**An Adult’s Guide to Social Skills, for Those Who Were Never Taught**

It’s a shame so few of us are taught the basics of how to interact constructively with each other. If you never were, we’re here to help.

Unlike topics like math or science, social skills are more of a “learn on the job” kind of skill. When you’re a child, you can learn how to manage conflict, make friends and navigate groups by doing it. But not everyone learns the same lessons the same way. Sometimes, they take a whole lifetime to refine, and many of us never master them.

Learning social skills can be difficult if you weren’t exposed to traditional group dynamics as a child, if you struggle with a mental illness like anxiety or depression, or even if you just didn’t have a lot of positive role models when you were growing up. Young people tend to learn how to manage their own emotions, recognize those of other people and manage them both effectively by socializing. If these weren’t skills you developed growing up, don’t worry. You’re not alone.

1. **The social foundation: emotional intelligence**

Before we get to specific social situations, we should discuss the concept of emotional intelligence (or E.I.). Put very simply, E.I. is your ability to acknowledge your own emotions, recognize emotions in others and use that information to guide your behavior. This is [a relatively new area of study](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/magazine/can-emotional-intelligence-be-taught.html) in the field of psychology, and developing your own E.I. can help you understand and improve your social interactions.

There are several models of emotional intelligence, but for our purposes, we’ll look at the author [Daniel Goleman](https://blog.cognifit.com/emotional-intelligence/). He outlines five general categories of E.I. that complement and support one another.

1. **Self-awareness**: This simply means being able to identify your own emotions and how they work. Are you anxious in loud environments? Do you get angry when people talk over you? If you know these things about yourself, then you’re practicing self-awareness. This can be more difficult than it sounds, but simply being aware of yourself is all it takes for this step.
2. **Self-regulation**: Taking it a step further, self-regulation deals with your ability not just to know your emotions, but manage them. Sometimes that might mean handling them as they come up. If you get angry, knowing how to calm yourself down is important. However, it can also deal with managing the emotions you will face. If you know that stalking your ex’s Facebook is just going to make you feel bad, self-regulation would help you go do something to better your own life instead.
3. **Motivation**: External factors like money, status, or pain are powerful motivators. But in Goleman’s model, internal motivation is a key component. This means that you know how to manage your own motivation and create or continue projects because you choose to, not because something outside yourself demands it.
4. **Empathy**: It’s just as important to be aware of the emotions of others. This might mean developing the skills to recognize how people are expressing themselves — can you tell the difference between someone who’s comfortable versus someone who’s anxious? — but it also means understanding how other people may respond to the circumstances they’re in.
5. **Socialization**: This area deals with your ability to steer your relationships and navigate social situations. It doesn’t mean controlling others, but understanding how to get where you want to be with other people. That might mean conveying your ideas to co-workers, managing a team, or dealing with a conflict in a relationship.

Every social situation is different and there isn’t always a “correct” way to handle any of them. However, when viewed through the lens of these core competencies, most social situations become a lot more manageable. We’ll go over some common scenarios even adults might struggle with, but keep in mind how these principles can apply in all situations.

1. **Constructively confront someone**

Confronting someone when you have a problem with that person can be scary. If you’re the type to avoid conflict, you might rationalize it away by saying you want to keep the peace, or you don’t want to upset anyone. However, this can be a way of avoiding your own feelings. If there wasn’t something bothering you, there would be nothing to confront anyone about.

Dr. Ryan Howes, a clinical psychologist, [explained to Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-therapy/201406/how-confront) that it’s our own fears that keep us from confronting others. Our fear that we’ll lose something we have, that we’ll hurt someone we care about, or that it will hurt but accomplish nothing. One of the first steps to constructively confronting someone is to recognize that fear in yourself and identify the real issues that led to the conflict in the first place. If you’re annoyed that your partner forgot your birthday, for example, ignoring how you feel about it won’t resolve the conflict.

Once you’re ready, [Gregg Walker, a professor at Oregon State University](https://oregonstate.edu/instruct/comm440-540/confront.htm), recommends having the conversation when there’s time to discuss the issue, focusing on “I” statements like “I feel hurt that we didn’t do anything for my birthday,” and describing behavior and your reaction to it, rather than hurling accusations. Healthy confrontations require a fair amount of awareness of your own emotions, so this is a good time to practice that skill.

1. **Speak up and be heard in a group**

Whether it’s a meeting or a party, any time you get more than a couple of people together in a group, it can become difficult (if not impossible) to get a word in edgewise. While [most tricks on how to combat this](https://youtu.be/ikAfrKf5A8I) involve managing how you talk — pausing in the middle of a sentence rather than the end, or finishing your sentence even if someone tries to interrupt — an often overlooked issue is managing how you react to being talked over.

It would be great if everyone was polite and let you finish or paused to ask what you’re thinking. This doesn’t always happen. If someone interrupts you and you become annoyed, that can kill your motivation to speak up again. Or you might become visibly agitated and demand to be heard, which can be off putting and make people less likely to want to listen to what you have to say.

Instead, Chris Macleod, counselor and author of “The Social Skills Guidebook,” suggests accepting that group conversations are a “[vortex of noise and chaos](https://www.succeedsocially.com/groupconversations)” and going with the flow. Don’t spend all your time trying to fit in that one thing you badly wanted to say. Instead, go with the flow of the conversation and look for new opportunities to jump in. When you do, speak loudly and with confidence. More practical tricks like keeping your stories short or framing a complaint as a story can smooth over the experience, but regulating your own frustration and annoyance is the foundation these tricks build on.

1. **Make (and keep) new friends as an adult**

When you’re young, making friends can be relatively easy. School often means that there’s a group of people you’re required to hang out with who are your age. You may share some interests, and you’ll see one another almost every day. As an adult, it can be harder. Everyone’s busy, everyone’s tired, and time feels in short supply. Or so it seems. What really may be lacking is motivation.

[As Vox explains](https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/8/16/17694356/how-to-make-friends-adulthood), one of the most important keys to developing a new friendship is, well, showing up. You both say, “We should hang out sometime!” but for some reason you never do.

Why? Sure, you have things going on, but you still managed to binge watch the latest “Stranger Things.” There’s nothing wrong with a little “me” time, but it’s also O.K. to spend some of it reaching out to someone new.

When making new friends, you have to start with [some internal motivation](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/opinion/sunday/the-secret-of-effective-motivation.html). Decide for yourself that you’re going to make friends and then [put yourself in situations where that can happen](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/24/smarter-living/the-edit-how-to-make-friends.html). Take a class, join a club, or just talk to people you know but aren’t friends with yet. More important, follow up. If you find someone you want to be friends with — and especially if there are indications that person wants to be friends with you, too — put it on the very top of your to-do list to follow up. You’ll be surprised how easy it is when you do it on purpose.

1. **Strike up a conversation with someone new**

Talking to a stranger for the first time — whether it’s at a party, a work event, or just on the street — can be complicated. You never know less about someone than when you first meet them. That’s also something you can use to your advantage. People like to talk about themselves. So much so that, according to research from Harvard University, people will sometimes even [give up money to be able to talk about themselves](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/224919007_Disclosing_information_about_the_self_is_intrinsically_rewarding).

You might feel awkward or uncomfortable when you’re out on your own, but practicing a little empathy can reveal a powerful truth: So does everyone else. Research [from the University of Chicago](https://news.uchicago.edu/podcasts/big-brains/why-talking-strangers-will-make-you-happier-nicholas-epley) found that less than 47 percent of its participants believed a stranger would be willing to talk with them. In reality, every attempt was successful. Most of us are willing to have a conversation, we just don’t always want to be the one to make the first move.

However, not everyone is open to a conversation with strangers all the time. An easy way to check is to pay attention to what they’re doing at the time. Are they wearing headphones? Do they seem in a hurry? Are they at their job and only making conversation as part of their duties? If so, you might try again later (or with someone else). If they’re not busy, [start by saying hello](https://ideas.ted.com/how-to-talk-to-strangers/) or opening with a compliment. From there you can keep the conversation going with [the “insight and question” method](https://www.fastcompany.com/3060762/three-scientifically-proven-steps-for-talking-with-strange). Simply offer an observation or insight, follow it up with a question, and let the conversation flow naturally.

These are far from the only social situations you might find yourself struggling with, but the principles that can be applied are nearly universal. Acknowledge your own emotional state and manage your needs and feelings in a constructive way. Take the initiative to pursue the social outcomes you want, and empathize with others who are dealing with the same struggles you are. With practice, the rest of the complex nuances of social interaction will flow a lot more naturally.

Not everyone has an easy time getting out, meeting people, and making friends. Some individuals tend to avoid social situations because of the anxiety and discomfort they might experience.  Others are simply introverted and like spending time alone rather than being surrounded by people. No matter which category you fall into, it’s still best to cultivate healthy social skills and effective strategies for communication with others.

1. **Why Do You Need Social Skills?**

Having a solid set of social skills allows you to communicate, relate to, and connect with other people. This is essential for establishing friendships and navigating your way through life with a better degree of satisfaction. It can be surprising how many doors open in life and how many opportunities can fall into your lap when you have good social skills. Now, how can you develop and build those skills?

1. **Learn Nonverbal Communication:** Social skills are about much more than just speaking. Nonverbal cues also go a long way in building trust and connecting with people. Make eye contact when speaking with someone, give an occasional nod to indicate you’re listening, and display open body posture so you don’t seem closed off.
2. **Ask Your Friends and Family:** Rather than trying to improve social skills all on your own, get some help from friends and family. Ask them how they feel about your current social skills, how they would grade them, and how you can improve. You have your own ideas about how you present yourself to the world, but by talking to someone close to you, you can gain deeper insights you might not have realized before. Your friends and family will also be there for you when you are ready to move forward and learn other [important life skills](https://www.pyramid-healthcare.com/5-adulting-skills-wont-learn-school-acquire/).
3. **Use Everyday Interactions to Your Benefit:** Everyday errands or activities present the perfect opportunity for you to build your social skills. Try branching out when you go to the grocery store or out for a walk, check the mail, or get something to eat. While you might hate small talk, sometimes it can lead to a great conversation. Making an effort can go a long way. Remember to integrate the nonverbal skills touched on above.
4. **Learn How to Keep a Conversation Going:** A great conversation is like a fire on a frigid day; it keeps you warm, comfortable, and engaged on various levels. Going back to small talk, you can use it as a doorway to have a deeper conversation. Once you’ve talked about the weather or have made a surface observation about a person, such as an article of clothing, you can ease into a topic that’s a bit more personal. For example, you can ask about family, personal feelings, and relationships. Stick to open-ended questions, and try to talk just as much as you listen.
5. **Learn How to Say “No”:** Learning to say “no” is just as important as learning to say “yes.” Refusing a request, no matter how minor, shows you know your limits and what you’re comfortable with. Know that you don’t have to explain your reasons for refusing and embrace it. You will see that others respect you saying “no” more than you would expect them to. Saying no to a request will give you [time to care for yourself](https://www.pyramid-healthcare.com/importance-self-care-make-time/), which is a way of recharging your batteries for your next social interaction.

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**Exactly How to Tell the Difference Between an Introvert and Extrovert**

It's a little more complicated than you may realize.

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Most of us think being introverted or extroverted is as simple as falling into one of two boxes: Would you rather stay at home on a Friday night in your pajamas or go out to the bars with a big group of friends? Would you rather be the center of attention or stay as far away from the spotlight as you can?

But the truth is, your personality is not that black and white. “There are no pure types in psychology,” says [Dan McAdams, PhD](https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/profile/?p=46), chair of the psychology department at Northwestern University. “Extroversion/introversion is a continuous dimension, like height and weight. There are people who score at the extremes, like very heavy people, or very tall people, or people who score very high on the trait of extroversion—but most people fall in the middle of these bell-shaped curves.”

Regardless of where we sit on the spectrum, there’s no doubt that personality plays a huge role in our everyday lives. “Everything that people do is a reflection of their personality,” says [Michael Robinson, PhD](https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~hilmert/SPRG/SPRG/Michael_D_Robinson.html), professor of psychology at North Dakota State University. “Personality is always with us, influencing what we think about, what we feel, and how we behave.”

Our personalities are made up of what psychologists call “The Big 5” personality traits, which have the acronym OCEAN: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, says [Scott Bea, PsyD](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/staff/2070-scott-bea), a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic.

So even though extroversion is only one part of our personalities, it’s still a*big* part of how we think and act. And just how extroverted or introverted we are can influence everything from our social views, to our relationships, to our careers. Here’s what to know about the two polar ends of the continuum and determining where you fall.

**What is an introvert?**

Being more of an introverted person means you thrive on spending time with your own thoughts and ideas.

**Common introvert traits**

* Enjoy spending time in solitude
* Don’t prefer to be the center of attention
* Value close one-on-one relationships
* Think before they speak/not as talkative
* Need time alone to recharge and reflect
* Prefer working in quiet, independent environments
* Deeply focus and think about specific interests
* Can be seen as reserved

“One thing I think people get confused is the difference between introversion and shyness,” says [Robin Edelstein, PhD](https://lsa.umich.edu/psych/people/faculty/redelste.html), chair of the Personality and Social Contexts Psychology Program at the University of Michigan. “Shyness has anxiety, or a negative component, to it.” Pure introversion, on the other hand, doesn’t have that negative aspect to it. “They’re happy to be alone, not needing as much social contact, but not having this anxiety about, ‘Will other people like me? Will I be accepted?’ That’s more shyness than introversion,” says Edelstein.

“Introverts and extroverts do not differ in the quality of the friendships that they have.”

Another important thing to remember about introverts is that just because they might prefer to be around fewer people, that doesn’t mean they don’t still have quality friendships and relationships, says Robinson. “Once a friendship is established, introverts and extroverts do not differ in the quality of the friendships that they have,” he says.

Although our society tends to be more geared toward extroverts—think leadership roles, building connections, and so on—the seemingly bad image introverts sometimes get doesn’t really hold water. “A lot of people have argued that we value extroversion so much in Western culture that introverts get a bad rap,” says Edelstein. “But there’s nothing problematic about being an introvert.”

In fact, on top of still having great relationships, introverts can also be extremely successful in their careers. The only difference is, they tend to gravitate more toward roles that have an element of solitude, such as accounting, engineering, writing, or long-haul truck driving.

**What is an extrovert?**

Being more of an extroverted person means you thrive on the energy of the people and things around you.

**Common extrovert traits**

* Have large social networks
* Enjoy being the center of attention
* Tend to think out loud
* Make quick decisions
* Gain energy from being around other people
* Outgoing, enthusiastic, and positive
* Thrive in team-oriented and open work settings

“Extroverts are also more likely to be the center of a social network,” says [Ryne Sherman, PhD](https://www.depts.ttu.edu/psy/people/rsherman/), associate professor of psychology at Texas Tech University. “They’re more likely to be the person who knows lots of people.”

Although there’s no research showing the differences between how introverts and extroverts react to and accept change, since extroverts tend to have larger social circles, that *could* make a difference in how deeply big life events might impact them. “They can draw on more people to provide comfort, to provide social support,” says Sherman. “So when a major event happens, they have more support than introverts typically do.”

“Our world is set up and more geared toward extroverts and making connections.”

Plus, our society tends to be more geared toward the acceptance of extroverts. “I think you can make a case that they’re better suited to our world in a lot of ways,” says Edelstein. “Our world is sort of set up and more geared toward extroverts and making connections, going on job interviews, and going on dates. All these things make that easier.”

This is part of the reason extroverts can more often be found in leadership roles, or in people-centric careers like sales, marketing, or public relations.

But it’s important to keep in mind that extroversion is still just *one* component of a person’s personality. “I think a big piece of thinking about introversion and extroversion in combination with other traits is it’s going to have a different flavor,” says Edelstein. For example, there’s a big difference between an extrovert who’s agreeable versus one who’s loud and makes rude comments.

**So, how do you find out if you’re an introvert or an extrovert?**

Most of us will fall somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. That’s a good thing, especially as our society has become more and more obsessed with dividing us out into “types.”

“Certain very popular 'measures' of personality (most notoriously the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI) purport to put people into types,” says McAdams. “There are no types, and these measures have no scientific validity. What we can say is that people do show differences with respect to where they are placed on the continuum.”

To find out where you sit on that continuum, Sherman recommends taking the [SAPA Project’s personality test](https://sapa-project.org/), which will tell you whether you’re high or low on extroversion. Being aware of your personality can definitely prove beneficial. “It provides some sense of consistency, predictability, and reliability of our expression of ourselves across time,” says Bea.