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## Supporting your child's social anxiety

By Karen Dempsey

**If your child is struggling with social skills, or is finding it hard to fit in, there are several ways that you as a parent can offer support and encouragement.**

As parents we all want to see our children happy and part of a peer group, running freely in the playground with smiles on their faces. No one wants to see their child alone and kicking leaves around the edges of everyone else's fun.

Maybe they don't fit in because they're too shy, too sensitive, or too self-conscious. It may help to remember that children develop social skills at a different pace, in the same way that some children learn to walk or talk more quickly than others.

### Some signs of social anxiety in children

Social anxiety can play a big part in the development of some children, and it can go beyond just shyness. Children who are socially anxious may:

- Avoid putting their hand up in class because they don't want the embarrassment of everyone looking at them.
- Prefer structured play – such as PE or football – to free play during break time, when they tend to play alone.
- Fear interacting with other children because it feels too overwhelming, and so avoid eye contact and conversation.
- Drop out of clubs or social activities because it feels too much.
- Blush, cry or create a scene when confronted with new people or situations.
- Feel panicky if asked to perform in front of anyone.

Exhibiting these symptoms does not mean that your child has a disorder. It may just signify that your son or daughter needs extra support and reassurance in learning how to be a social human being.

### Supporting your child's social skills through the ages

Psychologist Erik Erikson developed a model that explains the "psycho-social" development of children, and shows the different tasks that need to be achieved at different ages. As a parent you can support your child through these different phases by recognising their needs and encouraging them in these tasks.

**18 MONTHS TO 3 YEARS:** This is the phase where children learn autonomy and independence. They're becoming more mobile and active, and trying out more things, like climbing, jumping and playing with new toys. As parents you have to find the balance between allowing your children to explore, while also protecting them from harm. Too much

leeway and they may feel uncontained or abandoned. Too much control and they will feel stifled or begin to doubt their abilities. Create an environment where your children can experiment without being told off or criticised, and where they can be creative without fear of failure. Applaud their efforts, and you'll do wonders for their self-esteem.

**3 TO 5 YEARS:** This is the phase where children learn initiative and assertiveness. It's the time where they start to make up games and want other children to follow their lead. They become more wilful, which some parents may interpret as defiance. You'll hear the question "why?" frequently during this phase of development, as children seek to make sense of their world. To help your children negotiate this phase, take an interest in their questions rather than treating them as irrelevant or annoying, or the child can start to feel guilty for being in the way. Don't punish them for overstepping the mark, but encourage them to recognise where the boundaries are.

**5 TO 12 YEARS:** This is the phase of activity – once they've started school – where children learn competence in their own abilities. The world outside the home will take on more significance as children learn to fit in, and to feel proud of what they have achieved. Take an interest in your children's schoolwork. Support them in their sporting or artistic endeavours. Let them know how to win and how to lose, so they can learn to be balanced individuals.

### Dos and don'ts to support your child's social skills

- Do encourage creativity and questioning.
- Do give your child full attention. Put your phone down and truly listen.
- Don't jump in to rescue and speak for your children: allow them to find their own voice.
- Don't force a socially anxious child into a situation that can be excruciatingly embarrassing. Build up to it gradually.
- Do find activities where your children feel competent, able and confident. Let them find their 'thing'.
- Do seek support as a family if you are becoming overwhelmed.

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