxious hovering in social situations, or trying to bribe or force other children to include your child.

Causes of Friendship Problems in Fostered and Adopted Kids

Social skills problems in the context of foster care and adoption have not been well-researched, but the causes likely lie in a combination of:

- Lack of early secure attachments leading to more anxious/controlling behaviors in later relationships
- Rough and unsupervised early interactions with peers
- Poor social boundaries and judgement, difficulty reading others' social cues
- A higher prevalence of impulsivity, ADHD, and externalizing (acting-out) behavioral problems
- Poor emotional regulation (quick to anger at perceived slights and rejection, etc)
- Delayed social/emotional development
- Challenges in social communication and language, making it hard to keep up with the increasingly fast-paced world of their peers

These risks are not shared by all of the adopted children that we see, but they are more common. In the world of social skills interventions, many of the participants are children (boys, usually) with ADHD, acting-out behavioral problems, or autistic spectrum issues. If you substitute "institutional autism", or general lack of appropriate formative social experiences, that's a combination of issues that fits many adopted and fostered children.

Patterns of Peer Problems

The literature on social skills problems in general suggests that there are a few patterns of peer problems that are most worrisome, and deserving of intervention. Researchers in this field often categorize children by interviewing their peers to come up with how liked (or not) and influential they are. This all sounds a bit harsh, but no one knows better how children are doing socially than their peer group, and the categories that follow aren't nearly as hurtful as peers can be. In this research context, children are grouped as:

- Average (well-enough liked and influential)
- Popular (desired as a friend and influential)
- Neglected (not influential)
- Controversial (both liked and disliked, also influential)
- Rejected (disliked)

Interestingly, “popular” as derived from peer ratings is not the same as just asking who’s popular. The “sociometrically popular” kids are well-liked, good problem-solvers, and trustworthy - a good friend. The “popular kids” are actually seen as dominant and “stuck-up”. Neglected children may be shy or less motivated to join peers; they seem to do well academically, and can start over in new groups and shed the “neglected” status. Controversial children are sociable but tend to use more social aggression and hostility; this also may not be a very stable category over time.

Rejected Children

But the “rejected” group is the most concerning. Children with rejected status in one group tend to be rejected in new groups as well. Without intervention, they are likely to stay rejected over time, and are more likely to have later difficulties with delinquency and adult maladjustment.

Children who are classified by observers as socially withdrawn, plus rejected by peers (thus, not withdrawn by choice), are more likely to have internalizing problems like depression and anxiety. There are two sub-groupings of boys who are “rejected”: rejected plus aggressive (verbal aggression, rule-breaking, etc), and rejected with odd, immature, or “quirky” behaviors. The rejected-aggressive boys are more likely to have academic difficulties and ADHD. Girls have rates of rejection similar to that of boys, but are a lot less likely to be referred to social skills interventions; it may be that rejected boys stand out more and have more externalizing behaviors, while rejected girls have fewer overt problem behaviors.

If this sounds like your child, you should consider learning more about how to help your child with play dates and friendships (since you’ve got the potential to make a big positive impact), and explore local options for social skills groups. Here are a few tips, but the resources that follow will be more helpful:

Help your kids with the basics of social interactions

- Teach your child learn appropriate social greetings-and-responses, and what degree of physical contact is appropriate for whom (how not to be a "space invader")
- Encourage and model use of positive statements like praise and agreement
- Help your kids learn to share a conversation (reciprocity)
- Practice these skills over and over and over

Help children have frequent, successful play dates

- For younger/less mature children, having shorter, more structured play dates can help
- Practice being a good host beforehand, and come up with possible activities that their guest may enjoy
- When it comes to games, emphasize shared fun over winning/losing, and "good sport" behaviors (make sure to model these as well!)
- As a parent, stay aware of how things are going without hovering

Support your child in making and keeping friends

- Make friends with neighbors with children, allow your kids to get to know each other

- Get to know the parents of your kids potential friends (and enemies!)
- Make your child's friends feel welcome in your home (greet them warmly, compliment them directly and to their parents when they pick them up)
- Socialize across generations: make time for extended family, hang out with other entire families together, look for a range of ages for your child to get to know. Such shared family gatherings can provide models of interaction, unhurried time for children to get to know each other, and can keep parents in touch with how their kids are doing socially.

Help your children deal with the pain of rejection

- Remember that some pain around peer issues is inevitable and a normal part of childhood; try not to overreact or get too caught up in your own issues
- Don't nurture resentments, add fuel to feuds, or attempt to coerce other children into including your child
- But do employ "active listening"; acknowledge and reflect back the emotions that you see your child having
- Once your child feels heard and understood, help your child with self-soothing strategies like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and active play
- If bullying at school is involved, insist that it be appropriately addressed; most schools these days have policies, if not effective interventions, in place to deal with bullying
- If your child falls into the "rejected status" category above, seek further help (see below)

Resources for Families

One book for parents that I've really liked is "[Best of Friends, Worst of Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children](#)". Several of the tips above come from this book, which deftly summarizes the research about how children's friendships evolve as they mature, and has solid suggestions for each developmental stage. Another book is "[It's So Much Work to Be Your Friend: Helping the Child with Learning Disabilities Find Social Success](#)". But having a good book probably isn't enough for children that fall into the socially rejected category. That's where social skills groups come in ...

Social Skills Interventions

Social skills interventions for children do exist that have been well-studied, and show measurable improvements in parent and teacher ratings of social success. One such intervention is [Children's Friendship Training](#), which was developed at UCLA. Some of their work has specifically looked at children with ADHD, ODD (oppositional-defiant disorder), ASD (autistic spectrum disorders), and even FAS (fetal alcohol syndrome). I like this approach, as they've evaluated it with the types of problems my patients have, they have a rigorous approach to testing their program in general, and they include an important parent educational component which helps the gains children make in group generalize to the rest of their lives.

There are two local groups I'm aware of that draw on this intervention for their social skills groups. One is [BeFriended](#), which runs social skills and friendship groups in collaboration with Nurturing Attachments. The other is [FASt Friends](#), a family support group for families impacted by prenatal alcohol exposure, who run Children's Friendship Training groups for teenagers.

In the interests of full disclosure, BeFriended was started by my lovely and talented wife, Kim. I've been a bit involved with its conception ... for professionally selfish reasons, I've really wanted to see an adoption-savvy social skills intervention come to town! But I also want to be fair to the other good folks in town that I don't happen to be married to. I've heard nice things about all of the following social skills practices, and I'm happy for people to post more in the comments. Choice is a good thing. Best of luck to all of our families that are struggling with this issue!

Puget Sound Social Skills Groups:

- [BeFriended](#)
- [FASt Friends Teen Groups](#)
- [Wally's Club](#)
- [Friendship Group](#)
- [Carla Brooks and Associates](#)
- Your child's school may have a social skills program or friendship group as well

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