

Friendships, Rejection and Feeling Different

Helping parents look beyond the friendship fallout and understand the social effort, hurt, confusion and need for belonging that may sit underneath it.

Friendships can be deeply important to children with ADHD, but social situations can also place heavy demands on attention, impulse control, working memory, emotional regulation and the ability to follow fast-changing conversations. A child may desperately want friends and still interrupt, miss a cue, speak intensely about an interest, react quickly to a perceived slight, forget an agreement or struggle to re-enter a group after conflict.

That does not mean every friendship difficulty is caused by ADHD, and it does not mean the child should be taught to hide who they are. The aim is to understand what is happening, build useful social tools, protect self-worth and recognise when the environment or the friendship itself also needs to change.

What might be happening underneath?

What you may hear or see	Possible experience underneath	A supportive response
'Nobody likes me.'	A painful incident may feel global and permanent in the moment.	Acknowledge the hurt first, then gently separate today's event from the child's whole identity.
Repeated friendship fallouts	Impulsive words, misunderstandings, intensity, memory differences or difficulty repairing after conflict.	Look for the repeating point where things go wrong and teach one repair skill at a time.
Talking over others	Excitement, fear of forgetting the thought, difficulty judging the pause or high social energy.	Practise ways to hold a thought, notice turns and return to it without shaming enthusiasm.
Trying very hard to fit in	The child may be masking, copying peers or suppressing needs to avoid rejection.	Make home a place where they do not have to perform. Explore whether belonging is costing too much.
Avoiding peers altogether	Previous rejection, bullying, overwhelm or social exhaustion may make withdrawal protective.	Do not assume more socialising is automatically the answer. Understand what feels unsafe or exhausting first.

Rejection can feel enormous

Some children with ADHD experience rejection, criticism or exclusion with striking emotional intensity. The term 'rejection sensitivity' is often used informally to describe this experience, but it is not a separate formal diagnosis. Rather than arguing immediately about whether the rejection was 'really that bad', help the child regulate first. Once calmer, you can explore what happened, what is known, what is assumed and what might help next.

Do not make popularity the goal

A child does not need a large friendship group to be socially successful. One or two safe, reciprocal relationships may matter far more than being included everywhere. Support the child to notice how a friendship feels: Can I be myself? Is kindness mutual? Can we disagree safely? Do I feel frightened of losing them if I say no?

Building social confidence without teaching a child to mask

Useful social support should increase choice and understanding, not train a child to perform a version of themselves that is acceptable to everybody else. Skills can be taught while still valuing directness, enthusiasm, humour, strong interests and different communication styles.

Before the situation	Preview unfamiliar social situations, identify a safe adult, agree an exit or break option and reduce unnecessary uncertainty.
During friendship difficulties	Use fewer questions while emotions are high. Help the child identify the concrete event before trying to interpret motives.
Repairing after conflict	Practise simple repair: what happened, what I meant, what I am sorry for, what I can do differently and what I need too.
After social overload	Allow recovery. A child who has held themselves together socially all day may have very little regulation left at home.

When not to push friendship

There are times when encouraging a child to 'just join in' can increase distress. If the group is repeatedly excluding, humiliating, coercing or frightening them, the task is not to make the child become better at tolerating it. Likewise, a child may genuinely need solitude after school. Distinguish loneliness from chosen recovery time, and social skill needs from an environment that is not treating the child well.

Bullying is not a social-skills lesson

If there is bullying, targeted exclusion, threats, harassment or repeated humiliation, avoid framing the problem primarily as something the child must fix about themselves. Record concrete incidents and involve the school through its safeguarding, pastoral or SEND processes as appropriate. A child's impulsivity or social differences do not make bullying acceptable.

Working with school

Ask what staff see at less structured times such as break, lunch, transitions, clubs and group work. A child who appears socially settled in class may struggle considerably in the playground. Helpful support may include a trusted adult, structured lunchtime options, thoughtful grouping, a quiet recovery space, explicit support after friendship conflict and monitoring of repeated exclusion.

Helping a child repair without carrying all the blame

Repair matters, but it should be balanced. If your child interrupted, shouted or said something hurtful, help them take responsibility for that specific behaviour. Do not let the repair become 'everything is my fault because I have ADHD'. Equally, another child's hurtful behaviour does not become acceptable because your child made a mistake first.

Feeling different

Children notice difference. Trying to convince them they are exactly the same as everyone else can miss what they are actually telling us. A more useful message may be: 'Some things are harder for your brain, some things are strengths, and you deserve relationships where you do not have to be ashamed of either.'

Friendship Support Map

Use this with your child when things are relatively calm. It is not a test of social ability; it is a way of finding where support is most useful.

People I feel safe and comfortable with	_____
People I can ask for help	_____
Places or situations where friendship feels easier	_____
Situations that often become difficult	_____
How I know I am becoming socially overwhelmed	_____
What helps me when I feel rejected or left out	_____
A phrase I can use if I need space	_____
A phrase I can use to repair a misunderstanding	_____
How I know a friendship is kind and reciprocal	_____
Something I like about the way I connect with people	_____
What I want adults at school to understand	_____

Language that protects self-worth

Try: 'That really hurt, and I can see why you are upset.' 'Let's work out what happened before we decide what it means.' 'You can make a mistake in a friendship without being a bad friend.' 'You do not have to stay close to someone who repeatedly makes you feel unsafe or small.' 'We can practise what you want to say without changing who you are.'

When to seek more support

Consider additional support when friendship difficulties are causing persistent school avoidance, severe anxiety, marked loss of confidence, significant loneliness, repeated bullying, escalating conflict or major changes in mood or behaviour. School pastoral/SEND teams, the child's GP and appropriate mental-health or neurodevelopmental professionals may all have a role depending on the concern.

A message for parents

Watching your child feel unwanted can be painful, and the instinct to fix the friendship quickly is understandable. Sometimes the most important thing you can offer is a place where the child does not have to prove their likeability. Help them learn, repair and grow, but keep reminding them that belonging should not require them to disappear.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources for families. School anti-bullying and SEND policies can also be useful when difficulties are happening in education. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 16