

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **HOW PARENTS CAN FACILITATE SOCIAL SUCCESS FOR THEIR CHILDREN**

As children grow, their relationships with their peers become increasingly influential in their lives. Children's friendships not only provide a foundation for later adult relationships, they also buffer children from stress and lessen the risk of later emotional and behavioral problems. When children are socially successful, their friendships are a source of well being, pride, and identity. Yet some have difficulty getting along with others because of shyness, conflict, teasing, or other challenges. Parents can do a great deal to facilitate the social success of their children by recognizing barriers and providing appropriate guidance and support.

### **Common barriers to healthy social development**

Social anxiety is a common obstacle to social success. Many children experience shyness at some point, usually during class presentations, school plays, or dances. Although shyness is usually temporary, some children are troubled by more significant fears of embarrassment or rejection. This anxiety may cause them to be quiet and withdrawn in social interactions, or in more serious cases, to avoid these encounters altogether. In some children and teens, this social anxiety may eventually lead to depression, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in social encounters.

Other children may struggle socially because of disruptive, impulsive, or aggressive behaviors. Some children have difficulty making or keeping friends due to overly exuberant, hyperactive tendencies. These children may interrupt conversations, have difficulty waiting their turn, or intrude on others' play. They may also become frustrated easily and have a hard time calming themselves down, resulting in tantrums or aggression. Besides creating trouble for parents and teachers, these objectionable social behaviors may make children unpopular with peers.

### **How to encourage social success:**

Parents play an important role in the social lives of their children, both directly and indirectly. This eventually becomes a supporting role, with children taking center stage and parents quietly providing the necessary elements--rides to the mall, brownies at a sleepover, or consolation after a negative experience. The following are some general guidelines for encouraging social success:

- Use parent-child and sibling relationships. Research has shown that warm, trusting family relationships lay the groundwork for healthy social development in children. Use the ups and downs of family interactions to teach important social lessons.
- Practice what you preach. Model positive social skills by sharing how you handle arguments, hurt feelings, and misunderstandings as they occur. Children look to their parents' behavior to help them understand new or confusing situations.
- Get to know your child's friends. Offering to facilitate social encounters for your child or teen can provide natural opportunities to get to know his or her friends. You don't need to overstay your welcome--moments in the car, in a restaurant, or at an amusement park can really add up.
- Listen first, talk later. Listen to your child's complaints about his or her peers with genuine interest, and resist giving advice before your child feels understood. Knowing how to handle teasing or rejection doesn't necessarily make children feel better. Being heard and understood just might.
- Praise, praise, praise. Go out of your way to praise your child's treatment of others. Statements like, "I love the way you kept calm when your sister was yelling at you," or, "It was nice how you invited Jake to the movie," actively reinforce your child's respect and caring for others.
- Explore a variety of social settings. Trouble connecting with schoolmates is often due to a mismatch of personalities or interests. Introducing your child to new and varied social circles like team sports, clubs, or youth groups may provide for a better social "fit."

### **How to encourage your shy or emotionally sensitive child:**

- Share your own experiences. Children are often amazed to hear that their parents were once teased, left out, or lonely. Tell your child how you have handled shyness or other social difficulties--both in childhood and in the present.
- Ask about your child's fears. Anxious children often harbor questionable ideas about how others perceive them or how friendships are "supposed to be." Find out what these beliefs are and encourage your child to challenge them in their daily social encounters.
- Push a little harder. Parents often desire to protect their children and keep them comfortable. However, taking this approach with shy children may actually help them avoid important social experiences. Gently encourage your child to face his or her social fears.
- Empathize. Although you should avoid feeding into your child's anxiety or shyness, take care not to criticize these emotions. You will be better able to encourage social risk taking if you are empathic and supportive.

### **How to foster social success in your hyperactive, impulsive, or disruptive child:**

- Encourage creative, constructive activities. Avoid toys and games that encourage aggressive play, such as wrestling, toy guns or swords, or play fighting. These activities are not always problematic, but children with impulse control issues can carry things too far or have a hard time calming down.
- Closely monitor high-risk situations. Be aware of situations that have led to aggressive, angry, or unsafe behaviors in the past. Be ready to step in before things get out of hand.
- Praise preemptively. Frequently praise your child for asking first, for keeping hands to self, or for taking turns **before** disruptive behavior occurs.
- Be clear about playtime rules. Create and consider posting a set of rules regarding behaviors like hitting, threatening, and following directions. Review these rules together before playdates or parties, and be sure your child understands the consequences for breaking them. Form a discipline strategy that you can use consistently, both at home and in public.

### **Summary**

Children's social lives are complex and varied and there are many ways to be "successful" socially. Some children feel most comfortable with one or two close friends, whereas others prefer to be part of a large social network. Most children eventually find their niche and are able to achieve their social goals. With the right mixture of empathy and involvement, parents can aid greatly in this process.

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit [www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html](http://www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html).

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators, and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

**Giving Children Back Their Childhood  
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