



# Know! to Support Social Skill Development

As a caring adult, you know that today's world looks different than it did just a few years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way that we all communicate with each other and form connections. Young people may struggle to build and maintain social connections in an increasingly disconnected world. Lack of social connection can lead to loneliness and isolation, negatively affecting young people's mental health. Support the young people in your life with these tips to encourage the development of social skills at all ages.

## Preschool – Early Elementary

### **Help them take turns.**

Younger children may struggle to wait their turns, especially if they're still getting used to more frequent in-person interactions. Practicing turn-taking helps kids learn about empathy, kindness, and flexibility, which are critical social skills. Use time at home to show young children how to take turns – alternate between doing the activities they suggest and the activities you suggest or take turns selecting the topic of conversation at the dinner table.<sup>1,2</sup>

### **Encourage taking a different perspective.**

The ability to consider the perspectives of others is essential in forming friendships and connections. Use situations in your and your young person's life to emphasize the importance of understanding others' perspectives. You can model perspective-taking by sharing your thoughts and feelings about a situation, what motivated your behavior, and how you considered other people's feelings when making a decision. You can also ask the kids in your life how they think other kids might feel about a situation. For example, you might say, "You love playing with that toy. How do you think [friend] might feel about playing with that toy?" to help them think about how others might be the same or different from them.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

### **Use media as a teaching tool.**

Watching television shows and movies can be a great way for kids to identify social skills and understand unspoken social rules. You can use time watching TV or movies to point out how different characters feel, what makes something funny, or the dynamics between the characters. You might even ask your young person what they think will happen next, what they think the characters will feel, and what social clues they used to make those predictions.<sup>1,3</sup>

## Upper Elementary – Middle School

### **Talk about Popularity and Peer Pressure**

As children get older, the social dynamics among their peers often become more influential in their lives. Start having open conversations about popularity by asking young people what characteristics make someone popular and how those qualities make them feel. For example, you might talk about the difference between popular peers who are kind, empathic, or positive and popular peers who are "cool," exclusionary, or influential.

You might also want to ask about any stressors they are experiencing, including peer pressure, and share strategies for resilience.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **Encourage Friendships**

Good, healthy friendships help young people develop and practice social skills and can also protect against poor mental health. Discuss with your adolescent what qualities they value in a friendship, how to choose friends with those qualities, and how to embody them.<sup>2</sup> Check out last [January's Know Tip on Promoting Healthy Friendships](#) for more ideas and information.

### **Check In After Activities**

After a social event, big or small, check in with your young person about how they felt about it. How did their interactions with their peers go? What was difficult for them? What do they want to do differently next time? By checking in, you can help your young person think about how different interactions make them feel and pay attention to [potential warning signs](#) of loneliness and social isolation!<sup>1,4</sup>

## High School

### **Get to know their friends and hobbies.**

Take time to learn about what is going on in your teen's life. Ask about their friends and dating partners, what they like to do together, and what they enjoy about the people they spend their time with. Find ways to connect by sharing your hobbies and interests, asking about theirs, and encouraging them to get involved in activities that relate to their interests. This way, you show that you care about your teen, form a better connection with them, and help them find potential new friends.<sup>5</sup>

### **Normalize feeling insecure.**

Most teenagers struggle to feel secure in their identity and may find those insecurities affecting the way they interact with others. Let your teen know that feeling insecure is a normal part of this stage in their life, and encourage them to empathize with themselves and their peers. After all, most of their peers are also worried about their identities and dealing with complex feelings.<sup>2</sup>

### **Build up their identity.**

Especially if they are feeling insecure in their identity, use your conversations to help your teen honor and value themselves. Encourage them not to change who they are to fit in with their peers and develop their values, even if they don't align perfectly with your own. Young people benefit from feeling confident in their identity, so share what you love about them and how proud you are of them for being themselves?<sup>2</sup>

## Resources

[Middle school malaise \(apa.org\)](#)

[Social Skills Role Play Videos | Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior \(ucla.edu\)](#)

[Teaching kids about kindness - CHOC - Children's health hub](#)

[Resilience for teens: 10 tips to build skills on bouncing back from rough times \(apa.org\)](#)

[Superscript sources are hyperlinked at the start of this document](#)

For additional Know! Prevention Tips for Everyone, scan the QR code:



**know**<sup>®</sup>  
Prevention Tips for Everyone

**Prevention  
Action Alliance**  
Lifetime Prevention | Lifetime Wellness