

# using your natural resources\* to help your child with social challenges

\* making the most of the social potential in your family, community and school

In recent years, there's been a sharp rise in the number of children identified as having normal to high intelligence, but significant deficits in their social skills. In addition to those classified with Aspergers/Autism and those who suffer from anxiety, this group includes children who prefer interacting online but not in the "real world."

Parents can become alarmed by a growing "social gap" as their child enters adolescence and tries the complex social interactions of middle and high school. For kids with social challenges, parental support can make a vital difference.

The following notes focus on making the most of the social potential in your family, community and school and can be used either as a precursor to or in conjunction with a more formal therapeutic program.

## planting the seeds with family and friends

No matter what child's age, once social challenges are identified, parents should discuss the issue and try to be sure there is mutual understanding. This is a long term family project.

A first step is to observe how your child behaves with peers and then to develop additional opportunities for him/her to interact. In many families siblings provide a major portion of the child's social life. Perhaps you can promote contact with the brother/sister's friends. Increasing interactions with children of the extended family, friends and neighbors is another possibility. This can also provide a long-term benefit in helping your child develop a social network.

Again, the key is recognition by caregivers that social competence requires attention. Young children should know they can count on parents to respond in an understanding and supportive manner when they have social difficulties.

As children get older, it is appropriate to engage them in discussion about the life long importance of social competence, explaining that just as one has to work for academic success, a sustained effort is required in the social arena.

## tapping into community resources

Many community organizations seek family involvement. Houses of worship are the most obvious examples. Most try to incorporate fun into the children's religious and cultural instruction and offer a range of family events throughout the year. Social challenges are reduced by easy access to adults to help settle arguments and discourage teasing.

Look for other organizations as well as community fund raising events and happenings that encourage child participation. Even more important are groups specifically geared toward youth.

Scouting is highly regarded; in addition to providing a “ready made” group of kids in a supervised setting, there is a focus on ethics, personal and group achievement and an attitude of inclusion. This creates a culture in which social awkwardness and anxiety is accepted and channeled towards positive results.

Organized sports and other physical activities can also play an important role; however these are often difficult environments for children with social challenges.

If a child is young, being part of a soccer or baseball team might be something he/she can handle and learn from, particularly if their parent can help as a coach. If this seems too much, is there a local Y that offers swimming lessons? How about a local tennis program? What about martial arts? While these supervised activities tend to limit unstructured time, they allow some peer interaction while not requiring the social skills needed to excel in team sports.

## **branching out at school**

Schools are children’s main social arena. Here parents have two general concerns: effectively utilizing available opportunities, and avoiding damage that can occur through social ostracism and bullying.

Young children should be encouraged to participate in after-school events such as holiday parties. Middle schools usually offer somewhat more after school activities including sports as well as band practice and performances. If your child likes music, successful participation might lead to life long social possibilities.

The wide range of clubs available in high school will probably overlap with some of your child’s existing interests. Greater music and sports opportunities are also available including track, which is oriented towards individual effort but also linked to the larger group.

By high school, most parents are less engaged in school affairs, but for those whose children face social challenges, staying involved will help them advise their child about resources, activities and which school personnel can assist if they encounter social barriers.

Children who lack social skills often feel ostracized by fellow students. Sometimes this is due to the child misinterpreting situations or comments by peers. It can also be that they are an easy target for teasing and bullying.

Schools have begun to offer programs to address this. Parents should be familiar with these programs so they can effectively engage with counselors or other personnel to minimize the damage to their child’s sense of confidence and well being if these problems arise.

## **parents play a key role**

All children face social challenges as a normal part of growing up, but for those lacking basic skills or plagued by severe anxiety, successfully relating to peers can feel like a hopeless pursuit to be avoided at all costs.

Parents can play a vital role in turning this around.

By effectively tapping into their own network of friends and family, utilizing the resources available in the larger community, and successfully partnering with professionals in the child’s school, parents can minimize problematic situations, expand opportunities and effectively enhance their child’s social development.

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