

Making Friends

Parents often wonder how they can help their gifted child make friends.



With their complex vocabulary, love of elaborate games, focus on rules and fairness, and emotional sensitivities, some gifted children find it difficult to make social connections with their same-age peers.

Experts believe that a gifted child's friendship pattern and social concept is more related to his mental age rather than his chronological age. This means a gifted 6-year-old boy may be 6 years old in the literal sense, but have the mental age of an 11-year-old. As a result, gifted children tend to look to other gifted children, older children, or even adults to make social connections. Gifted children may have different sets of friends—idea peers and age peers—based on intellectual ability, interests, intensities, and temperament.

Research also suggests there is a strong relationship between children's levels of ability and their views on friendship. Intellectually gifted peers have been found to be further along in the stages of friendship than their same-age peers—meaning, gifted children may look for close, trusting, authentic, and honest friendships much earlier than their chronological peers. Exceptionally gifted children may reach this stage as early as age 6, roughly four or five years ahead of their same-age peers.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Isolation. When a gifted child does not have mental age peers, he may feel socially isolated or experience bullying and exclusion. The socially sensitive gifted child may experience an intense response to perceived rejection, creating a loss of self- and social-confidence.

Introversion vs. extroversion. What might appear as social isolation may be introversion. The gifted child may be satisfied with one or two close friends, be comfortable playing alone, or turn to books and pets for companionship.

Gender differences. Studies have shown that at all levels of ability and ages, girls are more advanced in their perceptions of friendship than boys. Highly gifted boys who have high expectations for emotionally intimate friendships at an early age may be at greater risk for social isolation than girls.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

» Sometimes a child may appear socially inept, when he is actually socially advanced.

» Help your gifted child "find her tribe"—children with similar interests and abilities—so that she can experience social connections and belonging.

» Social media adds complexity to the understanding of what constitutes a "friend."

» Ability grouping and acceleration are two ways to provide your child both academic challenge and peers at school.

Dig Deeper

What gifted children look for in friendship: Dr. Miraca Gross' *Play Partner or Sure Shelter*, www.sengifted.org

Dr. Linda Silverman's *Social Development in the Gifted*, gifteddevelopment.com



www.nagc.org

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QUESTIONS PARENTS OFTEN ASK

How can I help my child make friends?

You can't expect a child to be able to make friends with everyone. Instead, help your child seek out authentic social connections with people who have similar interests or abilities. One-on-one playdates, long-distance internet friendships, and teen mentorship opportunities are all effective ways to foster your child's social development. Focus less on the age of the individual and more on her interests and emotional connections.

Where can I find gifted peers for my child?

If your child receives gifted services at school, perhaps a teacher, gifted coordinator, or social worker can recommend other children in the program as potential friends. After-school, weekend, and summer enrichment programs can also be vital to supporting ongoing social development. Many gifted children find that a week or more of summer camp, offered through a university, talent development center, or independent provider (like SIG and Camp Summit), is the highlight of their entire year.

What do I do if my child continues to have trouble socially?

Assess the root of the problem. Your child may fall behind simply if he is not meeting like-minded peers or has little opportunity to practice social interactions. On the other hand, he may have a psychological issue that requires attention.

If things don't improve, it may be necessary to consult with a psychologist or counselor. Also, you might consider enrolling your child in a social skills group or reading "social stories" together to role play social situations.



FOR MORE INFO

Cross, T. (2011). *Competing with myths about the social and emotional development of gifted students*. sengifted.org

Gross, M. (2006). *Tips for parents: Gifted children's friendships*. davidsongifted.org

Missett, T. C. (2016). *The social & emotional characteristics of gifted students: An NAGC Select*. Washington, DC: National Association for Gifted Children.

Neihart, M., Pfeiffer, S., Cross, T. (2015). *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (2nd ed.). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

**Books Just for Kids—
Available at freespirit.com**
Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, Sharp, and Ready for (Almost) Anything

The Survival Guide for Making and Being Friends



1331 H Street, Suite 1001
Washington, DC 20005
202-785-4268
www.nagc.org