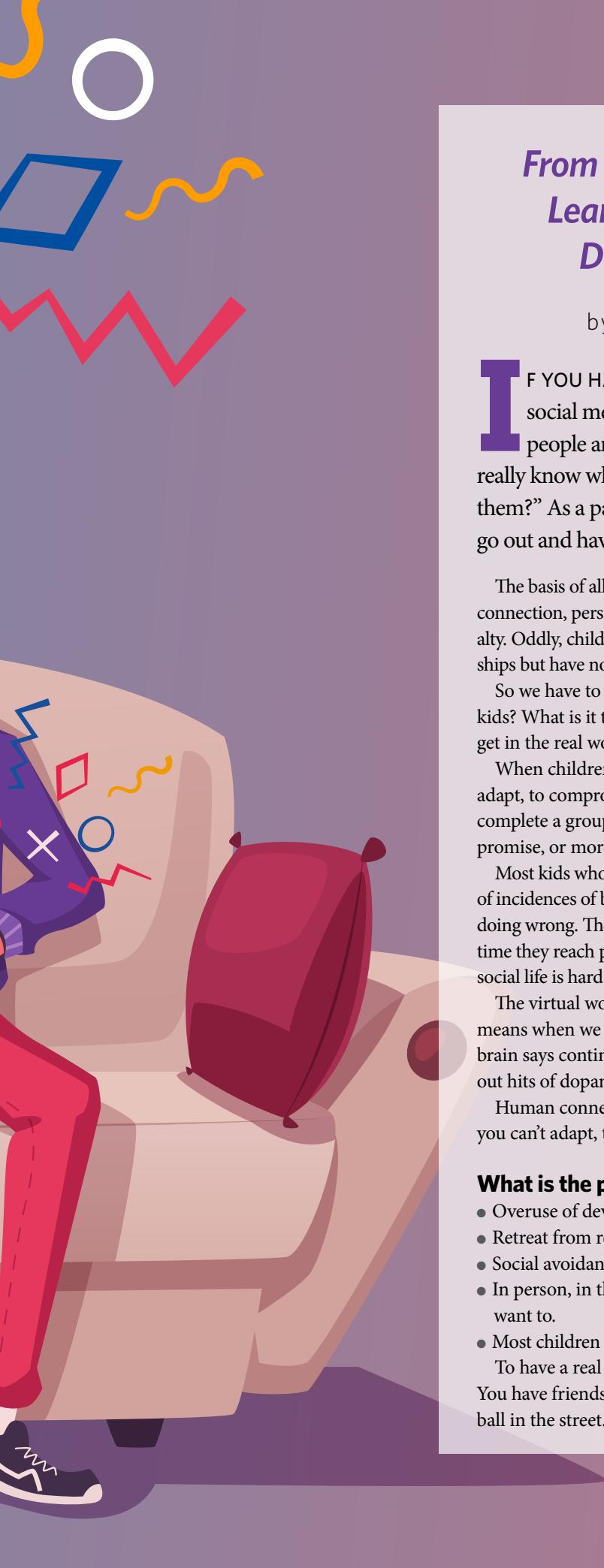


HELP! MY CHILD ONLY HAS VIRTUAL FRIENDS





From Cajoling to Collaboration— Learn How to Help Your Child Develop True Friendships

by Caroline Maguire, MEd, PCC

IF YOU HAVE KIDS WHO ENGAGE WITH OTHERS on any social media or gaming platform, you've said it before: "Those people are not real! They are not your friends. You don't even really know who they are! Why do you spend so much time with them?" As a parent, you are programmed to want your children to go out and have "real" friends. But what are "real" friends?

The basis of all friendships is to have close bonds, compatibility, emotional connection, persistent contact, shared activities, and most of all, trust and loyalty. Oddly, children and young adults desire these traits with in-person friendships but have no such expectations with online friendships.

So we have to ask ourselves, why are online friendships so crucial to our kids? What is it that they crave and receive in the virtual world that they don't get in the real world?

When children are in a group of friends or classmates, they are forced to adapt, to compromise, and work together to play a game of four square or to complete a group project in Civics class. But what if you don't want to compromise, or more importantly, you don't know how?

Most kids who engage in social avoidance shut down. This can be from years of incidences of being shunned. For years, they haven't known what they are doing wrong. They are alienated from other kids, and they are lonely. By the time they reach preteen/teen years, they engage in a lot of avoidance because social life is hard for them, although they may not articulate such information.

The virtual world is like brain candy—the reward path in the ADHD brain means when we do something that we like, we get a hit of dopamine. So the brain says continue. These virtual games are designed literally to be giving out hits of dopamine. They make us addicted.

Human connections help us in life. Virtual friends don't do that, and when you can't adapt, there is a problem.

What is the problem?

- Overuse of devices
- Retreat from real world friends and family
- Social avoidance
- In person, in the real world, friends force children to adapt when they don't want to.
- Most children who engage in social avoidance do not want to discuss it.

To have a real friendship, you have to form connections outside of school. You have friends over to study, go to the mall, walk to a coffee shop, or play ball in the street. Many kids aren't doing this. They are saying they are



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forming friendships in this virtual world. They have friends, and they are fine.

What's going on is avoidance. And it occurs when children and teens experience:

- Social anxiety
- Anticipatory anxiety
- Rumination
- Self-focus on potential flaws
- Depression
- Perfectionism
- Lack of social skills

These are the main contributors to stress. You won't hear from your child that he or she is stressed. Children don't communicate with adults about these things—it presents itself in other ways.

Listen to your children and find out what is getting in the way

When you work with your child, you really have to listen. Have a collaborative conversation with your teen to find out why he prefers virtual friends and then dissect what is getting in the way of the real in-person connections. There are many questions you can ask to explore:

- What do video games do for you?
- What interests you most about video games?
- Why is the gaming world important to you?

The virtual world is a much easier entry to friendships. You get to make your own avatar. You can be whatever you want—a rock star, an athlete, etc. The options are endless in the virtual world. Remember, kids who can't read social cues in the real world, don't have to worry about it in the virtual world. Talk to your child about this in a certain way that doesn't shut him down, or crush his spirit.

Shift from banning to planning

If you ban virtual friendships, your child will fight you, and it will become a battle.

So what do you do? Continue to ask questions and explore what your child likes about video games. What does he like about this virtual world? As adults we tend not to ask, we tell. ASK and let your child talk about it. Let him explain why Halo is the greatest game ever. He may say something that makes you angry, but it is his truth—if he loves this world and if he feels his skills are great in this world, it's true for him.

Don't surrender the conversation

As parents, we are engaged in difficult conversations, and we are not having them with someone who *wants* to have the conversation with us. When we can step into their shoes and really explore this with them and continue to talk, then we don't surrender the conversation.

Setting up the conversation

You will need to:

- Have a physical set-up to allow for conversation.
- Approach your child when he is in a good mood.
- Talk to your child privately, without other siblings around.
- Pick a quiet place—no phones or screens to distract you.
- Be as direct as possible. Some children respond better when you tell them that you want to talk with them about something.

Turning the corner toward better social connections

Coaching is made up of two key skills: 1) open-ended questions and 2) reflective listening. By asking open-ended questions, you can encourage your child to talk about his friendship situation fully and candidly. Open-ended questions use the words *who, what, when, where, how*. They ask, rather than tell.

Trade in the tell tell tell and ask questions

Instead of telling your son or daughter to “try harder,” mix in a few open-ended questions:

- What is getting in your way of hanging out with school friends?
- What would you like to do differently?
- What do you think you are expected to do as a friend?
- What do you think being friendly looks like?
- What does mixing in mean?

Engage in reflective listening

Next, listen to your child’s answers.

- Repeat back your child’s statement without giving an opinion. By reiterating your child’s statement, your child also hears what he has said.
- Confirm with your child that you captured his thoughts and feelings accurately.
- Clarify your child’s thoughts and feelings by asking questions.
- Accept and validate your child’s sentiments.
- Express empathy: “I hear you,” “I get it,” “That must be hard.”
- Use *you* and *I* statements, such as “You are overwhelmed,” and, “I am sad you are lonely.”

When you open up the dialogue, you can collaboratively problem solve. Rather than saying, “You were rude,” ask questions about what your child thinks other people felt. For example, you could ask, “How do you think those girls felt when you bragged about your ice cream when they couldn’t have any?” Open dialogue will help to give your child a better perspective of how his or her actions

How Enjoyable Is the Friendship?

Kids who only have virtual friendships have a very skewed view of what friendship really is and who they call friends. Discuss this with your child. What does friendship look like to him or her? Ask, “Would this person come to your birthday party?” “Who is treating you well and who isn’t?” You might also ask, “How much would you share with them?” “If you were in a crisis could you call them?”

Friendships should be enjoyable and fun; help your child get a better picture of their friendship world.

To put someone in the enjoyable category, they should:

- Show interest in you
- Ask you to hang out
- Invite you places where you want to be invited
- Always treat you well
- Keep your secrets
- Share positive experiences
- Share interests

Not treating you well means they:

- Pick on you
- Make fun of you
- Do not show interest in your life and dreams
- Do not listen to your problems
- Are jealous
- Are always in control
- Are secretly rooting against you
- Make you feel you have to hang out with them
- Tell you what to do
- Pick fights with you

impact others.

Remember, kids will always push back. “I have friends, I just don’t see them outside of school,” or, “I am happy the way I am, I don’t need any help.”

Just a discussion can make your child reevaluate his or her situation. This “ah ha!” won’t happen overnight. Collaborate and be there for your child, versus targeting the bad and exposing it by saying you have no real friends. Be their partner in this journey instead of going at them about their virtual world.

Remember, the end game is communication; you don’t want your child to shut down totally. It’s been hard for your child for a long time, and it will take patience to work through these tough conversations. But when children know they have the support of a caring parent in the journey, things can significantly improve. 

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