

How Can I Help Improve My Child's Social Skills?

by Lisa Graziano, M.A., LMFT

"Last weekend at my son's Little League game, the crowd grew dead silent as a young batter concentrated on avoiding a strikeout. Breaking the hush, my daughter with PWS proclaimed loudly for everyone to hear, 'Wow, that boy's a really bad hitter!' She wasn't trying to be mean; she simply voiced her exact thought without a filter. How can I help improve my child's social skills?"

Although most individuals with PWS have a very strong desire for friendships, they often face significant social challenges. These difficulties manifest in various ways, including compromised personal hygiene habits (e.g., picking one's nose or skin), voice volume (speaking too loudly), challenges with sharing and turn-taking, and deflecting anything that has the whiff of blame. Additionally, individuals may interrupt conversations, struggle with showing interest in the thoughts and feelings of others, or exhibit verbal and even physical aggression.

Social skills are built upon a range of foundational skills that include emotional regulation, impulse control, self-awareness, decision-making, and problem-solving. Engaging successfully in social relationships also requires critical cognitive components including executive functioning skills, empathy, and Theory of Mind. But these skillsets are typically impaired to some degree in individuals with PWS. And when we overlay any speech and language challenges that make it harder for peers to understand our loved one; slower processing speed that makes it harder for our loved one to understand others; problems with coordination, balance, and strength that can interfere with participating in activities, and hyperphagia that can drive individuals to behave in a whole host of socially inappropriate ways, we begin to see the scope of the challenges persons with PWS face.

And yet, no matter the age of our loved one with PWS, there are things we can do to help improve their social skills.

What Parents Can Do



There are a number of strategies and interventions we can use to help improve our loved one's social skills and social interactions. Maybe we start with the most troublesome deficit, or maybe we start with one that promises to be the easiest to change. What's important is that we actually *do* start because persons with PWS generally don't learn appropriate social skills by watching others, reading books, and certainly not from lectures. As parents, we need to take a more direct, active, and involved approach, whether utilizing ourselves or employing the expertise of others.

Everything we do that helps improve the physical symptoms of PWS can help improve social interactions – growth hormone treatment, OT, PT, Speech and Language Therapy, Sensory Integration Therapy, and now VYKAT XR to potentially reduce hyperphagia. In my son's younger, more physically wobbly years, he gravitated toward hanging with girls because the boys were more unpredictably rough. So, we arranged play dates with the ladies in our home and in the community, and he became more outgoing. In elementary school, my son and I talked about finding a playground activity he'd like to participate in. He chose Tetherball. We set up a Tetherball set in the backyard and played with him every day after school. We praised his good hits, empathized with his losses, and praised the heck out of his emerging sportsmanship skills. He had a ton of fun! When no one could play with him, he practiced by himself. And because the brain learns best by repetition, repetition, repetition, he got good. *Really* good. Eventually, he came to *belong* with the kids at the tetherball courts, and he looked *forward* to recess – often a solitary, lonely time for kids with PWS.

Learning is easiest when it's disguised as play. Use play to teach!

Learning is best when it's direct, in vivo, engaging, and interactive. Use yourself!

Anything and everything we do that helps improve any of the Executive Function Skills can help improve social interactions. The following table reflects Executive Function Skills and strategies we can employ to help improve each of these skillsets. Let's take a look at these foundational skills and strategies to help improve them.

Executive Function Skills	Potential Interventions
<p>Short-term memory Working memory used to hold information and actively manipulate, update, or apply it to complete a goal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concrete visual, cues, reminders. Pair verbal info with visual images • Chunking info into smaller steps • Mnemonic devices • Uno card game • Simon game
<p>Flexible thinking Ability to smoothly switch gears, adapt to unexpected changes, look at problems from different angles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Games such as Uno, Fluxx • Graduated exposure • Social Stories • Social Thinking books by Michelle Garcia-Winner, M.A. • Visual prompt of upcoming change. E.g., Change Card • Scaffolding language. E.g., teach "I'm stuck." 
<p>Impulse (self) control Ability to pause, resist temptation, filter out distractions before acting. The brain's mental braking system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play response-inhibition games: Simon Says; Red Light, Green Light; Freeze Dance; Mother May I; Follow the Leader; Jenga; turn-taking games • Use reward systems. E.g., sticker charts, etc. • Pretend Role Play: One dad shares his young son who incessantly blurted out answers in class was helped when he and Dad played School at home. Dad as Teacher continuously rewarded his son when he raised his hand, when he waited patiently before speaking, etc. After a few short weeks, the actual teacher reported hand-raising was <i>significantly</i> improved. • Note: Hyperphagia management falls <i>outside</i> of impulse control. Always restrict access to unauthorized food and other unsafe items.
<p>Decision-making The brain's executive suite for synthesizing info, weighing potential risks, choosing a logical path.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred Choices: "Would you like X or would you like Y?" • Rule of Three: Train individual to always brainstorm three potential solutions to a minor problem before picking one, preventing them from locking onto the very first idea they have. • Avoid open-ended questions: "What would you like?"
<p>Time management Ability to estimate, allocate, and track time effectively to achieve a specific goal. Mental ability to accurately sense the passage of time without looking at a clock.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concrete visuals and countdowns. E.g., Time Timer, Change Card, alarms or songs to mark transitions; Color-coded clock • Time prediction games: "How many minutes (or how many songs) do you think it will take to make your bed before coming down to breakfast?" • Provide boundaries, prompts, alarms: "5 more minutes. 1 more minute." 
<p>Self-monitoring Ability to observe, evaluate, and regulate one's own behavior, thoughts, and performance in real time</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a visual "dashboard" that individual can physically slide a marker to indicate their current focus, energy, or emotional regulation level. • Sticky-note countdown: Place a vertical stack of numbered sticky notes on their desk representing steps or time blocks. Have them physically peel off and crumple each note as they finish to visually monitor their progress. • Guided self-correction: When individual makes a mistake, do not fix it for them. Point to the general area and ask: "There is a goof in this section, can you act like a detective and hunt it down?"

<p>Self-monitoring cont.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 5-Point Scale: Use a 1-to-5 scale for voice volume, anger, or energy (1 being calm/quiet, 5 being a total blowout). Practice identifying what a "Level 3" feels like before they hit a "Level 5." • External environmental cues: Set a vibrating smartwatch or a gentle chime during homework or playtime. Teach that when the cue happens, they must do a quick body check: "Is my body calm? Is my mind on my work?"
<p>Self-Awareness Ability to recognize one's own strengths, weaknesses, emotional triggers, and learning styles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect choices to outcomes. Use cause-and-effect language, "When you shared your truck with your sister, her face lit up and she smiled. You made her feel happy." • Highlight emotional shifts. Point out physiological changes calmly: "I notice your shoulders are raised and your fists are clenched. It looks like your body is feeling frustrated." • Name It to Tame It charts: Use visuals that go beyond just "happy, sad, mad." Introduce nuance like "bored," "overwhelmed," or "disappointed."
<p>Emotional Control Ability to manage one's emotions, energy levels, attention, and behaviors in order to achieve long-term goals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tactile and resistance objects: Keep items on hand that require heavy muscle input, such as playdough to squeeze, bubble wrap to pop, or resistance bands to pull. Heavy work releases soothing brain chemicals. • "Calm Down Corner": Set up a dedicated, cozy space in the house with no electronics. Fill it with weighted blankets, fidget toys, coloring books, or a snow globe to provide sensory grounding. • Paint the Picture and use visual schedules: Verbally describe what individual can expect to see or happen. Use a visual timeline of the day's schedule/events. When someone can see exactly what comes next, it reduces anxiety and reduces potential for unwanted behavior. • "What If It Goes Wrong?" script: Before entering a potentially triggering situation (crowded store), preview potential disappointments. "If they don't have the toy you want, what is our backup plan, Plan A or Plan B?" • Multi-sensory countdowns and transition prompts: Give warnings using different senses: visual timer, auditory alarm, and/or a physical touch.
<p>Empathy Ability to recognize and understand emotional states of others. "Feeling with" someone rather than just "feeling for" them (sympathy). Empathy requires explicit instruction, visual tracking, and daily practice – it doesn't develop automatically.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use structured, playful systems to practice impulse control (stopping to listen) and cognitive flexibility (seeing another perspective). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build an "Emotion Vocabulary" <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. While reading books or watching shows, pause, ask: "Look at her eyebrows and mouth. What is her body saying about how she feels?" b. "Name It to Tame It." Label the emotion for the individual and teach the link between situations and emotions: "You wanted to keep playing, and now you feel frustrated. Is that right?" c. Use Visuals: Keep a simple chart on the fridge with emoji faces representing complex emotions so they can point to what they see in themselves or others. <div data-bbox="941 1428 1347 1669" data-label="Image"> </div> 2. Perspective-taking. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Play the "What If" Game: Throw out hypothetical scenarios during car rides or supper: "If someone dropped their phone and it broke, what would they be thinking? What would they be feeling?" b. Play Stop and Switch: Before attempting to resolving a conflict between siblings or peers, have Child A explain Child B's perspective, and vice versa: "Tell me why you think your brother wanted that toy first."

<p>Empathy cont.</p>	<p>c. Play Behavior Detective: If someone else acts out (at school, home, day program) frame it as a mystery: <i>"I wonder what kind of day they're having that made them feel so upset. Do you think they may be tired or sad?"</i></p> <p>3. Translate the abstract concept of kindness into a concrete, visual tool.</p> <p>a. Kindness Jar: Put an empty glass jar on the counter. Every time the individual performs an intentional act of empathy – sharing, comforting another, helping without being asked—verbally praise and drop a marble, seashell, colorful pom-pom, or token into the jar.</p> <p>b. "Check-In Checklist": Create a small, 3-step visual checklist for their bedroom, school notebook, and/or work clipboard: <u>Check-In Checklist:</u> <input type="checkbox"/> Look at their face (What is the feeling?) <input type="checkbox"/> Listen to their words (Don't interrupt) <input type="checkbox"/> Offer a helping hand (How can I help?)</p>
<p>Theory of Mind Ability to understand the mental states of others — their perspectives, wants, needs, beliefs, feelings, knowledge, and intentions. Knowing that others can have different views and perspectives from our own is foundational for social interaction and friendships.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play the game Battleship. Have the individual draw a picture based only on your verbal instructions. • Identify "Hidden Rules": Explicitly map out unwritten social expectations in specific settings. E.g., Turn back around and face the door in an elevator. Treat like a science experiment: "In this specific room, people expect X, because their goal is Y." • Thought bubble or Social Story drawing: Draw simple stick figures when analyzing a conflict or a misunderstanding. Draw a <i>Speech Bubble</i> for what was actually said, and a <i>Thought Bubble</i> above each person's head showing what they were actually thinking or feeling.

There are a few PWS symptoms we need to be mindful of when working to improve our loved one's social skills:

- While individuals with PWS can consciously recognize and identify disgusting images, we need to specifically teach disgust in the social skills sense: don't pick your nose; don't pick at scabs, don't stare at people, etc.
- Most persons with PWS have an intense need to be right and to win. With every game you play, model and specifically teach that it's ok to lose. Show how to be a "good loser" as well as a "good winner". With younger children, share that they can cheat at home with you, but if they cheat while playing with other kids, they won't be picked to play with for long.
- Most persons with PWS have an intense need for fairness. Teach how to "let it go" – maybe to the Frozen theme song!
- Most persons think very concretely. We need to specifically teach slang, idioms, and metaphors.
- Some people confabulate – make up for stories for no apparent reason. Reinforce the fact that this will interfere with making and keeping friends.
- If there has been a poor prior experience in a social setting, "Fix that past goof" by talking about the things that happened or that *you did or did not do* that interfered with the individual's success last time. Let the individual know you've "fixed these goofs" so that they don't occur again. Then Paint the Picture of what the individual can expect to occur this time.

While there certainly aren't *enough*, there are some truly wonderful PWS-specific resources available. Check with PWSA | USA, FPWR, and your local chapter to see what resources they have to support you, your loved one, and your family.

Below are links to well-written articles and PWS-specific social skills programs.

- **Article:** Social Skills and Prader-Willi Syndrome
https://www.fpwr.org/social-skills-and-prader-willi-syndrome#social_skills_and_pws
- **Journal Article:** *Model, Reflect, Describe: Analysis of Critical Intervention Strategies Within a Pretend Play Intervention for Children with Prader-Willi Syndrome.* Rachel A. Gordon, Sandra W. Russ, Anastasia Dimitropoulos. *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, January 2026.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41252-026-00478-0>
- **Journal Article:** *Systematic Review of Intervention Programs Designed to Improve the Socioemotional Skills of Children and Adolescents with Prader-Willi Syndrome.* Ane Perosanz et al. *American Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, November 2025.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/41145159/>

PWS-Specific Social Skills Programs

- **BOSS Building Our Social Skills Curriculum.** A social skills intervention program created at Vanderbilt University, funded by FPWR, and implemented by PWSA | USA. The BOSS curriculum equips individuals with PWS with essential skills to interpret facial expressions, tone of voice, and nonverbal cues, and empowers them to explore problem-solving strategies, establish new friendships both within the group and in real-world settings, and focus on personal growth. For more information contact PWSA|USA www.pwsausa.org or FPWR www.fpwr.org.
 - [Link to Application](https://www.pwsausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/BOSS-Curriculum-Application.pdf) <https://www.pwsausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/BOSS-Curriculum-Application.pdf>
 - [Download Parent Guide](https://www.fpwr.org/boss-curriculum-lp#parent-guide) <https://www.fpwr.org/boss-curriculum-lp#parent-guide>
- **The PRETEND Program** Dr. Anastasia Dimitropoulos's most prominent contribution to PWS social skills intervention is the development of the **PRETEND Program** (Play-Based Remote Enrichment to Enhance Development). **How to Get Involved & Next Steps:**
 - **Email:** neurodevelopmentresearchlab@gmail.com
 - **Phone:** 216-368-0112
 - **Laboratory website / study details:** Dimitropoulos Lab – Case Western caslabs.case.edu+1
 - **Facebook:** [Dimitropoulos Lab Facebook](#)