

Helping Problem Girls

Helping [Girl] Scouts with ADHD Improve Social Skills

From Frogs to Princes: Helping [Girl] Scouts with ADHD Improve Social Skills
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Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, the most common childhood psychiatric diagnosis in North America, involves, among other aspects, difficulty with interpersonal relationships. The most common complaint, in fact, by children and teens with ADHD is that they don't have enough friends.

Often ADHD-impaired children who are in [Girl] Scouting programs are weak in basic social graces. These social skills are the specific behaviors that tend to gain positive responses from others and foster healthy, productive relationships with peers. They can be learned through observing others and imitating them as well as rehearsing specific aspects that seem to require adjustment. [Girl] Scout leaders can actually facilitate some of this rehearsal and training. (I recommend securing the parent's permission before directly confronting a Scout about these kinds of issues.)

ADHD children in general suffer peer difficulties because their intrusive, obnoxious behavior and poorly developed social skills make them unattractive. Adding insult to injury, there is a noticeably negative flow of reactions and feedback from other children, who often tease, harass, bother, and bully the ADHD children. Faced with a constant stream of negative reactions from others, the child might take the path of least resistance and decide that those who criticize are correct. The result is the adoption of a troublemaker or brat role within social groups, including [Girl] Scouts. Prevented from being the best, your [Girl] Scout may elect to become the "best worst" in the group. This role is hard to stop once it has started.

Here are the most common areas of difficulty in social skills for ADHD children and adolescents. You may have noticed some of these difficulties among [Girl] Scouts with ADHD, with or without hyperactivity. Incidentally, research has verified that ADHD children who don't accomplish these steps well have more adjustment difficulties.

(1) Reciprocity with others: entering an ongoing conversation, interrupting courteously when interruption is necessary, joining in to group activities, waiting for one's turn in line or in a game, self-disclosing without bragging, doing favors, giving thoughtful gifts, lending and sharing, being a participant without dominating.

(2) Handling negatives: accepting criticism, accepting an answer of "no" to a request, responding to teasing, losing gracefully in a game—being a "good sport," disagreeing without criticizing.

(3) Self control: handling peer pressure, making decisions without assistance, resisting temptations, restraining first impulses.

(4) Using language skills: clarifying for the meaning in what others say, avoiding offensive language, understanding and following instructions, answering questions, using good conversation tactics, being an alert listener, using eye contact, showing empathy.

(5) Winning people over: giving compliments, showing gratitude, encouraging others, using good hello and good-bye skills, apologizing, smiling appropriately, honoring others' "boundaries" such as privacy and personal space, being courteous, inviting others to join in, noticing and commenting on the "good news" in others' lives, showing hospitality, showing interest in others.

Because of their weak understanding of their own contributions to their social difficulties, [Girl] Scouts with ADHD sometimes think that others are out to get them, dislike them personally, and are picking on them. They often learn to assume a victim stance toward the world. Even though your [Girl] Scout might seem bossy, impatient, or critical and drive other children away, she might not perceive the relationship between such behavior and others' rejections. Any child who doesn't understand the validity of others' negative reactions can quickly become bent on revenge for what seem like unfair attacks.

As much as you are able, describe the direct domino effects of the child's actions on others. She simply must begin to perceive the relatedness of others' negative responses to his own actions. Whenever a genuine rejection occurs within your [Girl] Scout unit, figure out what caused it and be realistic in connecting it to whatever actions of the child contributed to it.

Teach the [Girl] Scout exactly what to do in a similar situation in the future, especially when there is a risk of rejection. Rehearse proper behavior and statements if necessary to prepare the [Girl] Scout for a better handling of the situation next time. Work with the parents to encourage a broadening of social contacts and experiences. Building up of friendships with wholesome, desirable peers is very helpful.

Help the [Girl] Scout find better avenues for fulfilling the need to have a special place and belong. Channeling the boundless energy of the ADHD [Girl] Scout (the topic of the previous article in this series) is half the battle of getting the child to turn away from the brat role. By

directly but tactfully addressing any obvious flaws in the social skills of the [Girl] Scout with ADHD, you can go a long way toward helping [her] become a happier, better adjusted person.