

Social Motivation

Is your child wanting to engage but not sure how?



Is your child:

- Into topics and interests that isolate him or her like solitary computer games or obscure facts?
- Always having his or her nose in a book or reciting facts?
- Appearing to be in his or her own world; perhaps layered in fantasy?
- Always writing fan fiction; so that you wonder about a break from reality?
- Wanting to engage with others but having no idea what to say?
- Responding in conversation, but only after a long awkward pause?
- Unsure about why he or she would want a friend; what is the purpose?
- Isolated now, but before 3rd grade he or she had lots of friends?
- Interested in having friends or not but either way seeming clueless; appearing socially awkward in conversation and interaction with peers?

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

As a parent, do you worry about your child's social connections? Does it seem like he or she did just fine in kindergarten but in upper grades things are different? Perhaps social connections seem more immature than what you've noticed with other children. Maybe as your child reaches middle school there is not the depth to friendship, and everyone

feels like an acquaintance. Your child may say “I have so many friends” or he or she may say “I don’t want any” but either way you worry about those connections.

Social motivation is different than social savvy. Social motivation means that the child cares about making friends, but this motivation does not equate with social success.

Yes, there are those children who isolate themselves with a book at every recess, recite facts from nonfiction, or talk endlessly of a topic like Star Wars or law enforcement so much that you wonder if they can talk about something else. There are also children who want very much to make friends, who are very socially motivated but also very socially unaware.

Social Development: By grade school, we should see children understanding social relationships, knowing what to say to a peer, and recognizing deeper interests and areas to connect. A child should not simply talk about one interest or get stuck on a topic without being able to shift to something else. A bright pre-teen or teen should not appear puzzled by the question “What do you do for fun?” Children should be able to respond to open ended questions with a variety of responses.

During typical social development, we want to see children coming up with what to say to others easily; knowing how to start a conversation, keep an interaction going, and how to politely end the exchange. They also have to understand social rules; knowing when to be a leader and when to follow. Children should know what actions are “too much”, too physical, or taking it too far. Some children appear to follow others all the time, to stand on the sidelines and never engage in a leadership role, while others are bossy and too controlling.

Social motivation is a critical first step in social development. Kids have to care in order to even begin to make friends. In order to be successful socially, they also have to learn how to identify who good friends could be, find friends with common interests and skillfully join a group of children who are playing together. To gain social savvy and gain friends, it is important not to be overly formal, invade personal space, act bossy, or be too quiet and passive to be noticed.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

One important diagnostic consideration when a child lacks social motivation is whether this is a personality trait or a sign of a disability. Clinically, social motivation is an important factor to consider in child development, but it does not rule in or out a disorder that is social in nature.

Social motivation includes:

- a desire to connect
- enjoying time around other children

- trying to engage with other children
- enjoying social settings and activities
- attempting conversation with others

Shyness, introversion, and ‘slow to warm’:

Shy children are nervous when meeting new people but then will approach peers once they are more familiar and comfortable. They are still able to make friends and develop deep connections with them over time.

Introverted children can be socially motivated but they may prefer time on their own and may be less inclined to introduce themselves to people. Introverted children may not ‘get their energy’ from others and need time to ‘recharge’ after being around people for long. This would only be a concern if they are unable to make friends or connect with other children.

A ‘*slow to warm*’ child is one who may have a difficult time separating from parents initially but will eventually become quite social as an adult spends more time with them. None of these personality types indicate poor social motivation, and are probably not cause for concern.

Continuum of social motivation

If your child is not necessarily a social butterfly or a bubbly personality, there may be no reason to worry. Consider the continuum below to see if your child appears to be on track.

Toddlers and preschool children should smile at and approach each other, take interest in similar toys, stories or jokes. For example, a class of two-year olds may all love to make the same funny face after one peer initiated it. Preschoolers learn each other’s names and start to seek each other out in play.

In ***kindergarten***, children who are socially motivated, share information about themselves, and answer questions. They also play together and begin to take turns and to develop as leaders, social allies or followers.

By ***mid-grade school***, children should want to have playdates or get-togethers with friends. They should not just be satisfied with seeing another child or “best friend” at school.

Children in ***late elementary and middle school*** start to align with peers before parents in some situations. For example, at the swim team picnic children run around together, leaving the parents behind. They plan and initiate playdates sleepovers and activities just roping parents in for permission. Children start to want to spend a great deal of time with peers.

For example, some children with autism are highly socially motivated. As social demands increase, and social communication becomes more sophisticated these children can become lost. They may not know what to say or how to approach others. They may perceive others as being negative or excluding them socially, when this is not the case.

Children may want friends very much but find it hard to make lasting connections. Socially motivated children with autism have challenges with social communication. It is important to remember from a clinical or diagnostic perspective that being socially motivated does not rule out the diagnosis of autism.

Many children with autism want friends. On the other hand, not all children are socially motivated. This may initiate from a history of social rejection and negative experiences. Alternatively, a child who has social challenges may not see the point in having friends. He or she may not have strong **social perspective taking** (understanding others' thoughts feelings and behavior), may not see why it is important to consider other's views and opinions, and may be completely happy buried in a nonfiction book about rare bird species.

Social motivation does not assume social savvy. It is lovely if a child has social motivation, whether he or she has a disorder or not. If social motivation is present in a child with weak social skills, then the next step can be social skill development.

Social Savvy in Kids: Some children need to learn to take turns, communicate in a way that is not bossy, listen to others' comments, ideas and read their body language. Other children need to learn what to say, how to express interests and how to know what others like. Children should begin to make friends and have close friends when they can master some of these skills.

Why Friends? If a child is not socially motivated, then in teaching social skills there is the added step of teaching the child why having friends might be important. Perhaps a child has been rejected one too many times, perhaps he sees others through a negative lens or he likes things to go his own way. It may feel like involving others would place undue burden. Tasks he finds fun now would be less fun with another participant who might not do things just the same way.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD STRUGGLES SOCIALLY

For the child who wants to engage:

Strategies at home: Practice with your child. Set up playdates or activities with a clear structure to relieve some of the unknown. A playdate at the zoo, the pool or at an arts

and crafts center provides an expected structure while going to a friend's house leaves lots of unstructured time and questions like "What should we do next?" There is more time for argument or disagreement.

If your child struggles socially you want to first build confidence in social scenarios that you can practice or talk about before. At the zoo, kids can take turns deciding what animals to see next. There are opportunities to take turns and compromise and conversation topics are obvious.

Practice conversation for the playdate depending on the plan. If it is the zoo, talk about favorite animals, comment on what animals are doing and learn about animals' behaviors and habitats. If the playdate is for arts and crafts practice positive comments like "I love the color of your tree" or "cool clay house." Practice asking questions "what are you going to draw next?"

Asking questions can be a great thing for a socially motivated child to learn. When there is a long pause, ask a question of the other person and listen to the answer.

Help your child plan the text message, call or email to set up a playdate or activity giving him or her more ownership of the plans. Finally, be sure you are choosing a good peer to spend time with. Choose someone your child likes, who has similar interests and is kind and friendly. Not all socially motivated children can read their peers well and some may choose peers who would not make great friends.

Children who struggle socially need a lot of practice in these social settings. It is relatively easy to get the socially motivated child to agree to an activity or playdate or party. Take advantage of this and plan something weekly, more often in the summer. Practicing social skills is the way to improve them.

Additionally, consider a social skills group that is clinician led with similar aged children who have similarly developed intellectual abilities. This is another form of practice that can be very helpful for the motivated child who is failing socially.

For the child who does not want to engage:

This is a bit harder because some children reject social opportunities. It will be important to try to understand if your child's perspective comes from a history of rejection, a lack of skills or very restricted interests that he or she does not see the need to engage in socially. Consider this when you choose social activities to plan:

Be strategic in planning the social activities. Plan things that are highly motivating because of the activity. Pick a peer who you know your child is comfortable with. Go to the science museum to learn about outer space, join a Minecraft camp for a week in the summer, go to the lake if your child loves to swim.

Make the activity motivating and help your child build success in relationships with other children who also like the same things. Build skills the way we discussed above but be

selective in the type of activities. Initially stay away from busy picnics or birthday parties that might make your child feel miserable.

Thinking about the reasons why: Poor social skills (whether motivated or not) can be a sign of a disability such as Autism. If you suspect your child may have a disability, it is worthwhile to get an evaluation and to pursue associated therapies.

Autism: Children with **Autism Spectrum Disorders** may or may not be socially motivated but are likely to be *socially awkward*. When evaluated through tasks on the ADOS-2, a child may fail to let another person get in a word. He may give a lecture about air conditioners or tell you every detail about his fish. When you say in turn “Oh, I have some pets,” this statement is met with no response, a change of subject or an awkward “(long pause) Oh. Cool.”

Nothing to Say. Another child may look at the examiner and smile pleasantly but have no response to “What do you like to do during the summer?” or “What’s your favorite ___?” The same child may have no trouble with the question “What do our lungs do for our body?” The open ended question can be daunting though, and some motivated children just don’t know how to respond.

Reading Nonverbal Cues. Children with Autism tend to have challenges with conversation because taking others’ perspectives is challenging [1]. It is also hard to read other people when you are not paying attention to their nonverbal cues. Often, children with ASD don’t make well-coordinated eye contact, so they aren’t looking to see how the conversation partner is responding nonverbally. They don’t know when the partner is expecting a response or when he or she is moving on to something else [1].

All About Facts. Also, children with ASD tend to have restricted interests. They really enjoy talking about a certain subject, which may quickly bore another child who doesn’t share that interest. They struggle with open ended tasks and ideas which makes sharing facts a lot easier than reciprocal conversation.

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [Social skills \(Socializing\)](#): poor social skills may lead to difficulties with conversations
- [Attention \(Focusing\)](#): children with attention problems may have trouble following along in a conversation [7,8]
- [Restricted patterns of behavior or interests \(Repetitive Behavior, Perseverating, Rigidity, Rigid Behavior\)](#)
- [Pragmatic language](#): children who do not understand social language may struggle with conversations

- [Receptive language](#): children with poor comprehension skills may have difficulty with conversations
- [Self-Esteem](#): children with poor self-esteem may not have the confidence to make social connections or the willingness to fail or make a mis-step. This is why building social skills and social successes can be so important as it builds confidence

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. **Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#): includes deficits in social communication and restricted interests or behaviors. In children, social skills deficits are present for ASD even while some children have social motivation and others do not
- [Language Disorder](#): includes deficits in language that impact social skills. If a child does not have strong receptive language, even when expressive language is okay, conversation will be limited. Children with ASD sometimes have language impairments, so language is an important area to have assessed
- [Intellectual Disability](#): includes deficits in cognitive ability (low IQ scores) that may lead to a delay in reaching social milestones. Global delays, not just in the area of language and conversation skills, can be present

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child, or to *consult 'live'* with a psychologist. In-person and virtual assessment services are also available with CLEAR
- [Psychologist](#) or [Neuropsychologist](#): to provide an evaluation for diagnostic clarification; a psychologist may also run a social skills group to provide direct strategies and practice to improve social skills
- [Psychotherapist](#): to provide CBT interventions that have been shown to be effective in helping children with ASD make gains in recognizing and understanding emotions, improving perspective taking and social skills and managing co-occurring depression and anxiety
- [ABA Therapist](#): to provide Applied Behavior Analysis using principles of reinforcement to increase desired behaviors like communication and language and to decrease undesired behaviors like hitting/tantrums. For older children,

ABA may be a good way to address social skills, conversation, and social perspective taking

- [Speech and Language Pathologist](#): to provide speech and/or language support. An SLP is an important member of your treatment team if your child has language delays. Treatment works best if all team members can communicate with one another to make sure your child is getting comprehensive services

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- [CELF-5](#): this measure of language assesses Vocabulary, Language Comprehension, Expressive and Receptive Language, Pragmatic Language, and Language Memory
- [WISC-V](#): this measure of intelligence provides information on abilities in verbal comprehension, fluid reasoning, visual spatial, working memory, and processing speed. Understanding a child's cognitive profile can help us understand strengths and weaknesses that may be associated with ASD. The WISC-V can also help guide what other measures need to be administered to get a better picture of overall functioning.
- [ADOS-2 Module 3](#): this measure of social communication and restricted, repetitive behavior, is used to rule in or out the presence of an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The ADOS-2 gives information that can guide the formation of treatment goals

LEARN MORE ABOUT SOCIAL MOTIVATION

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Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/>

[2] Baker, Jed. (Retrieved 2017). Social skills books and resources for ASD.

<http://socialskillstrainingproject.com/books.html>

[3] Berns, Roberta M. (2010). *Child, family, school, community: Socialization and support*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Child-Family-School-Community-Socialization/dp/1305088972/>

[4] Mendler, Allen (2013). *Teaching your students how to have a conversation*.

Amazon: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/teaching-your-students-conversation-allen-mendler>

[5] Ozonoff, Sally & Dawson, Geraldine & McPartland, James C. (2014). *A parent's guide to high functioning autism spectrum disorder: How to meet the challenges and help your child thrive.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Parents-High-Functioning-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder/dp/1462517471/>

[6] UCLA PEERS Clinic <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers>

[7] Giler, Janet Z. (2000). *Socially ADDept: A manual for parents of children with ADHD and / or learning disabilities.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Socially-ADDept-Children-Learning-Disabilities/dp/0966696921/>

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Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Socially-ADDept-Teaching-Children-Aspergers/dp/047059683X/>

[9] Baker, Jed. (2006) *Social skills picture book for high school and beyond.*
<https://www.amazon.com/Social-Skills-Picture-School-Beyond/dp/1932565353/>

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<http://socialskillstrainingproject.com/books.html>

[11] Gray, Carol & Attwood, Tony (2010). *The New Social Story Book, Revised and Expanded 10th Anniversary Edition: Over 150 Social Stories that Teach Everyday Social Skills to Children with Autism or Asperger's Syndrome, and their Peers.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Social-Story-Revised-Expanded-Anniversary/dp/1935274058/>

[12] McConnell, Nancy & LoGuidice (1998). *That's Life! Social language.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Thats-Social-Language-Nancy-McConnell/dp/0760602247/>

Children's books on social skills:

Brown, Laurie Krasny & Brown, Marc (2001). *How to be a friend: A guide to making friends and keeping them (Dino life guides for families)*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/How-Be-Friend-Friends-Families/dp/0316111538/>

Cook, Julia (2012). *Making Friends is an art!: A children's book on making friends (Happy to be, you and me)*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Making-Friends-Art-Childrens-Paperback/dp/B00DCVWAJI/>

Cooper, Scott (2005). *Speak up and get along!: Learn the mighty might, thought chop, and more tools to make friends, stop teasing, and feel good about yourself*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Speak-Up-Get-Along-Yourself/dp/1575421828/>

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Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Understand-Care-Learning-Along-Book/dp/1575421313/>

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How-to-help-your-child-make-friends

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