

PEERS Social Skills Program for Teens & Young Adults - Video Transcript

Hi, I'm Vivian Dunstan, the founder of ADHD Support Australia

If you're here, you're most likely a parent of a teen or young adult who's struggling socially. Maybe conversations are awkward for them, they feel unsure of how to start or maintain them, or they freeze because they don't know what to say next.

On the other hand, your child might be very talkative and make friends easily, but the friendships don't last, and they're left confused about where things went wrong.

Many of those parents I speak to share that their young person feels lonely, isolated or out of the loop socially, even though they desperately want connection.

The good news is, you're not alone. This is incredibly common in the neurodivergent community, and the peers program can make a huge difference in helping your young person make and keep friends and feel more confident socially.

What is PEERS?

I'm going to walk you through what the peers program is, who it helps, how it works and what you can expect, so you'll know straight away whether it's the right fit for your family.

Peers is the world's leading evidence based social skills program for teens and young adults who want to make and keep friends but find social situations challenging.

It was developed at UCLA by clinical psychologist Dr Elizabeth Laugeson, and has over 20 years of research showing improvements in conversation skills, friendship quality, social confidence, handling teasing or conflict, dating skills in the young adult program, and emotional well being.

So, if your teen or young adult wants deeper friendships, but struggles with the how, peers teaches the step-by-step skills to make that possible.

Who is it for?

It's designed for people with ADHD, autism, learning differences, social anxiety or any kind of social challenge.

The teen program is for teens 12 or 13 - they must be in high school - up to 17, and young adults is for those 17 to around 30. If a teen is 17 they may go into the teens or the young adults, depending on the best fit.

The most important requirement is motivation. They don't need to be overly enthusiastic, just willing to participate and try.

How does it work?

Peers runs for 14 weeks online, and each 90 minute session follows the same predictable format, so your young person always knows what to expect.

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What does a typical session look like?

We start off with troubleshooting the home practice - by reviewing the previous week's home practice, what went well, what didn't go as planned, what could be done differently next time.

I then introduce the skill for the week, ask for the group's thoughts and we break it down into clear, manageable steps.

We watch short video role-play demonstrations showing unhelpful behavior in given situations, and then the group identifies what the other person might be thinking or feeling and how we can tell and why this behavior could be risky.

This is powerful because the insights come from the young person's peers, not just from me.

We walk through what to do instead, and then watch a video role-play demonstration of more helpful behavior.

Again, we're breaking it down step by step so nothing is vague.

The group then has a chance to practice these new skills, with coaching and feedback, although no one is forced to participate.

I do understand that many young people, feel anxious, and they're always encouraged, but they're never pressured to take part in this practice within the group.

We then do a fun group activity where they guess facts about each other that are collected at enrollment. This is a game called Jeopardy, and it builds familiarity and connection within the group.

Then we talk about our home practice for the coming week, which includes real world practice of the skill that we've been learning, and I'll answer any questions.

Home Practice consists of practice with their caregiver, or as we call them - their social coach. Then a brief in-group phone call - which I organize - so they can practice with someone else within the group who's also learning the skills and wanting to practice.

We start right away in week one with teaching how to start and end phone calls. So this never feels overwhelming for our participants.

We also have a little incentive. There are points that are awarded for participation, practice, calls and engagement in the sessions, the weekly winner receives a \$10 online voucher, and the overall program winner receives a \$30 voucher.

This just helps motivate young people in a fun and positive way.

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I do expect all young people to keep their camera on unless they're unwell or they have another valid reason for not doing so. I want to be able to see everybody and have a much more engaging session that way.

The caregiver sessions are separate sessions that are weekly and for 60 to 90 minutes, depending how many are in the group and how many questions are asked in the session.

In these sessions, I'm also going to be teaching caregivers the skill that their young person has learned that week, how to support them at home and how to coach them on these skills without nagging.

You'll also learn how to troubleshoot the challenges, and we'll talk about that in the sessions as well.

The caregiver sessions follow the same basic flow as the teen or young adult sessions, but obviously without the games or the practice.

You're also welcome to keep your camera off if you want to. I know parents are often juggling dinner, siblings and the general chaos of evenings, so I'm assuming that you're there and that you're engaged and wanting to listen in.

So what do we actually teach?

In the teen program, we are talking about starting and maintaining conversations, including online communications, finding common interests, joining single or group conversations, how to use humor, effectively, handling teasing, bullying, rumors and gossip, choosing appropriate friends, resolving conflicts appropriately, planning successful get togethers and being a good sport.

In addition to all of the above, the young adult program also includes Dating Skills, including topics like letting someone know you like them, asking someone on a date, accepting rejection, turning someone down, going on dates and staying safe and also healthy relationship boundaries and, most importantly, consent.

So everything is concrete, explicit and neurodivergent friendly.

So who might not be a good fit? PEERS isn't right for everyone, and your young person might not be a good fit if they're completely unwilling to participate.

We don't want to force anybody if they refuse to practice the skills - everybody has a different level of how much they want to engage. Obviously, it helps the more they practice.

If they have an intellectual disability, that's going to make it hard for them to keep up with the group, which isn't fair for them and if they're under 12 years old they are going to be a bit young to join.

The parent and social coach sessions or caregiver sessions, these are separate sessions that are weekly and for 60 to 90 minutes, depending how many parents and how many questions there might be in that week.

In these sessions, I'm also going to be teaching you the skill that your young person has learned that week, how to support them at home and how to coach them on these skills without nagging.

You'll also learn how to troubleshoot the challenges, and we'll talk about that in the sessions as well.

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What can you expect after your teen or young adult has completed the peers course?

Most families notice improvements in their young person's confidence, their social understanding, that they are reaching out more and making more plans with others.

They're beginning to make and keep friends.

They have increased emotional resilience.

They're becoming more independent, less conflict.

Oftentimes, there's a better parent and teen or young adult connection - the young person is talking more within the family and having stronger relationships with extended family and friends as well and coming out of their room a bit more and joining in.

So for parents, PEERS often brings a lot of clarity, confidence and relief, and finally, understanding how you can support your young person socially.

So if PEERS sounds like it might help your teen or young adult the next step is simply to book a call with me, which you can do right now.

During our call, I'll get to know your family, answer your questions, and help you decide whether PEERS is the right next step for you.

If it's not a good fit, I'll let you know.

If you decide it's not right for your young person or for you, that's also absolutely fine.

I look forward to speaking with you soon.