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PART

Getting Ready

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Why Teach Social Skills to Teens and Young Adults?

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF SOCIAL SKILLS described as an art form? Some would say there's an art to being social and making friends—an innate quality that you're either born with or you're not. Take conversational skills for example. Sometimes referred to as the *gift of gab*, many believe you're either good at making small talk or you're not. Although it may be true that some have a natural knack for the conversational arts, it's not necessarily true that all social skills are hardwired or fixed. What if conversational skills, and more broadly social skills, were not an art but a science?

Our research in social skills training for teens and young adults with social difficulties is based on this premise. We believe that social skills can be taught, much in the way we might teach math or science. By breaking down complex, seemingly sophisticated social skills into concrete rules

and steps of social behavior, we can demystify and to some extent decode the “art form” that is social skills.

Purpose of This Book

This book will give parents a step-by-step guide for helping teens and young adults struggling with social skills learn how to make and keep friends. The strategies outlined were developed at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) Clinic, our hospital-based program that provides parent-assisted social skills training for young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, and other social impairments. Although the skills we've developed were largely created through our work with teens and young adults with ASD, the tips and strategies can be used by anyone.

This book will give parents a step-by-step guide for helping teens and young adults struggling with social skills learn how to make and keep friends.

Through the use of concrete rules and steps of social behavior, you will become knowledgeable in the skills necessary to help your child develop and maintain friendships, expand social opportunities, and handle peer conflict and rejection.

Rules and Steps of Social Behavior

Many of the teens and young adults whom we work with at the UCLA PEERS Clinic, particularly those diagnosed with ASD, are fond of rules. In fact, what often happens when you break a rule in front of your child? If your child is like others in our program, he or she probably notices rule violations and may even feel compelled to point them out. We call this social error *policing*. Although we don't advocate the tendency to point out rule violations or police others, we do recognize that teens and young adults with social challenges often have a penchant for rules and may be likely to follow them. Consequently, we've developed a program that teaches social skills using concrete rules and steps of social behavior. The vast majority of the teens and young adults we've worked with appreciate our use of rules and steps of social behavior

because it clears away the gray fog of the social world, making social behavior more black and white and easier to see. You might consider how your own child responds to rules and think about how he or she will react to this approach.

To better understand the importance of rules and steps in teaching social skills, consider for a moment why people with social challenges, such as those who have ASD and other syndromes, are fond of rules. One reason is that rules are *predictable*. For example, we've noted that a lot of the socially challenged clients we see at the UCLA PEERS Clinic have strong inclination toward math, science, engineering, or computer technology, particularly those who come to us diagnosed with ASD. Perhaps these preferences relate to *predictability*. Numbers, algorithms, and formulas are predictable; you know what to expect. But in the social world, where human emotion, response, and humor exist, behaviors are not so predictable; you don't always know what to expect. Decoding social behaviors into concrete rules and steps will help to demystify the social world for those with social difficulties, neurological issues, and sensitivities that often accompany ASD or other conditions or emotional patterns. This is what makes the PEERS approach and this book unique.

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Ecologically Valid Social Skills

Another aspect of the PEERS approach that is unique compared to other models is our use of ecologically valid social skills. Although the term *ecologically valid* sounds quite technical and scientific, what it essentially means is that we're teaching social behaviors that are naturally used by teens and young adults who are socially successful. In other words, we're not teaching what we think young people *should* do in social situations but what actually *works* in reality. Although well intentioned, parents and professionals sometimes make the mistake of trying to teach social skills to teens and young adults by offering advice about what we think young people should do in certain social situations but, as you will soon discover, the problem with this approach is that the

advice given is often wrong. The goal of this book is to help you avoid those common pitfalls of giving misinformed advice and equip you with ecologically valid rules and steps of social behavior that will allow you to help your child make and keep friends through the use of acceptable real-world social skills discovered through science.

Evidence-Based Approach

What also makes this book different from typical how-to guides about social skills is that the skills offered here reflect behaviors that research has shown to be effective. This is why we call the book *The Science of Making Friends*. Through rigorous scientific study, we have uncovered the tools needed to teach critical friendship skills to teens and young adults with social challenges. Not only are the strategies contained in this book based on ecologically valid social skills but the method described here has also been shown to be effective through scientific investigation. Our research through the UCLA PEERS Clinic, in conjunction with other PEERS research programs throughout the world, has demonstrated improvement in friendships and overall social skills for teens and young adults with social challenges through multiple clinical trials, making the PEERS method the only evidence-based social skills program of its kind.

Scientific Evidence for the UCLA PEERS Model

Our research with PEERS, conducted at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, has primarily focused on teens and young adults with ASD, although the benefit of the program has also been examined for teens with ADHD, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), as well as teens and adults with intellectual disabilities. Because social problems are a hallmark feature of ASD, we base many of our rules of social behavior on the common social errors exhibited by those with ASD, in combination with the appropriate social behaviors used by socially successful teens and adults.

Findings from our research conducted in the community and school settings primarily come from parents, teachers, and youth, using

standardized measures of social functioning. Improvements in social functioning following PEERS typically include the following:

- Improved overall social skills in
 - Cooperation
 - Assertion
 - Responsibility
- Decreased problematic social behaviors in
 - Self-control
 - Externalizing behavior
- Improved social responsiveness in
 - Social communication
 - Social awareness
 - Social motivation
 - Social cognition
 - Decreased autistic symptoms
- Decreased social anxiety
- Increased frequency of peer interactions and get-togethers
- Decreased loneliness
- Improved empathy
- Improved friendship quality
- Improved knowledge of adolescent or young adult social skills

Unlike most social skills interventions cited in the research literature, our research team has conducted extensive follow-up research and investigated the sustainability of these improvements over time to make sure that what we're teaching is continuing to work for those going through our program. A long-term, follow-up study conducted with families one to five years after receiving the PEERS treatment revealed that improvements in social skills, social responsiveness, frequency of peer interactions, and social skills knowledge were maintained over time and in some cases improved even further. These findings are very encouraging when you consider that the social trajectory for many young people with social

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challenges such as those diagnosed with ASD sadly tends to worsen with age and entering adulthood.

It's probably worthy of note that the previously mentioned studies not only comprise the largest number of participants reported in the social skills treatment literature for older adolescents and young adults with ASD, but the improvements are also far greater than what is typically reported in the autism research literature. Most social skills treatment studies for young people with ASD tend to show minimal or modest improvements, often with a very small group of people, and with improvements rarely sustained or reported over time. Conversely, our research using the PEERS model has shown much greater improvements in social skills among larger groups of people, with improvements generally maintained over time and improved even further in some cases.

Although the exact cause of these improvements cannot be pinpointed with a perfect degree of certainty, we believe that the true power of the PEERS model can be attributed to the high degree of involvement of parents and teachers in the treatment. Our belief is that by teaching parents and teachers to be social coaches to teens and young adults with social difficulties, we're far more likely to generalize good social skills to multiple settings including home, school, and the community. Furthermore, these improvements are more likely to be maintained over time, as our research suggests, because involving parents and teachers as social coaches ensures that treatment never ends.

Reason to Use the PEERS Method

Teens and adults with social difficulties, such as those with ASD, ADHD, or other challenges, frequently struggle with friendships. They're often isolated and withdrawn, perhaps choosing not to socialize with others, or if they do wish to socialize, they may be rejected by their peers. To make matters worse, isolation and rejection may lead to other mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Not surprisingly, parents are often desperate to help their children improve their social skills, yet may struggle with knowing what advice and support to give.

Although many programs exist to assist younger children in improving their social skills, very few programs target older adolescents and

young adults with social challenges. Among the few programs that do exist, the vast majority do not have scientific evidence to support their claims of improving social skills, nor do they provide parent assistance. To date, the only known research-supported social skills program available for teens and young adults with ASD and other social challenges is PEERS.

PEERS is the research platform on which the rules and steps of social behavior will be described and taught in this book. Typically facilitated by mental health professionals and educators, PEERS is widely available as a treatment manual, with PEERS treatment groups offered in community mental health agencies, clinics, hospitals, and schools throughout the world. The training is typically provided in a group or classroom setting, where parents and teens or young adults attend separate co-occurring group sessions with the goal of teaching friendship skills using parent-supported social coaching.

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Although PEERS has been widely disseminated through published treatment manuals, professional training seminars, and the development of countless programs in the international community, the reality is that access to this scientifically supported treatment is not available to all families, nor was the manual written specifically for families. That's the reason for this book: to provide information about the skills taught in PEERS for families.

Tips for Parents: How to Use This Book

This book is organized into three main parts. Part 1 includes the current introduction you are reading, which is intended to give you an overview of our approach and the scientific rationale on which this book is based. Part 2 includes strategies for developing and maintaining relationships. This part includes information about how to find good friends; how to have good conversations; how to start, enter, and exit conversations; how to use electronic communication appropriately; how to be a good sport; and how to have successful get-togethers with friends. Part 3 includes strategies for

handling peer conflict and rejection. This part includes information about how to handle arguments, verbal teasing, cyber bullying, rumors and gossip, physical bullying, and how to change a bad reputation. An epilogue also includes general conclusions and thoughts about moving forward.

Within parts 2 and 3, each chapter outlines a different ecologically valid social skill, presented using concrete rules and steps of social behavior. Chapters are broken down into separate sections as described in the following.

Narrative Lessons for Parents

The first section of each chapter contains a narrative lesson for parents. This section outlines critical skills needed for your teen or young adult to make and keep friends. You will notice that the parent narrative sections are longer or more detailed than other sections because we expect parents to act as social coaches to teens and young adults as part of this approach. In our clinical experience, being a social coach requires a great deal of information on your part so these sections will naturally be longer. Each relevant chapter will also offer advice on how to provide social coaching to your teen or young adult using the material outlined in this book. Although the narrative lessons were written for parents, interested teens and young adults are also welcome to read this section, too.

Success Stories

At the end of each parent section, you will find a brief success story relating to the skills taught in that chapter. These inspirational stories highlight the experiences of families who've gone through PEERS, often in their own words. Although these stories and the people they chronicle are real, we have changed the names and identifying information of these families to protect their anonymity—although all have given their permission for us to tell their unique stories.

Chapter Summaries for Teens and Young Adults

The next section, which can be easily located by its shaded box, includes a chapter summary for teens and young adults. This section is intended

to be read by your teen or young adult, although you should also have a look. Chapter summaries are meant to help you convey the information contained in this book without having to lecture to your child. Some teens and young adults will find it off-putting to have their parents explain the material directly to them. In that case, he or she should feel free to read the chapter summaries independently from you, leaving room for discussion later. Although the chapter summaries provide an overview of the narrative lessons, using more kid-friendly language, this section also includes social vignettes and transcripts from DVD demonstrations that you will need to be familiar with when discussing the skills with your teen or young adult. So don't skip over this section without giving it a look.

DVD Demonstrations and Social Vignettes

As a companion to this book, you have a DVD of role-play demonstrations of appropriate and inappropriate social behavior. If your child is at all like our teens and young adults who attend the UCLA PEERS Clinic, he or she may benefit greatly from seeing video models of behaviors that work or don't work with their peers. Similarly he or she may be unwittingly turning off other people merely because of a few quirky habits or gestures. Through our research with PEERS, we have learned that showing teen and young adult models of some of the more common appropriate and inappropriate social behaviors has helped many to become more socially polished, accelerating their progress in learning to be more effective listeners and friends. Video demonstrations are intended to be shared with interested members of your family, most importantly with your teen or young adult. Transcripts of these DVD demonstrations can be found in the chapter summaries for teens and young adults in the social vignette section. When DVD demonstrations are unavailable, alternative social stories are provided in the social vignette section.

Perspective-Taking Questions

DVD demonstrations and social vignettes are intended to be viewed or read in conjunction with corresponding perspective-taking questions, located immediately after each social vignette section in the chapter

summaries for teens and young adults. Perspective-taking questions are also presented on the DVD following each video demonstration. These questions will help you facilitate a discussion with your teen or young adult about appropriate and inappropriate social behavior and also assist your child with reading social cues and putting him- or herself in someone else's shoes.

Chapter Exercises for Teens and Young Adults

Each chapter includes chapter exercises for teens and young adults to promote use of these skills in more natural settings. Like all teen and young adult content, this section can be easily located by its shaded box. Chapter exercises are intended to be completed by you and your teen or young adult with the relevant amount of coaching provided by you. You will want to carefully read this section in order to help encourage the practice of these skills in the real world. In our clinical experience, if your teen or young adult doesn't practice these skills, the program and your efforts will be less effective.

Mobile Application for Smartphones

In addition to the material presented in this book and companion DVD, you and your teen or young adult may also want to access the mobile application for smartphones developed to accompany this book. The FriendMaker mobile app is intended to act as a virtual coach in the absence of live social coaching. The mobile app includes a summary of strategies from relevant social skills highlighted in this book, along with embedded video demonstrations of appropriate and inappropriate social behavior and perspective-taking discussions. We have found that many teens and young adults prefer this method of virtual social coaching in real-life social settings because it's less conspicuous and more natural than live social coaching. Suggestions for incorporating the use of the FriendMaker mobile app in everyday practice of the skills provided in this book are offered in the chapter exercises for teens and young adults when relevant.

Social Coaching Tip: Although you will have many tools at your disposal as part of this model, reading this book alone will not be the magic ingredient to helping your child. Assuming your teen or young adult is

motivated to learn the skills we have to offer, in order to receive the full benefit of this book, your role will be to do the following with your child:

- Share the rules and steps summarized in the chapter summaries for teens and young adults located in the shaded boxes of this book.
- Read the social vignettes and watch the DVD demonstrations of appropriate and inappropriate social behavior with your teen or young adult.
- Discuss the social vignettes and DVD demonstrations with your teen or young adult using the perspective-taking questions.
- Encourage your teen or young adult to practice these skills through the completion of chapter exercises located in the shaded boxes of this book.
- Provide social coaching about the rules and steps of social behavior during chapter exercises and teachable moments.
- Assist your teen or young adult in finding a source of friends as described in chapter 2.

Social Coaching Tip: Although you may be excited to get started, it's possible that you may find your teen or young adult is unwilling to learn more about these skills or practice what we're offering. Although it may be tempting to try to force this information on your child, knowing that these skills may be just what he or she needs, the sad truth is that if your teen or young adult doesn't want to learn or practice these skills, they aren't likely to work. Although it's naturally frustrating and even heartbreaking to want to help your child but be met with resistance, you may still want to familiarize yourself with the skills provided in this book, saving the tools for a rainy day when they might be of use. The reality is that most parents provide social coaching to their kids, often on a daily basis, whether their child wants it or not. So even if your teen or young adult claims to be disinterested, familiarizing yourself with rules and steps of social behavior identified in this book may still provide you with a powerful tool to help your child when he or she least expects it.

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Importance of Social Motivation

Before we begin to explore how to help your teen or young adult develop the critical skills needed for making and keeping friends, we need to consider the level of social motivation of your child. It's important that we be honest and acknowledge that there are some people who actually choose to be left alone. Perhaps your child is one of them. Although some who choose to isolate actually do want to learn to make and keep friends, others may be satisfied with their lives and don't really see the benefits of friendship. These teens and adults may be very self-directed and self-oriented and appear to be happy on their own. Yet parents of these teens and adults are often at their wits' end worrying that their child will never marry, never find a suitable job in the workforce, and never enjoy all of the breadth that a healthy social life offers. They long for their child to branch out and get involved with their peers, but their kids insist they don't want to.

At the UCLA PEERS Clinic, where we run our social skills groups, we see many families facing this challenge: parents who want their child to be more socially adept and engaged and teens and young adults who are perfectly content with their current social situation. As clinicians, it's our job to determine who will benefit from treatment in our program and also who will not. One of the deciding factors determining who is included in our social skills groups is based on social motivation. If a teen or young adult says that he or she is content being socially isolated, having no friends or social contact outside of family, yet expresses an interest in learning and practicing the skills we offer in PEERS, then we have room to work. However, if the teen or young adult isn't interested in learning or practicing the skills we offer, then our efforts will be useless. When considering whether your child will benefit from the skills in this book, you'll need to think about whether he or she actually wants to have friends. By familiarizing yourself with the skills suggested here and providing good social coaching to your child during teachable moments, even if your child seems uninterested in these skills, there is still hope for helping your son or daughter, perhaps when he or she least expects it.

When considering whether your child will benefit from the skills in this book, you'll need to think about whether he or she actually wants to have friends.

For many young people struggling with social challenges, it's not so much an issue of not *wanting* to have friends but not *knowing how* to have friends. This book is focused on the how-to of making and keeping friends. For socially motivated teens and young adults, the skills described here will help many to begin to venture forth into the world of friendship, even the die-hard loners.

Introducing This Book to Teens and Young Adults

Read the following shaded section with your child to provide him or her with an overview of this book. If after reading this section, your teen or young adult wishes to read more, have him or her proceed to the other shaded sections of this book, including chapter summaries and chapter exercises, and make yourself available for discussion. For those parents of teens and young adults uninterested in reading more, feel free to read on yourself. Remember that you're likely the most important social coach in your child's life and any additional knowledge you gain will only benefit the social life of your son or daughter.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Chapter Summary for Teens and Young Adults

The following information is intended to be read by teens and young adults with their parents in order to understand the purpose of this book.

Through our work at the UCLA PEERS Clinic, we help teens and young adults make and enjoy lasting friendships. Doing this work is more rewarding than we could ever have imagined because we understand how important it is to have friends.

We, too, make friends and work hard to maintain healthy relationships, so we're hoping that you'll let us join you on a journey to having more fun and lasting friendships. If your goal is to make and maintain meaningful relationships or you simply

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have an interest in learning more about how friendships develop, then you're in the right place.

So how does this work? We call this book *The Science of Making Friends*. We chose the word *science* for a reason. What makes this book unique from other books about friendships is that the tips and strategies we offer come directly from scientific research about what works and what doesn't work in social situations. We call the strategies we teach *ecologically valid*, which is a fancy way of saying that they work in the real world. They work because they're actually used by socially successful teens and young adults in real-life situations. What might surprise you is that the strategies you'll be learning may be different from what you've been told to do before. That's because we're not going to be suggesting what some people *think* teens and young adults should do in social situations but what *actually works*. You won't be surprised to hear that adults sometimes recommend doing things to make friends that completely fail, maybe leaving you feeling frustrated or confused. The truth is that adults sometimes give advice with good intentions but may not actually know the right thing to do. We're going to fix this problem by giving you and your parent the right tools you'll need for making and keeping friends, relying on science to make sure we get it right.

To help you practice these new strategies, your parent will be reading additional information on how to be a good social coach to you during real-life practice and to answer any questions you may have about what you're learning. To make it easier to understand what these strategies are supposed to look like, we'll break everything down into concrete rules and steps of what works socially, taking the mystery out of the social world, which we all know can be confusing and frustrating. We've also provided you with a DVD of video demonstrations highlighting many of these rules and steps of what works socially, along with perspective-taking questions that will help you get why these

rules apply. Although these video demonstrations are meant to highlight the rules and steps for making and keeping friends, they're also often humorous and fun to watch, like watching a YouTube video or a funny commercial. That was intentional, so enjoy.

In addition to this book and the DVD, you'll also have access to a mobile application for smartphones, outlining the rules and steps of what to do and what not to do in social situations. The FriendMaker mobile app includes quick summaries of the strategies you'll be reading about and embedded video demonstrations from your companion DVD. The mobile app is meant to be used as a virtual coach for you to use in real-world situations when you're looking for a little social coaching or a refresher about the rules and steps of what works socially for teens and young adults.

The strategies that we'll talk about in the DVD and the app include things such as how to find good friends; how to have good conversations and meet new people; how to organize successful get-togethers with friends; and how to handle things like bullying, teasing, and other social problems. We won't make believe that making and keeping friends is easy but we will provide you with exact rules and steps that you can follow to make this process easier. We won't sugarcoat the realities of things like bullying or teasing, and we won't pretend that these harsh realities don't exist. Instead, we'll give you the tools you need to handle these situations more effectively, allowing you to achieve the social success you deserve.

One last point, although this book and the research it's based on focus on individuals with social differences, you don't need to have significant social challenges to benefit from these tools. Fortunately, as you will soon discover, the skills you're about to learn will apply to anyone interested in making and keeping friends!

