

Helping a Child Who Has Trouble Making Friends

When a child has trouble making friends, avoid treating friendship as a popularity contest. The first goal is to understand the specific barrier. Some children are slow to warm up, some do not know how to enter a group, some struggle to read social cues, and some simply have not found peers with shared interests. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to observe how children interact, provide guidance about sharing and resolving conflicts, and support friendship opportunities without taking over the relationship.¹ Start with one small social skill rather than “go make friends.” Practice a greeting, asking to join an activity, inviting one classmate to sit together, or asking a follow-up question. HealthyChildren guidance for shy children recommends role-playing small social steps and looking for activities built around the child’s genuine interests, where conversation has a natural starting point.² Parents can also model healthy communication at home because children learn verbal and nonverbal communication by watching adults.³ If your child wants more connection, help create repeated low-pressure opportunities with the same peers: a club, study group, team, library activity, or short visit. Do not force a friendship that is not reciprocal. Instead, help your child notice who is kind, responsive, and interested in spending time together. School connectedness also includes feeling cared for and supported by both peers and adults at school, so a trusted teacher, counselor, coach, or club adviser can sometimes help a child find a better social entry point. The target is not a large friend group. One or two healthy, reciprocal connections can be a meaningful start.

Did You Know?

- ✓ HealthyChildren recommends that parents support friendship skills by observing interactions, coaching conflict resolution, and giving children opportunities to practice with peers.¹
- ✓ For shy children, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends small social steps, role-play, and activities connected to the child’s interests.²
- ✓ HealthyChildren notes that children learn communication partly by watching how parents use verbal and nonverbal communication.³

Research Sources

1. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. “What Parents Can Do to Support Friendships.”
2. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. “My Daughter Is Extremely Shy and Anxious Around Strangers. How Can I Help Her?”
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. “Communication Skills Start at Home.”

Friendship Practice: One Small Step at a Time

Use this page to identify one social situation, practice one skill, and create one realistic opportunity for connection.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

School/activity: _____ Possible peer: _____

1. Name the Hard Part - About 2 Minutes

Identify the exact social moment that feels difficult instead of using a broad label like "I have no friends."

Hard moment: _____

2. Choose One Social Skill - About 2 Minutes

Pick one behavior to practice: greeting, joining, asking a question, listening, sharing, or inviting.

Skill to practice: _____

3. Rehearse the Words - About 3 Minutes

Role-play one short sentence your child could realistically use in that situation.

I can say: _____

4. Create One Opportunity - About 2 Minutes

Choose a low-pressure place where the child can try the skill with a familiar or potentially compatible peer.

Opportunity: _____

5. Review What Happened - About 1 Minute

Afterward, identify what felt easier, what was awkward, and one adjustment for next time.

Next time I will: _____

What Parents Can Say: "You do not need a whole group. Let's practice one small way to connect with one person who seems kind and interested."