

# Helping Grade Schoolers Manage Social Situations in Healthy Ways

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# Objectives

- Promote healthy peer interactions
- Learn conflict resolution approaches
- Help children who struggle with social difficulties
- Promote healthy social media and screen use



# Benefits of Healthy Social Skills in Youth

- More positive, enjoyable experiences at home, school, and activities
- Improved academic performance
- Greater feelings of belonging and engagement
- Increased rates of employment as adults
- Greater rates of family stability as adults

• (E.g., Beasley, et al., 2022; Perolli Shehu, 2019)



# Objective 1: Promote Healthy Social Interactions



## Key Points:

- Social skills are a part of every child's development.
- We can help our kids build these skills by specifically focusing on them every day.
- This is done through teaching, modeling, and highlighting those skills, just like any other.



Almost Any  
Time Can Be  
The Right Time  
To Teach  
Positive  
Interactions!



# Techniques for Starting Positive Social Interactions

- Teach and practice socially appropriate scripts to get a friend's attention
  - Greet them in the morning
  - Invite them to join an activity
- Provide words of praise or good-will
  - Look for and comment on things that others do well
  - Express appreciation
  - Share approval for helpful behaviors of others
- Share art supplies or toys



# Using a Team Concept to Promote Positive Social Interactions

- Most often thought about when participating in sports
- Can also apply to just about any group activity
- This can be difficult for school-aged children to consider naturally
  - “Scoreboard” of sports, grades, accolades etc. are understandably emphasized
  - Concrete nature of the young child’s brain makes it hard to “see the bigger picture”



# Using a Team Concept to Promote Positive Social Interactions

- Emphasize “a winning culture” to kids whenever possible
- A winning culture is often a supportive culture. Teams do better when they work well together!
- Families and those who work with kids can emphasize this through:
  - Energized statements asserting “how we do things”
  - Modeling behavior we want kids to enact
  - Pre-emptively coaching kids, and providing praise/validation



## Objective 2: Learn Conflict Resolution Approaches



### Key Points:

- Conflict/resolution is a normal part of childhood.
- Think about how a child's brain reacts to frustration or disappointment.
- Focus on specific parts of the brain to build a child's social competence.





Sharing? Or Not?!



Celebrating? Or losing?!



How Do We Help Kids Work Through Conflict? It Can Start with Perspective.



From Curious Kids:



Brain Development in School-Aged Children

# Brain-Focused “To-Do” Lists To Build Social Skills

## “Downstairs Brain” (Emotions/Impulses)

- Identify Emotions
- Regulate Emotional Intensity
- Inhibit Reactions

## “Upstairs Brain” (Thinking/Problem-Solving)

- Verbalize goals
- Name concerns (if necessary)
- Identify another point of view
- Think about the benefits of positive social interactions



# Resources for Emotional Regulation Exercises

## EMOTION AND STRESS REGULATION MAGIC TOOL BOX <sup>1</sup>



University of Maryland:



They Are The Future:



Raising Independent Kids:



# 5 Steps of Problem-Solving

Dividing the problem-solving process into steps can help them easily follow through. Here are five problem-solving steps to try out:

1. **Break down the problem.** A clear grasp of the problem helps come up with well-targeted solutions. Try to define it and understand the details. What are the circumstances? Who does it affect and how?
2. **Brainstorm possible solutions.** After having a well-defined problem at hand, you can start brainstorming. At this step, don't focus on the specifics. Simply list the ideas that come up. You can use post-its!
3. **Assess the pros and cons of each solution.** Now is the time to think of the possible outcomes of the solutions. Does it work for everyone involved? Is it easy to implement, and if not, is the effort worth the outcome?
4. **Decide on a solution.** After carefully assessing each solution, pick the one that works the best. Here, you can start planning how the solution can be realized. What do you need to make it work? What are your backup solutions?
5. **Put it to test.** Finally, you can implement the solution you have decided on. Observe how it plays out and discuss the results! Did it go as expected? What could be done differently? If the outcome does not match your expectations, try out other possible solutions or start the process again with the experience you gained on the first attempt.



## Resources for Social Problem Solving

Twin Science:



Lerner Child Development:



# Objective 3: Help Children Who Struggle with Social Difficulties



## Key Points:

- It can be difficult to determine whether kids are shy vs anxious.
- Gentle encouragement can help shy kids maintain social skills.
- More structured techniques can help kids with social anxiety.



# Introversion/Shyness Vs. Social Anxiety

## Introversion/Shyness

- Generally more reserved
- May prefer small groups or being alone
- Seems to “recharge” by doing quiet, solitary activities
- Withdrawal does not involve fear of rejection



## Social Anxiety

- Feels terror in social situations
- Thoughts/worries about rejection
- Withdrawal is based in fear
- Previously would (or would otherwise) take part in social activities

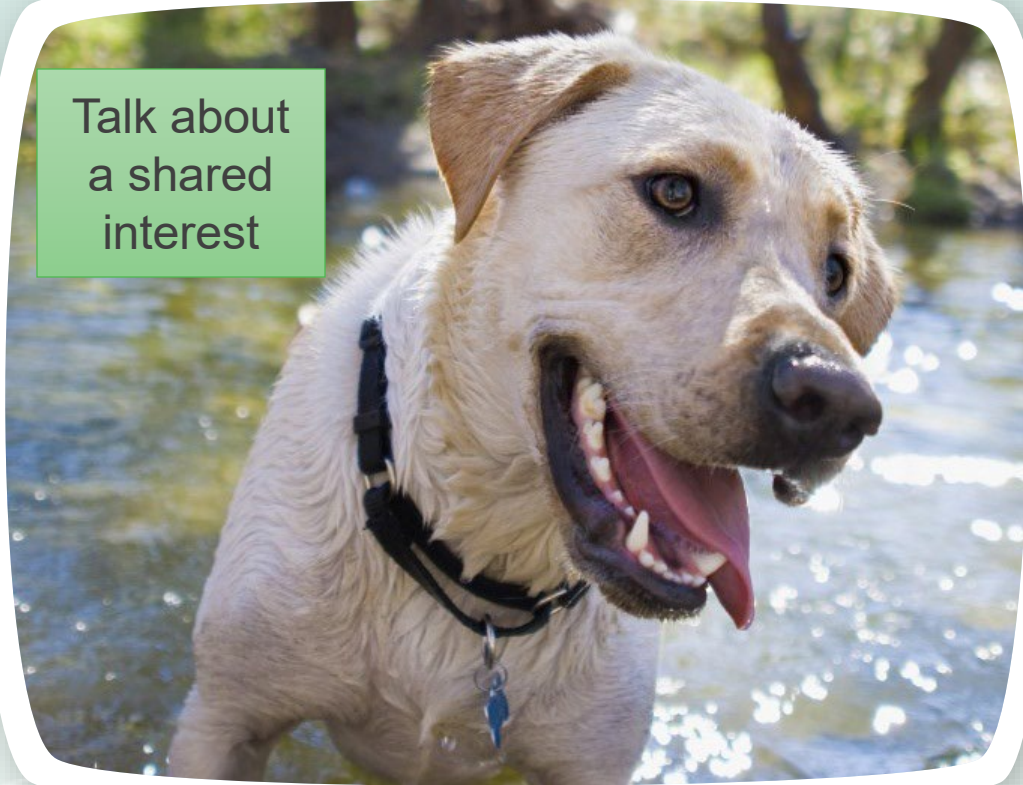


# For Introverted Kids

- Introversion is a personality style, and not a mental health concern
- Introverted kids can develop social anxiety if they have greatly limited social interactions
- The key is to encourage/set up SOME social activities
- A few close friends can be enough
- Exposure to larger groups at times is recommended
  - Can be brief
  - Can center on the child's interests



Talk about  
a shared  
interest



Ask about  
a recent  
event



Do something  
fun

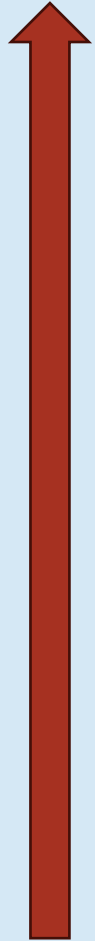


How to Initiate Positive, Enjoyable Interactions for Kids With Reluctant Behaviors

# How to Help Kids with Social Anxiety

- Validate the child's experience
- Show support
- Identify any core negative events, and address if needed
  - If this is rooted in non-bullying social conflict, it may be helpful to practice responses
- Utilize thinking and experiential strategies to help build self-confidence
- If the anxiety continues, consider school supports or an assessment for brief therapy





Start a conversation with someone

Ask the person sitting next to you a question

Join a conversation that acquaintances of yours are having

Join a conversation that your friends are having

Give a compliment to someone

Say "Hi" to someone in class I don't know

Say words other than "Hi" to classmates

Say "Hi" to classmate



From Mayo Clinic's  
"Anxiety Coach"  
website:



Example "Fear Ladder" to Help Kids Gain Social Confidence

## Objective 4: Promote Healthy Social Media and Screen Use



### Key Points:

- Screens and even social media are now an everyday part of kids' social lives.
- Balance screen time with other activities.
- Talk about healthy, safe online interactions and social skills development.



# Screen Time: How Much??

- Previously: recommendation was 1 hour/day or less
- Per AACAP: school aged children are on screens avg. of 4-6 hrs/day
- School-aged children are on social media (YouTube is the most popular)
- Age restrictions are often circumvented
- Video games, texting, and other screens are a major (or primary) communication/social activity
- Now: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: 1 hr/weekday + 3hrs/weekend



- Research on video games/screen time, and physical, mental and behavioral health is mixed
- In general, violent or competitive content does not result in aggressive behavior
- However, existing mood or behavioral concerns may worsen with increased screen activities
- The bottom line: the family's best judgment is the rule
- It is recommended that children adopt the health behaviors of the family, while respecting that peers and other families may have varying experiences

e.g., Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016



What Does the Research Say about Kids' Tech Use?

# Suggestions for Promoting Healthy Tech Use

- Most families implement some form of restriction
- Augment restrictions with discussions about the benefits and risks of online activities
- Talk about various platforms, and explore them as a family
- Invite children to share their own thoughts, concerns, and limits
- Encourage supportive conversations about healthy online interactions
- Discuss, rehearse, and positively reinforce healthy interactions and behaviors



- Make it clear that you expect your kids to treat others with respect, and to never post hurtful or embarrassing messages.
- And ask them to always tell you about any harassing or bullying messages that others post.
- Emphasize that “friendly” interactions do NOT mean sharing private or sensitive information online.
- Follow the "WWGS?" (What Would Grandma Say?) rule. Teach kids not to share anything on social media that they wouldn't want their families to see.
- If you don't know someone, do not friend them online.
- Empower kids to know they can simply turn off the tech when they encounter negative comments from others online. Often, it is healthier to disconnect.
- Rehearse or encourage kids to share (and hear themselves talk through) the ways they will respond/set their own healthy boundaries.

(e.g., Nemours)



Supportive  
Conversations about  
Healthy Online  
Interactions

# Resources

## Beyond Screen Time: Help Your Kids Build Healthy Media Use Habits

Media in all forms, including TV, computers and smartphones can affect how children feel, learn, think and behave. However, as a parent, you are still the most important influence.

Read on for tips on how to help your children develop **healthy media use habits** early on.



American Academy of Pediatrics:



London School of Economics:



Raisingchildren:



# Summary

- Social skills and interactions are a normal part of development.
- Taking a proactive, teaching approach can help kids build healthy relationships.
- Consider developmentally-focused skills to manage frustrations or disappointments with siblings and peers.
- Supportive techniques can promote increased social experiences for those who are reluctant or anxious.
- Consider online social experiences as a part of growing up, and help kids develop healthy behaviors and boundaries.
- There are a number of resources available to support family discussions about social interactions with their kids.



Questions/Comments?

THANK YOU for attending!

