

FOREWORD BY JOHN ELDER ROBISON
bestselling author of *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's*

ELIZABETH A. LAUGESON, PSY.D.

The Science *of* MAKING FRIENDS

Helping Socially Challenged
Teens and Young Adults



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The Science of Making Friends

*Helping Socially Challenged
Teens and Young Adults*

Elizabeth A. Laugeson, PsyD

Foreword by John Elder Robison

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*This book is dedicated to all of the parents who work
tirelessly to support their children*

Video Contents

Throughout the book you'll find references to videos marked with a "play" icon  (shown to the right). These videos are available at www.wiley.com/go/makingfriends. The password is the last five digits of this book's ISBN, which are 27216.

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Foreword

Are you a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, or do you have a kid with ADHD, anxiety, or depression? Does your child struggle to make and keep friends? You've come to the right place. This book—*The Science of Making Friends*—describes one of the first evidence-based systems for helping teens and young adults achieve that all-important goal.

The words *evidence based* are very important. They mean that the creators of the therapy have tested it against other therapies and verified that it is effective and delivers lasting benefits. In the world of therapy, evidence-based practices are the gold standard. An evidence-based therapy for making friends is the mental health equivalent of a drug that's shown to be effective. It's the best therapy we know how to deliver.

As a person who grew up with undiagnosed autism, I know how important social skills are for people who are neurologically different. I know firsthand the pain of loneliness and the sense of failure unwanted social isolation brings. The sting of childhood rejection followed me long into adulthood, and I'd do anything to save today's kids some of what I went through.

As a parent of a young adult with autism, I also know how powerful the effect of parental coaching can be. Like me, my son is on the autism spectrum but with recognition of his challenges and social skills coaching he grew up to be far less isolated and more socially successful than I did.

When I raised my son—as I describe in my memoir *Raising Cubby*—I flew by the seat of my pants. I watched him struggle and fail, pondered his actions, and gave the best

advice I could based on my limited life experience. That's all most people could hope to do, until now.

Dr. Liz Laugeson has devoted her career to studying the behaviors that lead to social failure and finding ways to teach alternate ways of acting. Most important, she has kept records of her work, and she's learned what works and what doesn't.

She leads a team of researchers and therapists at UCLA's Semel Institute, where they have developed and proven the benefit of an intervention known as PEERS, which stands for Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills. It's one of the first programs of its kind and the first to be backed by solid evidence of its effectiveness.

The PEERS program was originally designed to be delivered by two therapists. One would meet with the kids, the other with the parents. Right now, Dr. Laugeson and her staff are training teams to do PEERS all over the world, but there are still many families in need who are not near a trained PEERS team, hence, this book.

In it, you will find all the core concepts of PEERS with advice on how to work through the elements with your teen or young adult. If you're like me, you may even find the lessons of PEERS relevant in your own life or those of your partner.

If you follow the guidelines, I guarantee you will see greater social success. And that is one of the best predictors of happiness and good life outcome. I can't stress strongly enough what it's meant to me.

John Elder Robison
Author, *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's*,
Be Different, and *Raising Cubby*
Member, Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee,
US Department of Health and Human Services

Preface

This book is the culmination of years of research in social skills training for teens and young adults with social challenges conducted at the UCLA PEERS Clinic. Many of our clients come to our clinic with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Others have been diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, or any other number of disorders that cause social difficulties. Some have no diagnosis at all but struggle with knowing how to make and keep friends. All find themselves at sea socially and need a little help navigating their way. The strategies presented in the following chapters are based on a decade of research in the skills necessary to make and keep friends. The UCLA PEERS Clinic has helped hundreds of teens find and keep friends and become socially adept at doing so. The PEERS model is unique from other programs in that it involves parents in the curriculum and is the only existing research-based model of its kind for teaching friendship skills to teens and young adults.

Through rigorous scientific investigation, we have identified the essential elements needed for developing and maintaining meaningful relationships and have organized these essential social behaviors into easy-to-understand concrete rules and steps. We have broken down complex social behaviors to make them simple for any teen or young adult to follow. Yet we have also taken into consideration the special needs of some of the young people we work with. Those with ASD and ADHD, for example, sometimes have required that steps be smaller, more digestible, and methodical. We also know, for example, that some individuals on the autism spectrum have a tendency to think in concrete and literal ways. The use of figurative language such as metaphors and analogies is often lost on them.

Likewise, abstract thinking about social behaviors may be equally confusing. Rather than trying to remedy this deficit by attempting to teach teens and young adults with ASD how to think like typically developing people, we embrace their unique thinking style and use it to create a program that can help a vast array of people with social skills challenges. We are particularly indebted to the teens and young adults with ASD whom we've encountered; thinking about their needs and unique perspectives provided the program with an elegant solution to teaching social skills challenges—breaking down complex social behaviors into rules and steps. The result is a researched-based model for teaching social skills to teens and young adults.

In the following pages you will see how we take what appear to be abstract social behaviors, such as starting or entering conversations, and break those behaviors down into their smaller, individual parts. By reducing complex social behavior into smaller, more manageable segments, we're able to decode the social world for individuals who have social challenges, making it more likely that they will be able to successfully navigate this world and thereby develop more meaningful relationships.

DOWNLOAD THE APP!

The FriendMaker app (available for iPhone and iPad) helps teens and young adults navigate social situations, practicing the skills taught in this book in real time. To download the app, open iTunes on your computer or the App Store on your device and search for **FriendMaker**. You can download from there.

Acknowledgments

Someone once said *mentors are everyday heroes*. To my mentor, Andrew Leuchter, I would like thank you for being *my hero*. This work would not have been possible if it were not for your mentorship, and without your support and guidance, this book would never have been written and the research on which it is founded would never have been conducted. Thank you for being my hero and the kind of person I aspire to be.

This work would also not have been possible without the love and support of my family and friends. To my husband, Lance Orozco, I am forever indebted. You are my greatest source of support, my biggest fan, and the kindest and most thoughtful person I know. To my mother, Janet Tate, I am forever your student. You have taught me by example what it is to be a strong woman, and I carry your voice with me always. To my colleagues, Fred Frankel, Mary O'Connor, and Blair Paley, I am forever grateful. You have shown me the world of social skills research and have transformed my life in the most meaningful way. To my dear friends, Jennifer Wilkerson, Carrie Raia, and Dan Oakley, I am forever your friend. You have taught me what true friendship means, and I am a better person for knowing each of you.

No list of gratitude would be complete without acknowledging the incredible contributions of my wonderful team. The work on which this book is founded is a collaborative effort on the part of two dedicated and talented labs. To my amazing research and clinical teams at UCLA (Team PEERS) and The Help Group (Team Alliance), I would like to thank you for your tireless efforts and unparalleled dedication. Most especially to Shannon Bates, Lara Tucci, Ruth Ellingsen, Yasamine Bolourian, Jessica

Hopkins, Jennifer Sanderson, and Ashley Dillon—I am eternally grateful for your commitment and enthusiasm to our work and the warmth and compassion you show to our families.

To my amazing team of actors—Yasamine Bolourian, Mary Goodarzi, Lara Tucci, Alex Friedman, and Ben Schwartzman, who moonlight as autism researchers when they are not conducting fabulous role-play demonstrations of social skills—I commend you on your wonderful acting abilities in the accompanying videos and thank you for your willingness to embarrass yourselves a little in the interest of social skills!

To my friends and colleagues at UCLA and The Help Group, I thank you for your endless support and encouragement of this work. Most especially to Barbara Firestone, Peter Whybrow, Jim McCracken, and Philip Levin for their loyal and steadfast support of our research efforts. To my dear friends and colleagues Vicky Goodman and Sally Weil at The Friends of the Semel Institute, Vera and Dana Guerin with the Shapell and Guerin Family Foundation, and the Organization for Autism Research—I thank you for making possible the research on which this book is founded.

To my talented editorial team—Margie McAneny, Pat Stacey, and Tracy Gallagher—I thank you for your patience and persistence in helping me find my voice. To Melissa Wasserman, Lyndsay Brooks, Meagan Cronin, Rohini Bagrodia, and Jason Tinero—who masquerade as graduate students when they're not busy copyediting—thank you for helping me dot my i's and cross my t's.

Finally, to the inspirational families we have had the great privilege of working with, thank you for guiding this work and reminding us what is important in life. You never cease to amaze me, supply me with endless amounts of laughter, and inspire me to always do better and work harder. Thank

you for touching my heart and making this work more meaningful than I could ever have imagined.

About the Author

Elizabeth A. Laugeson, PsyD, is a licensed clinical psychologist and an assistant clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. Laugeson is the founder and director of the UCLA PEERS Clinic, which is an outpatient hospital-based program providing parent-assisted social skills training for youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, and other social impairments. She is also the director of The Help Group-UCLA Autism Research Alliance, which is a collaborative research initiative dedicated to developing and expanding applied clinical research in the treatment of children and adolescents with ASD.

Laugeson has been a principal investigator and collaborator on a number of research studies investigating social skills training for youth from preschool to early adulthood and is the co-developer of an evidence-based, parent-assisted manual on social skills intervention for teens and young adults known as the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®), which has been translated and disseminated in over a dozen countries to date.

Laugeson received her doctorate in psychology from Pepperdine University in 2004 and completed a predoctoral psychology internship and a postdoctoral research fellowship at UCLA in 2004 and 2007, respectively. She has presented her research at conferences throughout the world, and her work has been featured on national and international media outlets such as *People Magazine*, *Los*

Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, CBS, NBC, and Channel 4 in the United Kingdom.

In this book, Laugeson shares her research-supported strategies for helping adolescents and young adults with social challenges learn to make and keep friends.

Part One

Getting Ready

1

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. 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.

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.

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.

Decoding social behaviors into concrete rules and steps will help to demystify the social world.

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

A long-term follow-up study conducted with families one to five years after receiving the PEERS treatment revealed that improvements were maintained over time and in some cases improved even further.

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.