



Helping Your Child Build Social Understanding

A Brief Guide for
Parents and Caregivers

Understanding Social Development

It's through social development that we learn to connect with others, understand emotions, communicate needs, and build relationships. These skills are essential for friendships, learning, and emotional well-being.

Many acquire these skills as a natural part of human development. However, for others, especially neurodiverse children and adolescents, including those with ADHD, autism, or other social communication challenges, teaching from skilled professionals offers lifelong benefits.

When social cues like body language, tone of voice, and unspoken rules are missed, or processed slowly, social situations can cause a lot of anxiety and stress.

This guide helps parents understand social development, recognize common challenges children and adolescents face, and learn the types of targeted support that make a positive difference.

Did you
know?

UP TO
15%

of kids under
the age of 17 are
diagnosed with
some form of
neurodiversity



Signs Your Child or Adolescent May Be Struggling With Social Development

Every child develops socially at a uniquely individual pace. Some social challenges are a natural part of development, while others that persist may signal a need for extra support. If a child or adolescent consistently exhibits one or more of the following behaviors, the child or adolescent may need support to build social understanding.

- 1 Difficulty Making or Keeping Friends**
Your child may want to connect with peers but struggle to start conversations, join play, or maintain friendships over time.
- 2 Preference for Being Alone**
While some independent time is healthy, consistently choosing to play alone, especially when peers are nearby, may reflect uncertainty or discomfort with social interaction.
- 3 Trouble Understanding Social Cues**
Your child or adolescent may miss facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, or sarcasm, which can lead to misunderstandings with peers.
- 4 Challenges With Conversation**
Conversations may feel one-sided, off-topic, very brief, or repetitive, or your child or adolescent may have difficulty taking turns while talking.
- 5 Emotional Reactions During Social Situations**
Social interactions may trigger frustration, anxiety, shutdowns, or outbursts when expectations feel unclear or overwhelming.
- 6 Avoidance of Group Activities**
Your child or adolescent may resist birthday parties, playdates, group projects, team activities, or even school attendance due to uncertainty about social rules or fear of making mistakes.
- 7 Difficulty With Flexibility**
Your child may struggle when games change, rules aren't clear, or peers have different ideas, making cooperation challenging.
- 8 Limited Awareness of Others' Feelings**
Your child or adolescent, despite being caring and well-intentioned, may not notice when others are bored, upset, or uncomfortable.
- 9 Frequent Social Misunderstandings**
Peers or adults may misinterpret your child or adolescent's behavior, humor, or tone, which can result in awkwardness, conflict, or isolation.
- 10 Self-Doubt**
Your child or adolescent may talk about feeling left out, different, or unsure, or may appear withdrawn or exhausted after social interactions.

What You Can Do at Home

Try Social Role-Play:

Practice greetings, turn-taking, sharing, and expressing feelings in daily life. Describe why these matter to others.

Create Structured Social

Opportunities: Provide guidance, support, and practice during play dates, games, or family activities.

Read Social Stories or Books:

Discuss characters' feelings, choices, and reactions to build curiosity about "the why" behind actions.

Praise Effort and Small Successes:

Celebrate attempts to join play or to express needs and emotions.

Teach Emotional

Regulation: Practice calming strategies like deep breaths, physical activity, or taking a break. Adults can take part, too!

Encourage Cooperative Activities:

Games, chores, or creative projects can provide opportunities for teamwork, turn-taking, and flexibility.



How the Stern Center Helps

Expert teaching and practice = meaningful social growth

At the Stern Center for Language and Learning, our team of specialists has extensive experience supporting children, adolescents, and adults for social success. We provide targeted instruction, combining evidence-based strategies in a warm, supportive environment that affirms every individual's unique strengths.

Families benefit from practical tools, ongoing guidance and communication, and a collaborative approach designed to help children build confidence, connect with peers, and succeed both socially and academically. Your child or adolescent receives expert support in one-to-one or group sessions that create lifelong benefits.



Spring and Summer Sessions are now open.

Contact us today to learn more.

802-276-8681 or **social@sterncenter.org**



“From elementary school through to life as a young adult, I could not ask for a better resource than the Stern Center to help my son continue to grow and learn how to be his best self.”

—Parent of a Stern Center Student



Perspective Taking

Perspective taking requires us to adapt thoughts, actions, and words to consider other people. We help students understand personal perspective and better comprehend the motivations and intentions of others.



Communication

Social communication involves understanding why we use variations in tone, rate, pitch, and vocabulary to communicate with others across a variety of social contexts. Our experts help learners find ways to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs.



Self-Regulation

We help students handle everyday life and monitor their own responses so they can approach school, work, and life with more focus and steadiness. Success builds by setting goals, reflecting on experiences, and celebrating achievements.