



FREE E-BOOK :
5 Steps to Making and
Keeping Friends
(A Guide for Adolescents and
Young Adults with Autism,
ADHD and other social
challenges)

Making and keeping friends isn't always easy for anyone - but for a teenager or young adult with autism or ADHD it can be particularly difficult.

That's because being on the autism spectrum can come with a number of social challenges that are actually pretty vital to making friends. Challenges like finding it difficult to interpret social cues and to understand someone else's perspective can make interacting with others really tricky - which is why in the PEERS® course we teach adolescents to notice specific body language to help understand how someone else is feeling.

Research shows that not having friends has a seriously detrimental impact on our happiness and well being. In fact, feeling isolated or being neglected or rejected by peers or experiencing conflict with peers - can all result in having a higher chance of being teased and bullied which can then lead to depression, anxiety, loneliness and low self-esteem.

The good news is that having just one or two close friends makes all the difference. But how do we make and keep those friends if you have autism, ADHD, social anxiety or other social challenges?

Thankfully, the skills we need to make and keep friends can be easily learned once they are taught in a way that is specific to how people with autism or ADHD learn - that is, with clear steps and rules and behaviour practice with peers in a safe space. And that is exactly what we do in the PEERS® program.

In this E-Book we are going to cover *5 Steps to Making and Keeping Friends*. This is a very brief overview of one of the topics that is covered in a lot more detail in the PEERS® for Adolescents and PEERS® for Young Adults programs.. For more on the programs visit www.socialskillsaustralia.com.au but for now, let's look at these 5 Steps.

Step #1: Know the rules for having a good conversation

Communication is important when making friends so it's crucial that you understand the rules for having a good conversation and trading information. Some of these rules include things like asking the other person questions, finding common interests, sharing the conversation, asking follow-up questions and open-ended questions, and using humour appropriately.

It's important to avoid things like being a conversation hog (not letting the other person speak), being an interviewer (when questions only go one way), policing (correcting people), teasing, getting too personal at first and talking about risky topics such as politics, religion, sex or money.

In the PEERS® social skills course, we practice trading information by asking and answering questions in the group and then we also practice at home with our social coach which is usually the parent or caregiver.

Practice is key when learning social skills like having two-way conversations and finding common interests and we make time to practice new skills every week in the PEERS® program.

Step #2: Find and choose appropriate friends/romantic partners

There are GOOD choices and BAD choices when it comes to friendships and romantic partners. It's important when choosing friends we recognise friends who are good choices and friends who are bad choices. So, we are looking for friends who are friendly to us, seem interested in us, like the same things as us, and are a similar age to us.

It's important we know to avoid people who are mean to us, make fun of us, take advantage of us or who could get us into trouble. We learn how to discern good friendship choices from bad friendship choices in the PEERS® program.



It's also important that our friends have common interests to us - that means, we like the same things. So understanding what peer group we belong to, such as bookworms, sports fans, history buffs, sci-fi fans, maths geeks, skaters, surfers, musicians and more is important so that we know which groups we can join and are likely to be accepting of us. We also need to know where to find people from these peer groups and that we have the communication skills to be able to talk to them when we get there.

When it comes to choosing appropriate people to date, it's important we know our criteria for a good choice. That means: someone we actually like, someone who seems interested in us, likes the same things as us, is similar age to us and is likely to say 'yes' if we ask them on a date.

It's also important to know good dating sources and how to let someone know we like them - well before we ask them on a date.

We cover all of that in the PEERS® program.

So it turns out that the advice we usually give to adolescents when they want to start or join a conversation with others is actually really off the mark. They might be told to 'just go over there and introduce yourself' - but that's not what people who are good at social skills actually do.

There are a few very important steps we take before we walk over out of the blue and without any reason to introduce ourselves to a group of strangers.

Here are the steps in a shortened version:

1. Listen to the conversation and watch from a distance
2. Use a prop (like a book or a phone so it's not obvious you're listening)
3. Identify the topic
4. Move closer and look at the body language
5. Wait for a pause
6. Mention the topic
7. Assess if they are interested in talking to you.

Finally, after all of that - you can introduce yourself - but even then that's not always necessary straight away.

We cover all of these steps in detail in the PEERS® course.

Step #3: Successfully host get-togethers / go on dates

Close, meaningful friendships are developed and maintained by spending time together. Getting together with friends and enjoying fun activities is one of the highlights of having friends. Whether it's going out - such as to the movies or festivals or parks or beaches - or staying indoors watching movies or playing games or craft - or eating out or playing or watching sports, there's always a huge range of options for things adolescents and young adults can do together. The key is to know the steps to planning a successful get-together and following through.

Planning includes considering the 5 Ws - Who to invite, What you will do, When you will go, Where you will go and how you will get there. It's important to follow key steps at the beginning - such as greeting and introducing people and offering refreshments. During the get-together, the steps include things like getting guests to pick activities, not ignoring our friends, not arguing with or policing our friends and being a good sport. And at the end of the get-together, steps like giving a reason (cover story) for ending the get-together, thanking them for coming over and telling them you had a nice time before saying goodbye all help make the get-together run smoothly.

We cover all of these steps in the PEERS® course and we also practice and role play the steps for hosting so participants are confident when hosting get-togethers with friends.

Similarly when going on dates, we need to know how to let someone know we like them and we need to know their dating status before we ask them on a date. We can ask mutual friends, we can flirt and give compliments, we can trade information - and use all of these things to assess their interest in us.

Once we are fairly confident they are available and romantically interested in us, we can then ask them on a date using our common interest as a cover story. It's important though that we first know the steps for accepting rejection and turning someone down.

Then once going on dates, we need to know how to plan and prepare, how to stay safe on the date and how to conduct ourselves at the beginning, during and after the date.

We cover all of those steps in the PEERS® program.

Step #4: Be a good sport

Knowing how to be a good sport is key for making and keeping friends as being a bad sport will quickly push friends away. Being a good sport means we use the rules of good sportsmanship, including not cheating or being a referee or coach, not being overly competitive, showing concern if someone gets injured, praising our friends and team mates, sharing and taking turns and not being a bad winner or sore loser. We cover all of these rules in the PEERS® course.

In the PEERS® course we practice being a good sport every time we play games or sports with friends, peers or family members. Video games, computer games, board games, card games, extracurricular sports and extracurricular activities are all great opportunities to practice good sportsmanship.



Step #5: Know how to handle disagreements and bullying

It's important to know that having a disagreement does not have to end a friendship. Disagreements are totally normal and everyone has them. There are some key steps to responding to a disagreement so that it doesn't have to end the friendship - things like keeping your cool, listening to your friend, repeating what they said, explaining your side using 'I' statements, saying you're sorry and trying to solve the problem.

Keeping your cool isn't always easy but taking some deep breaths, counting to ten in your head taking a timeout can all help.

We go through each of the steps in detail in the PEERS® course.

When it comes to direct bullying (teasing and physical bullying), it turns out that often what adolescents and young adults are told to do just doesn't work. Research shows that ignoring bullies, walking away, telling a teacher or teasing them don't work and can even make the bullying worse.

In the PEERS® program, we teach the skills that socially savvy people use naturally when approached by a bully - they act like it didn't bother them or that it was lame or stupid - they sound bored and give a short verbal comeback with attitude. The goal is not to retaliate - it's just to shut the bullying down as quickly as possible.

With physical bullying, often laying low and avoiding the bully (such as by taking a different route to school), hanging out with other people (as you are much more of a target if you are on your own) and making sure you are near people in authority (such as sitting near the front of the bus near the bus driver) are all effective strategies.

With indirect bullying (cyberbullying and rumours and gossip) - adolescents and young adults will sometimes either try to befriend the bully or make them an enemy, or to try and stand up to the bully or try to disprove the rumours. Research shows that the best strategy is to remain neutral - act like it doesn't bother you, don't try to engage with the bully or try to defend what they are saying - just act amazed anyone cares or believes it.

We cover these steps in detail in the PEERS® course.

So that's it! *5 Steps to Making and Keeping Friends.*

If this resonates with you - or you want to know more about the PEERS® social skills program - reach out to us. We have new groups starting all the time and our age-appropriate groups cover a broad range of ages from senior primary age right through to adult.

You can get us on Messenger, Facebook, Instagram or Email and you can book a free 15-minute phone consult via our website. We are here and ready to talk to you so do reach out! And remember - NDIS funding can be used depending on your plan.

Reach out! We'd love to hear from you.

Warmest regards,

Chris

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