

## Helping Your Anxious Child Make Friends

One of childhood's toughest lessons is learning how to be a good friend. However, some anxious children and teens find it tough to face their fears in social situations. Most often, they desperately want to be accepted by peers but their anxiety is holding them back. Some help from Mom or Dad can go a long way to enabling anxious children make friends.

Three steps to get started:

**1. Listen.** First, give your child a chance to talk. Your child may be feeling rejected by peers, and may be sensitive or self-conscious about the subject. Maintain a curious, supportive and caring attitude, and take care not to blame your child. To find out more, you may need to ask concrete questions, such as:

- *Did you play/hang out with anyone today?*
- *What did you do together?*
- *Why do you like playing/hanging out with that friend?*
- *What were some of the other kids doing?*
- *Is there someone at school that you would like to play/hang out with? (Get them thinking about who they might like to have as a friend)*

**Idea:** For younger children, make a list of all the students in your child's class. This way, you can ask about the children in his or her class by name. If you have a class photo to match up with names, even better!.

Older children and teens may be more reluctant to go into too much detail. If this is the case, don't push. Let your child know that you are there if he or she wants to talk. Share some ideas about what might be helpful, and state that making friends is like any other skill – you can improve with practice!

## 2. Observe your child's social skills.

Look for any behaviors in your child that may be inadvertently turning off other children. For example, does your child avoid eye contact with other people? Does your child speak so softly that others can't hear? Does your child smile?

There are several ways you can help coach your child in this area:

**Role-play.** Role-playing is one of the best ways for your child to practice new social skills in a safe setting. The role-plays can be simple, such as practicing how to say hello and goodbye, or more challenging, such as starting a conversation, asking a question, or phoning a new friend. It is important to begin with one or two specific social skills, so as not to overwhelm or confuse your child.

Some examples of social skills include:

- Body language skills (e.g. smiling, eye contact, posture, facial expression)
- Voice Quality (e.g. volume of speech, clarity)
- Basic Conversation Skills (e.g. saying hello and goodbye, introductions, asking questions, etc.)
- Friendship Skills (e.g. offering help, sharing, asking to join in, using the phone)

### **6-Step Role-Play:**

**Step 1:** Together with your child, come up with a situation to role-play. Ensure the situation is as realistic as possible. For example, asking to play with a classmate at recess, or even just smiling and saying hello.

**Step 2.** First, show your child (“model”) how to act out the situation, using the skill(s) that you are practicing. For the first couple of times, ask your child to pretend to be the other person.

**Step 3.** Next, it’s your child’s turn to practice! Ask your child to act it out, paying careful attention to the specific social skills you are focusing on.

**Step 4.** Immediately afterwards, give lots of praise about what your child did well. Look hard to find any small, yet noticeable, signs of improvement. For example:

- *Well done! You smiled and looked me in the eye when you asked me the question. You looked very friendly.*

**Step 5.** Mention one thing about the skill that your child might need to practice a bit more, and try the role-play again. Repeat over and over, until you are certain your child can do it spontaneously. Remember to make these role plays fun, so it doesn’t feel like a chore. Humor helps! Some other examples of feedback include:

- *That was a really great try! Your voice was nice and loud. How about we try it again, and this time you look up at me just a little bit more.*
- *I like how you asked me how I am. It showed that you were interested in me. I wonder if it might be a good idea to think of one or two more things to say afterwards, maybe about something we both have in common. Let’s think of a few things, and try again.*

**Step 6:** Finally, practice the new skills (e.g. smiling and eye contact) out in the community. For example, have your child ask a store owner a question, order lunch at the fast-food counter, or introduce themselves to the librarian. Give your child lots of praise after!

**For younger children,** you can also use dolls or puppets to act out situations. Books about making friends are helpful too – ask your librarian for suggestions.

**For older children and teens,** ask your child to watch other students carefully, to see how they deal with different social situations. For instance, how do other kids join in games at recess? How do other students choose who to sit with in the cafeteria? What do they say and do? This “detective” approach can be used to help your child discover his or her own ways to handle different social challenges.

**Idea:** Videotape or audiotape your child at home. Reviewing these tapes with your child allows children and teens to see themselves as others see them. This can also make role-plays more enjoyable and powerful.

In general, it is important to review and practice new skills with your child prior to social outings. Anxious children feel more confident if they have a plan.

Here's a sample conversation of a parent helping a child make a plan.

**Parent:** *So, when you get to the party, who is the first person you are going to say "hi" to, like we practiced?*

**Child:** *Um...I don't think I know anyone going...I don't know....*

**Parent:** *Okay, let's see. Who **do** you know?*

**Child:** *Um...I know Amy, it's her party. I guess I will look for Amy and say "happy birthday" to her first.*

**Parent:** *That sounds like a good idea.*

**Child:** *But what if she is busy or in the bathroom?*

**Parent:** *Well, what could you do instead if that happens?*

**Child:** *Um...everyone might be looking at me when I walk in. I don't know.*

**Parent:** *They might look at you, but that's probably because they want to see who just walked in the door. That's normal. So, what do you think you could do if that happens?*

**Child:** *I guess if I don't see Amy, I could go and bring my present over to the present pile or something.*

**Parent:** *That is something else you could do. Anything else?*

**Child:** *Amy's sister might be there. I could go say "hi" to her I guess...*

**Parent:** *That's a great idea! Amy's sister might also help you talk to other kids, or if a game is going on, she will help you join in. Now you have a couple of different plans!*

### 3. Create some friendship goals with your child

A friendship goal is something your child can work towards that will increase his or her chances of making new friends. Depending on how socially anxious your child is, you may need to start with very small friendship goals. It is important to work on one goal at a time. Wait until one goal is reached before moving on to the next. Some friendship goals might include:

- Saying "hi" to a classmate
- Asking to borrow something
- Sharing a treat with another student
- Asking to play with a child (even before recess starts)
- Asking to join in (e.g., a game)
- Asking a friend over for a play date
- Phoning a classmate

At the beginning, your child may find some of these goals too risky. In this case, the same principles apply that are included in the [Helping Your Child Face Fears - Exposure](#). For younger children, you can write down the friendship goals on the [Hopping down the Worry Path](#) activity sheet. For older children or teens, use the [Climbing my Fear Ladder](#) activity sheet. On this sheet, choose a friendship goal and write it at the top (for example, invite a certain classmate

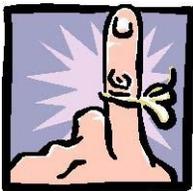
over to rent a movie). Then, think of smaller, step-by-step goals that will take your child closer to achieving that friendship goal, such as sharing a snack with the classmate at lunch, asking to borrow a pen, or sitting beside the classmate at lunch or in the school library.

**Below are some extra tips:**

**Encourage extra-curricular activities.** Organized clubs, lessons, or sports are all a great chance for your child to meet peers. Your child is guaranteed to have at least one thing in common with the others! It also gives your child a chance to meet new peers outside of the classroom or school.

**Set up regular play dates.** Help your child nurture one or two friendships through regular play dates. First, ask your child who he or she would like to invite over. If your child has difficulty thinking of someone, you may want to arrange a play date with another parent who has a child of the same-age. Choose an activity that will be really attractive to the other child, such as a “make your own pizza” party, a trip to an amusement park, or going out to a movie. Initially, a teenager may prefer to invite a friend along on a family outing, such as going to the movies, a backyard BBQ, a football or hockey game, or an outdoor activity (e.g. hiking).

#### **More Tips for Planning a Play Date:**



**Start by inviting only one child.** Inviting two children over can end up in a two-on-one situation, and your child may be the one left out. Until friendships become more solid, it is best to invite one child over at a time. Then, you can build up to a larger group of three or four children.

**Short and sweet play dates.** Make initial play dates brief, so the friend leaves on a high note and wants to come back again.

**Make your home fun and welcoming for other children.** Your child is probably more likely to invite friends home if he has good food and fun games. Ask your child to participate in selecting — or even preparing — snacks and activities.

**Supervise, but don't be interfere!** Remember, your child is the host. Unless your assistance is needed (e.g. to referee), you should greet your child's guest warmly, make small talk, then move to the background.

After the play date is finished, take a minute to talk about the visit. What parts went well? What parts went poorly? Why? Getting this feedback from your child will help you to track your child's difficulties. It also gives you a chance to praise positive behaviors, and shows that you care about your child's social life. This information will also help you role-play future play dates.

**Have a regular family games night.** Playing games with your child gives you a chance to witness how your child plays. You can note his or her strengths, and also see the areas that need some coaching. This will also give you an idea of what kinds of successful games or activities to include on future play dates.

**Give your child "icebreakers".** Pack some snacks or a fun toy in your child's backpack or bag to share with other classmates.

**Recruit the teacher (or school counselor).** Your child's teacher (or school counselor) probably has several ideas about how to help your child build social skills and foster friendships with other classmates. For example, the teacher can:

- pair up your child with a classmate who may be a good match for a project or activity

- invite your child to help out on tasks that involve “low risk” interactions with classmates (for example, collecting papers)
- encourage others to appreciate your child by having your child share a special hobby or talent

**Keep in mind...**

- Take care not to make your child feel like he or she is being forced to make friends. When a child is anxious, too much pressure can make him or her feel even more self-conscious and insecure. Gentle coaching, encouragement, and praise for bravery are key!
- Not all children are social butterflies. Some need more time to observe a situation before joining in. Let your child progress at his or her own pace.
- Some children will naturally have lots of friends, and some will prefer to have only a few close friends. Quality friendships are more important than quantity.
- Developing social competence is an important life skill, and should not be taken for granted. Modeling, support, and constant practice in building and using social skills will increase the quality of life our children and teens experience.