



The ADD-vantage
Specialist **ADHD** support services

Great minds think alike, brilliant minds think differently

**Understanding & Supporting
Social & Emotional Development in**

Young people with ADHD

A Guide for Parents



Dear Parent Carers

Welcome, I am glad you found this offering!

Take heart from the fact that there is no one better placed to parent your child than you. No one loves or knows them as you do. If you are reading this guide, you are already doing something important. You are paying attention. You want to understand your child not just manage their behaviour or learning. You have decided to explore and increase your understanding of what is going on for her through the lens of ADHD.

Young people with ADHD are often bright, energetic, compassionate, warm and creative. But, they are also frequently misunderstood, by teachers, by peers, by siblings and sometimes even by themselves.

Boys with ADHD are often labelled as defiant, lazy, or disrespectful because they present blurting out answers, refusing to sit still, or failing to complete assignments. In reality, these are neurological symptoms beyond the child's conscious control. Peers, meanwhile, can find these children exhausting or disruptive, leading to social rejection that compounds the child's already fragile self-esteem. The tragedy is that many of these boys are bright, creative, and deeply sensitive but because their difficulties are externalised (hyperactivity, outbursts, inattention) rather than internalised, they are far more likely to be labelled as "problem children" than to be recognised as kids who need support.

Girls tend to internalise their struggles rather than 'act out', their ADHD can go unnoticed for years. By the time it is identified many have already accumulated a painful backlog of self-doubt, social confusion, and quiet shame. Researchers asked women with a late ADHD diagnosis to share their toughest challenges through their childhood and adolescence. Their answer was unanimous; it was the social impairment and isolation caused by their ADHD differences and needs being misunderstood and unsupported.

This guide is written to help you appreciate what is happening when your child struggles socially or emotionally, and give you practical, grounded ways to help. It will also ask you to reflect, not to judge yourself, but to grow alongside your child.

Courage! You have got this!

Many the 'force' with you!

Pippa

x

Section 1: Self-Esteem — Why do young people with ADHD doubt themselves?

The gap between potential and performance

One of the most painful features of ADHD is the gap it creates between what a child knows they are capable of and what they can produce consistently. They might write a brilliant story one day and forget to hand in their homework the next. They see other children managing things that feel impossibly hard for her sitting still, keeping track of belongings, maintaining friendships and they draw a quiet conclusion: the problem must be them.

Boys with ADHD tend to develop low self-esteem through a process of accumulated negative feedback that begins very early in life. Because their symptoms are typically so visible and disruptive, they receive a disproportionate amount of criticism from teachers correcting their behaviour in front of classmates, from parents expressing frustration at home, and from peers who exclude or mock them. Over time, a child internalises these messages and begins to see himself as fundamentally flawed, stupid, or "bad," even when none of that is true. The gap between his potential and his performance becomes a source of chronic shame.

Girls with ADHD often spend enormous energy masking and compensating. They learn to appear fine in public while quietly struggling behind the scenes. This is exhausting, and it erodes confidence in a way that is hard to see from the outside. They are told they are clever, but clever does not seem to be enough. So, they internalise a story: that they must be lazy, careless, or simply not trying hard enough.

That story, repeated hundreds of times across childhood, becomes their identity.

Key Takeaway

Self-esteem in children with ADHD is not about how others see them — it is about how they see themselves in relation to what they expect themselves to be. The gap between those two things is where the damage happens.

What parents can do

The most powerful thing you can do is help your child separate who they are from what they do. ADHD affects performance. It does not define character, intelligence, or worth.

- Praise effort, strategy, and persistence — not just results.
- When things go wrong, help them name what happened without it becoming about who they are.
- Look for and name their genuine strengths, specifically and often.
- Share your own stories of struggle — it normalises imperfection.

Reflection Questions for Parents

1. What story do I think my child is telling herself about who they are?
2. When I respond to their struggles, am I separating the behaviour from the child?
3. What specific, true things do I genuinely admire about them?

Section 2: Social Struggles – What Is Really Going On?

The social world is an incredibly demanding environment – it requires reading subtle cues, regulating impulses, taking turns, managing emotions in real time, and sustaining attention in conversation – and all of these are areas where ADHD directly interferes, and our children experience difficulties in this aspect of their lives. When we watch a child struggle socially, it is easy to assume they are being rude, aggressive, selfish, or simply difficult.

However, social struggles are **often rooted in executive function challenges** – the brain-based skills that govern how we plan, regulate, and respond in real time.

Social interaction is extraordinarily complex. It requires all the following, simultaneously:

- **Working memory – to track what was just said and respond relevantly.** For example, drifting off during what someone is saying, forgetting what was just discussed, or missing the point of a joke makes sustained friendship genuinely difficult and can come across as disinterest or disrespect.
- **Impulse control – to wait your turn, not interrupt, not blurt out thoughts.** Peers often experience as rude or overbearing, even when no harm is intended. A boy may genuinely not realise he has spoken over someone or hijacked a conversation.
- **Emotional regulation— to manage excitement, frustration, or hurt in the moment.** It is common for minor disagreements during play to escalate quickly when a child struggles to manage frustration. Being unable to lose gracefully, for instance, can make group games a minefield.
- **Cognitive flexibility - to shift topics, tolerate changing plans, repair misunderstandings.** Young people with ADHD can struggle to accurately interpret facial expressions, tone of voice, or unspoken social rules, meaning they may not notice when someone is uncomfortable, bored, or upset with them. Friendship requires a balance of give and take, and children with ADHD can become overly intense or one-sided in their interactions, overwhelming peers without realising it.



The **consequences are often swift and brutal in childhood social settings.** A single impulsive comment, an inability to follow the unspoken rules of a game, or an emotional outburst can result in immediate exclusion. What is particularly cruel is that many of these children *desperately want* to connect – they are not indifferent to friendship – but they lack the neurological toolkit to sustain it in the way their peers expect. They are often the last picked, the one not invited to birthday parties, or the child who drifts from group to group never quite finding their place.

Research consistently shows that children with ADHD are rejected by peers far more rapidly than neurotypical children sometimes within minutes of a first interaction. This is known as the "**fast rejection**" phenomenon, and it is particularly damaging because it becomes

self-reinforcing. A child who is repeatedly rejected begins to either withdraw entirely or overcorrect by becoming louder, sillier, or more attention-seeking to be liked — behaviours that then drive further rejection.

Perhaps the most overlooked dimension is **the profound loneliness many of these children** carry. On the surface they may appear happy-go-lucky, hyperactive, or disruptive — but underneath, many are acutely aware that they don't quite fit, that friendships don't stick the way they seem to for others, and that they don't fully understand why. This loneliness, if unaddressed, can lay the groundwork for anxiety, depression, and deep social insecurity that persists well into adolescence and adulthood.



💡 Key Takeaway

Your child is not choosing to be difficult in social situations. Their brain is working harder than most just to keep up with the pace and complexity of social interaction. Understanding this changes everything about how we respond to them.

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

Many children with ADHD also experience Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) — an intense, often overwhelming emotional response to perceived criticism, exclusion, or failure. This is not dramatic overreaction. It is a neurological feature of ADHD that makes social pain feel genuinely unbearable.

A friend cancelling plans, a teacher's sharp tone, not being picked for a sports team, being left out of a group chat or a party invite; these can trigger a level of emotional distress that seems wildly disproportionate to others but is entirely real to her. RSD shapes how they engage with the world, often leading them to avoid situations where rejection is possible, or to become hypervigilant about others' moods and reactions.

➡ Reflection Questions for Parents

4. When my child has a social difficulty, is my first instinct to understand what happened or to correct their behaviour?
5. Have I ever watched them be overwhelmed in a social situation and not understood why?
6. Do they seem to feel social pain more intensely than I would expect?

Section 3: How Repeated Struggles Shape Identity

When hard moments become a story

Children build their sense of self from accumulated experiences and the meaning they make of them. A child who is regularly left out, corrected, or rejected begins to construct a narrative: “There is something wrong with me. I am too much. I am annoying. I do not belong.”

Over time, this stops being a reaction to events and becomes a lens through which they see everything. They may stop trying to make friends because they expect rejection. They may become either hypervigilant, reading every interaction for signs of disapproval or may appear not to care, having learned that detachment hurts less than hope.

These are protective adaptations. They make sense given their experience. But they can also become barriers to connection and growth if they go unaddressed.

💡 Key Takeaway

The goal is not to protect your children from all difficult experiences. The goal is to help them make different meaning of those experiences, so they shape them into someone with resilience rather than someone who is diminished.

Building a different narrative

Children do not rewrite their self-story alone. They need a trusted adult to help them hold a different version of themselves — one that is truer than the one they have constructed from their hardest moments.

- Name what you see in them specifically, not vaguely. Not ‘you’re amazing’ but ‘I watched you stick with that even though it was frustrating, and I want you to know I noticed.’
- Revisit difficult experiences later, when calm, to gently help them reframe them.
- Share stories of people who struggled and found their way real ones, not fairy tales.
- Help them identify a community where she genuinely belongs even if it is small.



➡ Reflection Questions for Parents

1. What story do I think my child is telling themselves about their social life?
2. Am I the kind of presence in their life who helps them see herself more clearly and kindly?
3. Are there opportunities I could create for them to experience genuine belonging?

Section 4: Spotting Low Self-Esteem – The Subtle Signs

Low self-esteem in children with ADHD does not always look like sadness or withdrawal. It can be surprisingly well-hidden or expressed in ways that are easy to misread.

What to watch for

- **Avoiding challenges-** Giving up quickly on new things “I’m not good at that” before they have really tried rather than risk failing again, they often refuse to attempt tasks, which looks like laziness but is self-protection.
- **Clowning or acting out** - some adopt a class clown persona, choosing to be laughed *with* rather than laughed *at*.
- **Explosive anger** — emotional dysregulation in ADHD means small frustrations can trigger outsized reactions, which are often a mask for deep feelings of inadequacy.
- **Social withdrawal** — after repeated rejection from peers, they simply stop trying to connect, becoming isolated. Difficulty accepting compliments or deflecting praise with a joke or dismissal. Needing excessive reassurance before attempting anything
- **Negative self-talk** — describe themselves using harsh language (“I’m stupid,” “I can’t do anything right”) from a surprisingly young age. Over-apologising saying sorry constantly as a pre-emptive defence. Comparing themselves negatively to peers or siblings.
- **Learned helplessness** — after years of trying and failing despite effort, some give up entirely, believing outcomes are beyond their control.
- **Perfectionism** - there is less risk of being exposed as ‘not good enough.’ Perfectionism that leads to paralysis, procrastination, or meltdowns is a sign of anxiety about self-worth — not high standards.
- **Excessive need for control**— food, appearance, routines — to manage inner chaos

Reflection Questions for Parents

4. Looking at this list, do any of these signs show up in my child?
5. Are there patterns I have dismissed as ‘just their personality’ that might actually be self-protection?
6. How do I respond when they are hard on themselves? Does my response help or inadvertently reinforce the belief?



Section 5: Parenting Pitfalls – What Hurts Without Meaning To...

Every single approach listed here comes from a place of love. That is exactly what makes them hard to spot. None of this is about blame. It is about awareness.

- **Comparing to siblings or ‘easier’ children** — even gently, even once. She hears it for years.
- **Fixing things**— it sends the message: ‘I do not think you can.’
- **Over-focusing on what went wrong** — when most conversations involve correction, they learn they are mostly a problem to be solved.
- **Public correction** — correcting behaviour, especially social behaviour, in front of peers is deeply shaming.
- **Expressing frustration or despair in front of them** — even an exasperated sigh registers. They are watching your face for evidence of what they ‘are’.
- **Pushing the social agenda too hard**— asking ‘Did you make any friends today?’ every day tells them the current answer is the wrong one.
- **Minimising feelings**— ‘It’s not a big deal’ or ‘Just ignore them’ teaches them that their experience is wrong or excessive.
- **Praising achievement over effort** — telling them they are smart, and then watching her struggle, creates a painful contradiction that damages rather than builds confidence.

💡 Key Takeaway

The antidote is not perfection — it is repair. When you notice you have slipped into one of these patterns, you can simply say: ‘I want to try that again. I don’t think I handled that very well.’ That modelling of repair is one of the most powerful things you can offer them.



➡ Reflection Questions for Parents

7. Which of these patterns do I recognise in myself?
8. What is usually going on for me when I fall into them? (Worry? Exhaustion? Pressure?)
9. What would it look like to repair a moment that did not go well?

Section 6: Supporting Friendships – Without Overstepping

Being a consultant, not a fixer

It is agonising to watch your child struggle with friendships. Every instinct says: do something. Fix it. Make it better. But rescuing them from every social difficulty denies them the chance to develop repair skills and quietly communicates that you do not believe they can manage.

The goal is to be a consultant, not a fixer. You are there to support, reflect, and occasionally advise – but they are the one learning to navigate.

Practical ways to help

- **Create low-pressure social opportunities** – one child at a time, a structured activity, a shorter duration. Success in small doses builds real confidence.
- **Debrief gently, not forensically** - ‘How did that feel?’ rather than ‘What did you do wrong?’
- **Name what you observe without diagnosing** – ‘I noticed you seemed tired after that. What was going on for you?’
- **Teach social skills explicitly** – children with ADHD do not always absorb them naturally. Role-play, talk through scenarios, read books together.
- **Validate before advising**– when they come home upset, resist the urge to problem-solve immediately. Feeling heard first matters enormously.
- **Facilitate finding their people** – activity groups on a genuine passion. Friendship built on shared interest is more forgiving of social differences.
- **Let them experience natural consequences**– as painful as it is to watch. They need the chance to develop repair skills through real experience.

💡 Key Takeaway

The most useful question you can ask when your child comes home from a difficult social situation is not ‘What should I do?’ but ‘What do they need from me right now?’ Sometimes that is advice. Often it is simply to be heard.



➔ Reflection Questions for Parents

10. When my child has a social difficulty, is my first response usually to fix, to listen, or something else?
11. Are there ways I might be inadvertently rescuing them that prevent them from building resilience?
12. What are their genuine interests where I could help them find their community?

Section 7: When they say “No One Likes Me”

What not to say — and what to say instead

Few moments stop a parent in their tracks like hearing their child say “No one likes me” or “I’m bad.” The instinct is to reassure quickly: “That’s not true everyone loves you!” But that closes the conversation, and she feels unheard.

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
That’s not true — everyone loves you!	That sounds really hard. Tell me more about what happened.
Just ignore them.	It sounds like today felt really lonely. I’m sorry.
You’re overreacting.	I want you to know what I see when I look at you. Can I tell you?
Stop being so dramatic.	That moment sounds like it really hurt. It doesn’t tell us who you are.

A few things to remember in that moment

- Slow down. They are watching how you react to what she has just told you.
- Validate the feeling, not necessarily the belief. “I hear that you’re feeling really lonely right now.”
- Do not panic. Your calm is regulating. If you look devastated, they may feel guilty for telling you.
- Follow up the next day, when the heat has passed. “I’ve been thinking about what you said. How are you feeling about it now?”

➡ Reflection Questions for Parents

13. How do I typically respond when my child expresses distress about their social life?
14. Is there anything I am afraid of hearing from them? What does that fear tell me?
15. What do they need to feel in that moment in order to keep talking to me?

Section 8: A Word to the Worried Parent

If you are reading this guide with a knot of fear in your chest — worried that your child will always struggle, always be on the outside, always find it harder than everyone else — this section is for you.

That fear makes complete sense. And it comes from love.

What we know about children with ADHD and social connection

Many young people with ADHD find their people later sometimes not until secondary school, sometimes university, sometimes through an online community that reaches across geography. Social connection does not have a deadline, even when the primary school years make it feel that way.

The goal is not popularity. The goal is for them to know themselves well enough, and trust themselves enough, to find and keep relationships that are genuinely good for them. That is a skill that can be built. And you are already helping to build it.

What you can do right now matters enormously not by fixing everything, but by being the place where she always knows she belongs. If home is safe, connected, and honest, she has a secure base to return to when the world is hard. That is not a small thing. That may be the most protective thing there is.

You are not failing. And she is not broken. You are both learning, in real time, how to navigate something genuinely difficult. That counts for a great deal.



Quick Reference Summary

At a Glance: What Helps

Topic	Key Principle
Self-Esteem	Separate who they are from what they do. Praise effort and process over results.
Social Struggles	These are executive function challenges, not character flaws. Understanding this changes how you respond.
Identity & Narrative	Help build a truer, kinder story about themselves through your specific and genuine observations.
Spotting Low Self-Esteem	Watch for avoidance, perfectionism, over-apologising, and excessive self-criticism.
Parenting Pitfalls	The antidote is not perfection — it is repair. Model it openly.
Friendship Support	Be a consultant, not a fixer. Validate before advising. Find their community.
Crisis Moments	Slow down. Validate the feeling. Stay calm. Follow up the next day.
Long-term Outlook	Connection does not have a deadline. Home being safe is the most protective thing.

Further Reading & Resources

Books and resources for Parents

- **Smart but Stuck by Thomas E. Brown** — An accessible exploration of ADHD and executive function challenges for parents and adults.
- **ADHD 2.0** by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey
- **ADHD Explained** by Edward Hallowell
- **You, me and our ADHD Family- practical steps to cultivate healthy relationships** by Tamara Posier

All Aboard ADHD with Claire Quigley Ward is a podcast for parents and caregivers navigating the world of ADHD. <https://www.allboardadhd.com/podcast>

Books and resources for young people with ADHD

‘Hi, it’s me I have ADHD’ by Katelyn Maybry

The Teenager Girl’s guide to Living Well with ADHD by Sonia Ali.

YouTube channel ‘How to ADHD’ by Jessica McCabe

Journey with me though ADHD - A podcast for Kids with Katelyn Maybry

The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic by Siena Castellon (she has ADHD and dyslexia too!)

Professional Support

If you are concerned about your daughter’s social and emotional wellbeing, consider seeking support from:

- A clinical psychologist or educational psychologist with experience in ADHD
- An ADHD coach / mentor who works with young people
- A school SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator)
- Your GP, as a starting point for referral to appropriate mental health support

Online Communities

- **Understood.org** — A comprehensive online resource with articles, tools, and community support for parents of children with learning and attention differences.
- **ADHD UK (adhduk.co.uk)**— UK-based support and resources
- **CHADD (chadd.org)**— Children and Adults with ADHD, US-based with wide-ranging resources
- **ADDitude Magazine (additudemag.com)**— Expert articles, webinars, and community forums

You are not alone in this. And neither are they.

Great minds think alike — brilliant minds think differently