

10 Ways to Improve Social Skills in Children and Teens

In today's society, children and teens are faced with many obstacles that previous generations might not have experienced. In a world where social media and technology take over, it is important to look at the ways in which social interactions are changing.

In sessions I often hear statements such as, "It is weird to talk over the phone; no one ever does that," or "I can't tell what people are thinking about me."

I have been putting lots of thought into the question, "How can we, as parents, clinicians, or educators, help to teach the younger generation appropriate social skills in a world that gives them every opportunity to reduce face to face interactions?" Below I have created a list of a few ways in which we can encourage and promote healthy social skills in younger generations.

In children:

- **Role play self introduction.** How do you begin talking to someone you know nothing about? This is a fear that many of my children often discuss in sessions. The unknown surrounding questions like, "Do we have any common interests? What do I say?" Role play with your child self introductions; you be your child and allow them to be the 'new friend' you are meeting. This can open discussion and extend role play scenarios to questions such as, "How do I join in a game that is already started? Or How do I invite someone over for a playdate?"
- **Play a game of Emotions Charades.** Often times, children having limited face to face interactions with peers, creates the difficult challenge of reading other's emotional cues. In this game, write down on paper a few different emotions. Each person take a turn. You could increase the challenge by not only visibly expressing the emotion across you face but think of what other ways the emotion be expressed in terms of body language (ie feeling angry might be observed by clenched fists or tightly crossed arms across chest). This could lead to discussions surrounding the questions, "What situations could lead to the following emotions?"
- **Match tone of voice to an emotion.** This can be done in numerous ways from charades, role play, voice recording, or finding examples from tv shows or movies. Sit with your child and identify an emotion being expressed through an individual's deliverance. (ie if someone is sad, we may talk in a quiet and low tone)
- **Practice taking turns.** Taking turns and practicing patience is often a difficult task for children. Try playing a game or completing a coloring sheet together by alternating turns.

- **Use the child's interests.** If your child has a particular hobby or interest, use this as a tool to discuss social skills in the realm of what is important to them. (ie. If your child plays hockey, asking questions “How can your team work together?” “What can you do if you notice someone is having a bad game to help them feel better?”) You can also use their interest as a way helping your child to facilitate playdates.

In teens:

- **Volunteer with your teen for a charity.** This will create an opportunity for you and your teen to work together. They can rely on you to lead by example and show the appropriate etiquette in working with others whom may not be their peers.
- **Play a game of Say Anything .** Say Anything is a board game where you can respond to questions in any way you choose. This is a fun and lighthearted way of improving communication. You as the parent, can point out emotions you see in your teen when they share their response to the game. (ie. I can see by the way you were jumping up and down in your seat that you were really excited to share your response to the question, “What is the best movie of all time?”)
- **Role play job interviewing skills.** I work with many teens who share anxiety surrounding the topic of job interviewing. Providing your child with a list of interview questions and you as the adult being the interviewee allows your teen to have a visual example of the proper way to engage in interviewing scenarios.
- **Write a letter asking for help.** Instead of just quickly giving your teen what they need, ask them to write a letter to ask for help. Often times, writing out our feelings and/or needs allows us to step back from the situation that is causing us distress and focus on addressing what we are feeling and what we need. This will help your teen not only practice the skill of asking for help, but allow them to sit with an emotion and identify their needs.
- **Engage in the card game Awkward Moment™.** This is a fun and entertaining game made for teens. The game discusses uncomfortable scenarios where each player has to submit the best reaction card per case. This makes for a fun opportunity to discuss uncomfortable social situations!

About the Author



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By Urban Wellness | 2018-06-05T17:19:42+00:00 June 13th, 2017 | Dana Rivera, parenting, social skills | 0 Comments

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