

## **Thriving During the Teenage Years - Importance of Peer Acceptance**

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Boulder Valley School District November 2007

**Q:** My son has High Functioning Autism. He was recently not invited to a birthday party of someone whom he considers a friend. This may bother some children more than others; especially children with self esteem issues, like my son. What's a parent to do? Monarch K-8 Mom

**A:** It is reassuring to know that your son has peers whom he considers friends and hopefully gets invited to other friends' events. If so, reassuring your child that due to various limitations, not everyone can be invited to a party and being available for him to share his feeling may suffice. In addition, helping your son participate in other structured activities in the community (e.g. Recreation Centers, YMCA, school clubs, etc) can increase his opportunities for peer acceptance. If this is a more frequent problem for your son, you're not alone. It is estimated that about ten percent of school-age children have no friends in their classes and are disliked by the majority of their classmates. This is a reason for concern because studies show that children who experience significant peer rejection report being more depressed, anxious and angry, have lower self-esteem, and are at increased risk of academic difficulties, dropping out of school, substance abuse, relationship problems and juvenile delinquency.

While peer rejection can often seem random, there are certain factors that can increase your child's risk of being rejected by peers. The primary issue is often a lack of well-developed social skills. Social skills are tools that we use to interact with and understand others in our social environment. We are not born with these skills, but learn them through our social experiences. For children who are very shy or for a variety of other reasons are limited in their opportunities to engage in social interactions with peers, their social skills development can be restricted and they risk falling behind same-age peers. Because children with autistic features often have difficulties interacting with others in socially acceptable ways, this issue can be of even higher importance to their overall development.

In order to strengthen social skills, it is important to expose children to a variety of opportunities to interact with peers. Due to social skill deficits or difficulties, however, it is sometimes necessary to first help them develop some of the skills they are lacking and then encourage them to practice these skills in both structured and unstructured activities. Typical social skills that are necessary for effective interaction include simple mechanical skills (e.g. eye contact, smiling, other facial expressions, tone/volume of voice, body gestures, listening, complimenting) as well as more sophisticated skills (e.g. joining a group activity, coping with teasing, sharing/cooperating, dealing with conflict, being supportive of others, empathy).

Similarly, some of the negative perceptions that increase the risk of peer rejection include being: mean/aggressive, disruptive, bossy/domineering, withdrawn/apprehensive, resistant/rigid, nonresponsive, and nonconforming to peer conventions. It is helpful to observe your child in social interactions and assess his/her social skills strengths and weaknesses, in order to determine the specific areas that require improvement. If this job feels a bit overwhelming, experienced child and adolescent mental health providers can often help address the issues of peer rejection and assist in developing an effective social skills training program.